

## REVIEW ESSAY<sup>1</sup>

ROGER DIGBY

*Concertinas at Bradfield.* Various artists. Video/DVD. Garland Films (2004).

*This Label is Not Removable.* Various artists. 3-CD boxed set. Free Reed, FRTCD 25 (2002).

*Ghosts and Lovers.* The Mellstock Band. The Serpent Press. CD SER 007 (2003).

*The Lewes Favourites.* Edited by Andy Warburton; forward by Vic Gammon  
(Lewes [Sussex]: Lewes Arms Folk Club, 2003).

The English Country Music Weekend is flourishing again after its reincarnation a few years ago. The very first such gathering took place in Cricklade in 1975 when Rod Stradling and Neil Wayne (of whom more later) organised a weekend of specifically English traditional music as a focus for the growing enthusiasm for this previously neglected area. Highlights were the presence of Oscar Woods, Jim Small, Ray Andrews, Bob Cann, all now deceased, and a live performance by the line-up of Plain Capers, all still gloriously alive (and of which more later)!

This peripatetic weekend is shaped by its annual host, and in 2003 found itself on the farm of Mark Davies at Bradfield in Yorkshire. Mark featured a number of local Yorkshire artists and, being a concertina enthusiast, he also invited a number of concertina players and brought them together in a (very early) Sunday morning concert. The ECM Weekenders are rightly musically broadminded; many of the older generation of musicians had already established the fact that their repertoires were flexible and drew from all areas. If any eyebrows were raised at the presence of such a specialist concert spilling itself all over the ECM boundaries, their owners were quickly won over by the quality of the performances. Barry Callaghan was there with his video camera, and this edited eighty minutes not only records a remarkable concert, but can stand alone as a testimony to the glorious capability of the concertina and the many hugely talented players who are currently taking it from strength to strength.

Pride of place belongs to Michael Hebbert and his Jeffries Duet. A Jeffries Duet is seldom seen, and, sadly, so is Mike. Just one commercial LP virtually three decades ago (*The Ramping Cat*, FRR 009, 1977, of which more later) is the only recording of this virtuoso player. Here he plays traditional tunes, Schubert, and his renowned interpretation of the 'Dambusters' March'. The Jeffries Duet system is the most limited of the Duets, but Mike has achieved a style of playing which is both lyrical and rhythmic, with a way of 'pencilling in' the chords so that they are suggested as much as heard.

All of this is here in his two short contributions. In addition, uniquely on this video, there is a real bonus in the visual element: the pleasure of watching Mike perform! Mike's former musical partner, Andrew Frank, once likened Mike to Archie Andrews, the schoolboy puppet of ventriloquist Peter Brough, and the boyish face and impish grin are still there, betraying the clear pleasure he gets from playing. Yet the better comparison would be to a marionette rather than a hand puppet, as Mike virtually marches along to his own rhythm with the occasional swing and flourish of the concertina. The grin, the posture, the delight. . .there's an echo of Loveless here as well. Ten minutes of sheer joy!

The more familiar MacCann Duet system appears in the hands of three excellent players. Harry Litherington, by far the senior member of this concert party, has the typical repertoire of his generation, and immediately recalls Tommy Williamson (of whom much more later). Here he plays Charles Trenet's 'La Mer' (having no problem with the key change that has caused me many a stumble on the Anglo) and similar standards. This is precise, practised playing, finely controlled and vibrant with interest. Much more relaxed is the performance of Iris Bishop, a hugely and rightly respected player from the musical hotbed of South Sussex (of which more later). Iris has the traditional tunes, but opts instead on this occasion for 'Blue Moon' with the familiar chord sequence getting a full Duet treatment, and then a blistering adaptation from the jazz pianist Thelonius Monk.

Iris could have played Tommy Williams's 'Spring Time in Battersea' (still more later), but leaves that for Anahata, who shows convincingly that the 38-key Anglo can go comfortably into the repertoire of the Duet, a point which is also convincingly demonstrated by Harry Scurfield, who enjoys a reputation for taking on unlikely songs and tunes, influenced, as he states here, by the late Fred Kilroy, who would have a crack at anything. Harry also has a jazz pianist as one of his sources: in this case the Boogie-playing Jimmy Yancey.

Will Duke is a wonderful player. Owning Scan Tester's concertina and living now in Scan's geographical area (of which more later), he is widely associated with the playing of that particular Anglo icon and plays a set of Scan's tunes here. Yet there is much, much more to Will than just this facet. On first meeting, Will appears a very unexceptional person, quiet, unassuming, even retiring. On closer acquaintance he reveals himself as a man of sharp intelligence, vast knowledge, sparkling humour, and infinite charm. His playing is just the same: there is nothing flashy or ostentatious; no concession to being on a stage, and the tunes, seeming at first deceptively

straightforward, are underpinned with subtleties and whimsies and little flights of fancy without ever compromising the respect with which they are approached.

