

ROY HARRIS - A PERSONAL MEMOIR

Written in March 2016 for the newsletter of the Traditions at the Tiger Folk Club, founded by Roy Harris

Roy Harris was my friend, guide, mentor and hero. Although my influences in the world of folk music have been many, none had the profound effect that Roy did. He'd been amongst my favourite artists ever since I'd heard the classic LP 'Champions of Folly' in the late 1970s, at the flat of a friend of a friend who'd been a regular at the legendary Nottingham Traditional Music Club that Roy ran for many years. I loved that record, stole songs from it shamelessly when I took up the trade myself, and always watched out for Roy's concert spots at folk festivals. So, as a budding singer just making the leap from club resident to the lofty status of getting a few bookings, I plucked up courage to approach the great man after a performance at Northwich Folk Festival. I can't remember which song I asked him about - though obviously I was after nicking material yet again - but I do remember Roy's immediate response: "Have you heard Sam Larner sing that one?"



I had sheepishly to admit that I had not - indeed, truth to tell I'd never heard Sam Larner sing anything, and if I'd heard of him at all it was as one of those 'croaky old men' that proper singers like me might steal songs from. Though of course I kept such thoughts to myself... "What's your address, then?" I'm not quite sure what I was expecting, but a week or so later a square parcel wrapped in cardboard was delivered by the postman. Inside were four vinyl 12-inch LPs: one of Sam Larner himself; a copy of MacColl and Parker's Radio Ballad *Singing the Fishing*, featuring interviews and songs from Sam; another Radio Ballad, *The Ballad of John Axon*; and lastly, the old EFDSS LP of Phil Tanner. An attached note read: "Enjoy these, and return them when you've got what you can from them." You could see the thought that had gone into Roy's choices, the links between all four records, and it's hard to decide which one made the greatest impression on a cocky young singer who thought he knew it all but actually knew practically nothing. I still listen to all of them (or at least their CD equivalents), and use them regularly in lectures and workshops, thinking of Roy smiling down while my classes sit enthralled by Larner, chortling his way through 'Butter and Cheese and All', by Tanner, unfurling the vocal *tour de force* that is 'Henry Martin', and by MacColl's stunningly innovative hymns to the strength, courage and humanity of the working class. By the time those LPs went back home to Roy, I'd learned that 'croaky old men' could sing the pants off many of the stars in the folk firmament, and that this music we call 'folk' is so much more than just a bunch of songs with good tunes and stories. There were many more square cardboard packages over the years, many visits to Roy's musical treasure room in the Cardiff flat where he and Elaine would always extend a warm welcome: Joe Heaney, Ma Rainey (Roy was a big blues fan), Doc Watson - whose debut LP Roy told me was his favourite recording - and many more gems from both sides of the Atlantic. There was also much encouragement, both practical and spiritual, of my own career.

I relate all this to illustrate the kind of thing I've heard from many singers since Roy's death, who were not only encouraged and inspired by him, but who were taught vital lessons about the music we all love. But don't let's gloss over his skills as a performer. Roy was possibly the best pro I've ever seen grace a folk club.

There was no instrumental expertise to hide behind, it was just the man, his voice, his personality, and the songs he loved and sang with total commitment. Every song meant a great deal to him, and he was a master of getting the emotional core across - but at the same time he never forgot that folk music was supposed to be about having a good time, and he knew just how to achieve the perfect balance of light and shade. His warm and easy style impressed all who witnessed his performances, yet I knew that it sometimes concealed severe stage fright - which made him all the more impressive a professional. I remember him performing at my local folk club in Glossop (I insisted they book him), making his way to the stage already singing 'The Sail Boat Malarkey', and walking off while still conducting the chorus of 'Red is the Rose', by which time the audience was in the palm of his proverbial hand.

Years ago I prevailed on Bob Berry at Chippenham Festival to invite Roy to participate in the 'Song Shops' series that I'd plotted with Bob to redress the balance of festival workshops towards instrumental skills. The first session I pencilled in was to have Roy play and talk about his recordings of traditional singers. We had a full house as Roy unleashed his cassette tape: Phil Tanner, of course; Cyril Poacher singing *The Broomfield Wager* in the Ship at Blaxhall; the great Almeida Riddle from the Ozarks. After each song Roy would explain what made the performance special, or introduce a personal anecdote. After playing Jeannie Robertson's *The Overgate*, he described hitching up to Aberdeen for a gig and staying over with Jeannie and her family: "They had next to nothing, but they'd scrape the paint off their walls for you" (Roy treated his friends in just the same spirit). The last recordings in the session were of Sarah Makem: we heard her sing *The Month of January*, first as a relatively young woman, then as a septuagenarian. The first was good, the second emotionally shattering. All those years of experience and wisdom had lent gravitas, weariness and a deep sense of tragedy to Makem's depiction of tragic betrayal. At the end there was a long silence; the whole room was completely wrapped up in the performance. Never again would any of those present say carelessly, "You should have heard so-and-so when they were younger!"

During the 1990s I wrote regularly for *Folk Roots* (now *fRoots*) magazine, and those on the traditional side who believe that publication to be somehow 'The Enemy' should be aware that Ian Anderson accepted immediately when I suggested a feature on Roy. It was the best interview I ever did. Amidst entertaining anecdotes of life on the road (hanging out with Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys, would you believe!) he spoke with passion on his reasons for falling in love with folk song, his determination to succeed as a professional singer - with factory work his only alternative - his struggles with ill-health and with his singing voice, and his commitment to the concept of the folk club. When I played Devil's Advocate and asked him what he thought of the widespread notion that bad floorsingers would be the death of the clubs, he replied firmly: "that kind of thinking is the worm inside the apple of the folk song movement". And with the Tiger he put his money where his mouth was. A club where singers from the floor would always be encouraged, and which would book performers from the tradition whenever possible - or revival performers who at least understood it. Margaret and I brought a minibus-load down from Glossop for the opening night (we were made honorary life members on the spot!), and I can't remember a better evening in a folk club, with queues outside the door at an improbably early hour, terrific entertainment from the Elliotts of Birtley, and Roy - with a huge grin cemented to his face - presiding over the proceedings as genially and authoritatively as only he could.

Roy was unusual in a folk world where university education, counter-cultural attitudes and plain eccentricity are perhaps over-represented. Here was an ordinary bloke, who had educated himself to a high level of knowledge, who saw no reason at all why folk song should not appeal across the social spectrum, or why 'normal' people should not be engaged by it. With apologies to that Stockport railwayman in *The Ballad of John Axon* who first coined the phrase, integrity, honesty and generosity ran through Roy Harris "like Blackpool through a stick of rock". He is irreplaceable, and I shall miss him enormously.

[Roy's Guardian obituary](#)

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