

Tradfest: Lore of the Land



A night of folk music and music with a modern interpretation, as well a talk on field recordings was brought together by Folklore Tapes. This is an ongoing project of documentation and collaboration of experimental audio and visual responses to different themes within folklore.

As part of Tradfest, the festival of traditional arts currently taking place, the event was held at the Scottish Storytelling Centre. Tom Western, a PhD student on field recording in Post-war Britain, began proceedings with a presentation to a full auditorium of 99, mainly young people.

Three diverse folk music acts followed the talk. First on stage were Ian Humberstone and Malcolm Benzie, with an intriguing tale set to modern and traditional instruments. Iona Magnetic were next on stage, mixing folk stories with electronic music techniques and improvisation. Finally, the evening ended with Rob St. John, a band from Devon with a more classical set up.

As the lights dimmed, and the audience hushed in expectation, Western took the stage and began with a 30 minute presentation on the authenticity of this type of field audio. Such recordings are produced outside a studio, and can feature natural sounds, or musicians and storytellers in their own surroundings. They began as an aid to research work, and were used for documentary purposes.

Western first attempted to define the folk genre, when he said:- "It's hard to define but the borders between folk and pop music are seen as being opposites. Folk music has dealt with technology by embracing it and its effects."

Western focused on the process of folk recording as “models of authenticity”, and related the difference between true and false recordings, and the way field recordings are placed in this context. He also explored the supposed authenticity of recordings since the Second World War, particularly whether technology really adds legitimacy. Western explored the media’s role, and its commercial aims. He explained:-“These are relevant issues because reproduction and recreation of the recordings contribute to the corruption of authenticity. This can also lead to distortion and fragmentation of the original sound.”

Ian Humberstone and Malcolm Benzie were next to appear, with the tale of esteemed witch, **Marrian Voaden**, who in the late 19th century offered magical remedies, predictions and fixing of curses. Marriann lived in a derelict house in Bratton, Devon, until it eventually fell apart and burned down. The house’s decay, and the effects of this on Marriann were themes in the music.

The traditional instrument, the harmonium, lent a core authenticity to the thirty minute piece, while adding a new interpretation due to the inclusion of the modern instruments, the violin and cymbals. These all combined to create an eerie and atmospheric sound, with a sinister and dark, slow deep haunting melody. We could imagine Marion deep in the dark woods in that house which is creaking and groaning with a life of its own.

Iona Magnetic, a band comprising David Orphan from Iona along with Alexander Borland had only decided to play the festival two weeks ago, and despite only one rehearsal of their 30-minute set under their belt, their sound was still very professional.

Their first tale was called “**The Fishermen and the Fairy Mound**”. This folk tale is of two fishermen coming home in bad weather when they encounter the fairy queen going past Sithean

Beg (the little fairy mound). She beguiles one of them and takes him away. His friend pleads every night with the fairies for his release, until finally a year later the queen consents to the fisherman's return in exchange for his catch as ransom.

The band incorporated old and new instruments, cassettes, abstract films and field recordings in the local tongue to create a whole multimedia experience. The backdrop film was an abstract in black and white. The 8mm film had been left in water to coat it in algae, which created an interesting effect and was played in vintage mode.

The cracking and hiss in the film's audio indicated traditional materials and old recordings. The field recordings from Iona of wind and waves crashing, signified the fisherman's doom, but the birdsong allowed us some hope. These also added authenticity to the piece and created an effect of the tale's otherworldliness.

The ukulele as well as manipulated cassette players, mixed traditional and modern, bringing the piece into the present and indicating the evolution of folklore.

The darkness of harmony and broken melody were hypnotising in the dark auditorium, leading us to believe in the fairy queen and her beguiling. The slow tempo included sudden crashes and bangs, but the ukulele melody provided lightness towards the end as the danger decreased as the fisherman was rescued from the other world and returned home to the sound of the xylophone.

The second tale was about **Netta Fornario**. Netta went to Iona in 1929 with the intention of living there, and also further her occult studies as member of the group Alpha and Omega. This was part of the Order of the Golden Dawn, who were involved in astral projections and who performed magical rituals in the woods. Netta was found dead in these woods in dubious circumstances, perhaps as part of a ritual. She was

discovered on top of a large cross carved in to the ground, along with a dagger and a blackened cross, which Western explained as “all very strange and arcane”.

The background film of decay contributed to the dark and sinister atmosphere. It was made on Super 8 film coated in dead insects and incorporated field recordings of a voice telling the story in tongues, as if from the past.

The incessant instrumental beat signified Netta’s heartbeat, and the twanging ukulele signified her move to the Scotland that she loved. The field recordings of wind and waves crashing show her doom, as the music became eerie and dangerous. It was as if Netta was running, scared. The music speeding up, with bangs, and the screen turning red, signified her death on the cross. It ended with a sinister recorded voice talking of how she was found.

When asked about his inspiration for the piece, Orphan said: – “I guess because The Fisherman and the Fairy Mound is a local story that I can relate to, as that was where I walked past a lot and the menfolk raced horses around it on a midsummer eve. It was a leftover from a pagan tradition. The piece is not done in a uniform way. The soundtrack is done in our way, keeping the same thing alive, but differently.”

Rob St. John with his band were the final headlining act, his set included the release of his new 7” single Charcoal Black, with the b- sides The Bonny Grey/ Shallow Brown. Charcoal Black is a traditional Lancastrian melody from 1905, about the Industrial Revolution and crumbling mill towns contrasted with green fields. This is a ballad sung with energy and conviction, with the vocalist adding to the drama with his impressive stage presence and energy which made the music come to life.

“Shallow Ground” is a sad, haunting piece about the death of a loved one, Juliana, which is a West Indian sea shanty from

1908, and an affiliation to slave ships on the port of Sunderland Point in Lancashire in the 1700s. The band has a modern set-up, with an electric guitar, the moog and drums accompanying traditional folk songs. St. John said: – “I feel we’re on an exciting learning curve, with brand new songs recorded last year. These are traditional songs but reinterpreted. This is a wonderful space, brilliant sound and lovely people, I can’t ask for much more.” Judging by the applause at the end, they did themselves and the venue justice.

The event took was part of Tradfest, a festival of traditional Scottish arts. This runs in Edinburgh between 24 April to 6 May at various venues. It is part of the celebrations for Mayday or Beltane, the traditional start of summer. The festival encompasses music, song, storytelling, dance, crafts, folk drama and celebrations of the environment. The festival is based on previous festivals such as the Edinburgh People’s Festival and the International Folk Festival and there are events available to suit all tastes, including families and children.