



Norma Waterson: English Folk Singing

Tradition and History

NORMA WATERSON:

Blues music is very very similar to traditional music of these islands. In fact Bob Copper who sadly has just died, one of our oldest and most lovely traditional singers, he heard the blues when he was a young man and the first time he heard it, he thought, that's just like our songs and they are. The songs here are... it's the working class music of these islands and it's the history really of these islands. You won't find that working class history in the history books certainly. You'll find it in the oral tradition.

The history books were written by learned people and there was always an agenda to make history look something better than it was but the real stories are written by the... and that's the same with the blues, the same with the black population, they were very put upon so they wrote it all in the music.

Certainly the black population of America had no voice and the working class people, the peasant class of these islands had no voice either. The only voice that they had was their music. And it's not a surprise to find that they're quite similar. They come from the same root.

The thing about the women in the house was that the women stayed in the houses, they never went into public houses, I mean the men went into public houses, so you would get a man's perspective so a lot of songs were collected in the pubs but a lot of the collectors, including Cecil Sharpe, thought it would be nice to collect from the women and he said that of all the singers he heard in his life, the best singer was a woman, a lady called Betsy Holland,

I don't think the singer makes...traditional music is not like pop music and I think you have to tell the story and if it's a woman telling the story then you have to do that. If it's a man telling the story, you can do it as well... there's no rules that say women have to sing women's songs and men have to sing men's songs. And the collections show it because some of the bloodiest songs were collected from women. Murder, murder of women were collected from women.

I think what these songs were, what people saw that these songs were warnings – this is what happened to me, don't let it happen to you, they're warning the young ladies like don't go into the red barn like Mariah Martin did and before there was such an amazing amount of media in this country, these songs went around and served as a little warning and also served as a newsletter