It was interesting to hear Geoff Crabb say at last year's ICA /Chiltinas event that the English concertina system was never intended to be a solo instrument, and that it was hard to do much more than play a simple melody and occasional extra note. Talking to me a few days later, he explained that the various ranges of the English system were intended to represent the instruments of a string quartet. Dave Ball and Graham Pratt go some way towards this, playing arranged duets, and this discipline is in clear contrast to the style of the players on the other systems; as such they enhance this recording with a totally different style and approach. Chantal Noppen, the other player of the English system, reminds us that there are younger players and composers.

The English system is overshadowed at this concert, though not because of musical competence—the performances are highly proficient. The difference lies in the attitude. The Duet and Anglo players are out on the edge, and whatever the origin of their musical ideas, their approach is to think, 'I like this. I play the concertina. Let's bring it together, and take it all the way that the instrument allows'. You know that when you meet them in a few years' time they'll have tried something new. This sense of adventure and challenge fires their performance. This was a fine concert, and it makes a fine video.

The Free Reed record label was the most significant of the many enterprises that originated in the fertile and energetic mind of Neil Wayne, a leading enthusiast for the concertina back in the days when men walked on the moon and the junk shops were full of quality concertinas for the price of a pint. Like other labels devoted to minority interests (e.g. Leader/Trailer), the hope was that the specialist players, who would never have been recorded under any other circumstances, would be financially balanced by the more commercial acts who were playing to good audiences in the busy folk clubs. Some players like Mike Hebbert, John Kirkpatrick, Tufty Swift, The Old Swan Band, and my own Flowers and Frolics had a foot in both camps, being popular on the contemporary circuit, particularly the ECM resurgence, whilst also featuring free-reed instruments and respecting and learning from the earlier generation of players. Sadly the numbers didn't add up, and Free Reed collapsed under financial pressures—fortunately not relevant to this review. A recent resurrection has seen a few ambitious projects of which *This Label is Not Removable* is a retrospective of the first twenty-five years.

All of the Free Reed vinyl albums are represented on this collection, and given the combination of old and traditional musicians with the wide variety of singers, songwriters, and novelty acts from the folk world, this creates an extraordinary hotchpotch of listening; it's hard to imagine anyone playing these CDs without skipping some tracks. The concertina appears on sixteen of the sixty-one tracks, with the melodeon adding a free-reed presence on twelve more.

The great strength of Free Reed was its willingness to take risks with recordings that no other label would look at. If it was financial madness, it was also musical heaven. I mentioned Peter Bellamy's *Transports* in my review last year (*PICA*, 1). Free Reed also gave us the only recording of Mike Hebbert (FRR 009), a splendid mix of tunes of all styles with some guest vocals from Andrew Frank, and the only recording of Tommy Williams, tunes and reminiscences from this former Lachenal employee and MacCann giant—musical giant that he is. He was so physically small that when he stood up to play (which he did, being a true old stager) you worried that he would topple forward from the sheer weight of the instrument. *Spring Time in Battersea* (FRR 008) contains some excellent playing and transports you back to a different musical era. Gordon Cutty (FRR 006) was recorded after his dance band days, surely the only conventional dance band to have an English concertina leading an otherwise standard line-up, and he demonstrates how much drive can be achieved on the English system.

Bellamy's *Transports* was not the only Free Reed triumph. There were at least two others. Together with John Tams, Neil Wayne visited County Clare and made field recordings of the wealth of Anglo players who dominate the sweet, gentle style of that area of Ireland. These were magnificent releases and actually appeared on the Topic label, explaining why there are a few tracks on recent Topic compilations, but none here. Nevertheless they are a feather in Free Reed's cap, and their current unavailability at a time when Irish music is looking back to its great musicians and re-issues abound is as big a mystery as it is a loss to music. Here were Mrs O'Dwyer, Bernard O'Sullivan, Tommy McMahon, John Kelly, Chris Droney, and more; some of the finest players of that or any other time.

Pride of place in the Free Reed catalogue belonged to John Kirkpatrick's *Plain Capers* (FRR 010); a superb musician with a wide audience, Kirkpatrick played Cotswold Morris tunes with drive and integrity. On this LP he was joined by Martin Brinsford and Martin Carthy (monkeys without the brass), as well as Sue Harris and Fi Fraser. *Plain Capers* was released in 1976. This was the time of 'Folk Rock', a short-lived fad which was only survived by the very few who were good enough to develop it further. 1972

had seen the release of *Morris On*, which sought to bring the electric treatment to Morris music. It was great 'fun' to listen to, with all the implications of triviality that that three-letter word increasingly carries. Although not stated, John Kirkpatrick was the only performer with real Morris credentials, having been involved in the dance from his teens. Now John can enjoy a lot of joking (as opposed to 'fun'), as is clear from his contribution of 'Laudnum Bunches' on William Kimber's *Absolutely Classic* CD (issued by the English Folks Dance and Song Society, EFDSS CD 03 [1999]). Deep down he is very serious about the music; and it is hard not to see *Plain Capers* as his commitment to setting the record straight. Certainly it serves as a primer for Cotswold playing; it led many 'ear players' to new Cotswold tunes, it is supremely entertaining and satisfying to listen to, and it shows that music with lift, drive, pace, and sheer balls comes from good musicianship, not from an electric wall socket. It will be played and celebrated long after Folk Rock has been forgotten and abandoned in the bin-liner of musical fashions.

Like all Free Reed issues, *This Label* has ample documentation, but the proof reading and accuracy is hopelessly inadequate. Missing punctuation, incomplete parentheses, inconsistent formatting, and variable font size. There are major gaffs: page 12 does not follow from page 11, and the bottom of page 42 reads 'Reproduce relevant notes from original insert?': an editorial suggestion has found its way into the main text. Then there are the factual errors: I know for sure that the few short paragraphs on Flowers and Frolics contain three outright errors. How many others must there be!

The notes on the tracks, particularly the bullet points, are often repetitive, but the main body of the text contains an account of the origins and development of Free Reed which lead me happily down Memory Lane, and will give useful background to any readers who were not around at the time. This, after all, is the purpose of a retrospective: a combination of nostalgia for some and first-time knowledge for others. Unfortunately, should those others become fired with enthusiasm for some of the excellent music that is reissued here, they will be equally frustrated by the unavailability of nearly all of the originals. Free Reed owns some tremendous recordings, some still unissued; and any reissue is to be welcomed.

Another musical experiment which was around in the '70s was the use of 'Old Instruments'. Trotto were an unlikely starting point for Free Reed records, and Dolly Collins, probably the finest of arrangers in this musical vein, was responsible for the accompaniments on Bellamy's *Transports*. There were other 'consorts' in similar style

and, while these are interesting musical experiments, it is absurd to consider them authentic. Sorry, that should be '~~Authentycke~~', as incorrect spelling and Gothic script are compulsory when claiming bogus historical validity. ('When visiting Stratford on Avon, don't miss ~~De Olde Shakespeare Internette Caffe~~. . Patron, heede thee that thou spilleth not thy sack upon ye keyborde'). The use of old instruments in this context can very quickly plummet into 'Merrie England', which is, of course, the marketing division of Heritage UK Ltd, a government initiative which is in the process of taking anything and everything of historical interest and rebranding it as a Former Lifetime Experience, so when the exhausted tourists eventually get to the ghastly tea-room and the overpriced scones, they are aurally assaulted by costumed clowns twanging lutes and 'Hey Nonny No-ing' from the Elizabethan Minstrels' Gallery that was constructed on the wall of the cafeteria during the winter by a benighted marketing manager who knows more about Hollywood than history.

And lest I seem, gentle reader, to be banging on a bit off-topic—I am not! This is another example, like Folk Rock, of the glorious jewel that is the people's music being abused, exploited, and immolated on the Altar of Mammon. If the culture of one of the UK's other ethnic communities were trivialised and debased in this way, there would be a huge furore—and quite rightly, but English music can be violated with impunity.

The use of old instruments in formal arrangements can only be an academic exercise. The best that can be hoped is that it is done with knowledge, competence, and sensitivity, and The Mellstock Band are safe hands. The name, of course, recalls Thomas Hardy, who wrote about village bands, played the fiddle, and is the reason why a large part of Dorset has been rebranded as 'Hardy Country'. On *Ghosts and Lovers*, they offer a range of tunes and songs from a variety of sources and a wide spread of England. It is melodious and thoughtful, but whether Hardy would have recognised it is another matter. The earliest sound recordings are too far removed in time to allow speculation. There are sufficient earlier recordings of singers to reach a few decades further back, but the Mellstock Band opt instead for the vocal style of the concert hall, sometimes a little shakily, and their audience is more likely found on the plush seats of the auditorium than the benches of the public house. The presence of the English concertina is a major part of the sound, and Dave Townsend can be relied upon to provide thoughtful listening.

If you travel eastward along the South coast of England, you will reach South Sussex, which could, with a change of cultural emphasis, be equally appropriately restyled 'Copper Country'. A county of great traditional music and song for many

years, it now contains a thriving community of session players, partly sustained by the quality of some of the local residents (Sussex is the home of Will Duke and Iris Bishop, both of whom I have mentioned earlier) and also by enthusiastic organisers of clubs and session venues. A collection of 180 tunes from these sessions named *The Lewes Favourites* has been compiled by Andy Warburton, and while the presence of a handful of tunes from Scan Tester and one from William Kimber does not justify a full review, a theme of this essay has been approaches to English Country Music, and those wishing to discover the repertoire will find a large number of the most widespread tunes in this well-presented collection, which also contains some photographs and the occasional dance notation. It will, however, not help with the playing style, and for this the enthusiast will need to search the internet and the second-hand shops for the excellent old vinyl records which are now mostly unavailable. The Free Reed retrospective will fill a few gaps in the revival players, and there are some specialist CDs in the Voice of the People series, but the big gaps will remain until Topic issues a similar retrospective based entirely on their wide resources of traditional English musicians.

#### NOTE

1. I must declare a slight interest, having played a small part in the first two items reviewed. Far from influencing my opinions, however, the presence of my own mistakes is a valid reminder of our human weaknesses.



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