

by Jim McCourt

After a 20 year break where she raised a family and pursued a career, singer and doctor Barbara Dymock's return to the folk scene in recent years has been marked by two well-received CDs and several gigs. Her experiences give Barbara a unique perspective from which to compare and contrast how the folk scene was with how it is now. We met in her Tayside home for a chat about her folk journey, and began by talking about how it all started.

"I was brought up on a Council estate in Methil, Fife, which was then a mining community. My granddad was a miner. A lot of music and singing went on, at birthdays, family get-togethers, any kind of party. Everybody had a party piece. My dad's brother, Uncle Pat played the accordion. My granny, who had an Irish background, was a singer. She and my granddad knew lots of Scottish and Irish songs so I absorbed them. In working class households then, there wasn't a lot of money about, and we didn't have so many entertainment opportunities - like tablets and the internet. Now, it's not the same, and parties are not so special - maybe people have too many different options."

"At University in 1972, a friend persuaded me to go along to the folk club - it was a revelation, and that's when I began performing in front of an audience, starting off with floor spots. The University folk club inspired sessions in Dundee and Broughty Ferry, and led to the formation of Ceolbeg. Bands were a relatively new phenomenon in folk music at that point, especially those with multiple instruments, sets of tunes, and a singer, though there were lots of duos around, like The Corries, and ceilidh-style events with individual performers - fiddlers or unaccompanied



Barbara Dymock

Now and Then

singers. Possibly the biggest inspirations for Ceolbeg were Irish bands like The Bothy Band or De Danann. We thought we could be a Scottish version."

"We weren't the first - I think that was The Clutha, with Gordeanna McCulloch - but we were in the vanguard if you like. The other bands were mainly Glasgow based. There was Kentigern which had Sylvia Barnes, and there was Ossian. The forerunner of Ossian was a band called Alba which Tony Cuffe was in, and also Mike Ward who I went to school with. We were all kind of connected with each other in some way - certainly musically. There were relatively

few of us in a thriving folk club scene, so we were all able to get gigs."

"I didn't do so much unaccompanied singing in those days. I prefer singing in a band, even though if you're singing unaccompanied you can set your own rhythm, tempo, pauses and breaths or whatever. Instruments will drive a rhythm/tempo or make you breathe in a different place, but I find the comfort of having other musicians around me makes me feel less exposed. I would learn a song by myself singing unaccompanied, decide how I wanted to sing it, then take it to the musicians. Everyone

would contribute to make it the whole thing, working out accompaniments, and adding harmonies. This is how I still do it."

"Soon after we formed Ceolbeg, I got married to Peter Boond who was the only musician that was in the group from beginning to end. He was really the driving force, the one who sought out bookings and all that sort of thing. Sadly, he died a few years ago. Pretty quickly, we got gigs in folk clubs - and folk clubs were a big deal at that time. We would have huge audiences and one gig would beget another, until we were doing festivals. It spiralled very quickly, but I was a medical student and

had set my sights on being a doctor, so eventually I had to pull out of Ceolbeg. I just couldn't fit everything in. It was then that I gave up singing in public, because I didn't like being on my own and I was so busy."

"I had a very short-lived foray into another band around 1987-88 - called Rathlin. Kenny Hadden invited me (he had been in one of the line-ups of Ceolbeg back in the day). I had two kids by that time and my car was on automatic pilot going up and down to Aberdeen to rehearse. We had a few gigs and did really well. Kenny recorded all our gigs on cassette. Every now and then he

sends me a CD of some of them. That's a great source of songs for me - I recently found two that I had forgotten about!"

"During my time away, I kept learning songs, and kept in touch with what was happening through friends, but I didn't go out to sessions because I was on-call and had a family to look after. I occasionally managed some local things, like sessions in the Fisherman's Tavern in Broughty Ferry, or the Kirriemuir Folk Festival. I also have lots of music books - although I can't read music, I'm very interested in the words so I would often go through the Child Ballads, looking

for inspiration, and refreshing my memory."

This led us on to talk about how Barbara chooses songs. "If a song speaks to me, I know instantly - some songs stop me in my tracks. If I can, I'll play it again and again and, that way, I can learn it in a day. But then I'll spend another three or four weeks bedding it in. I don't want to copy the person that I've heard it from, so I'll set their version aside, and go over and over it myself - sing it in the shower or when I'm doing the hoovering; that sort of thing - until eventually, it's mine, although it might not bear any resemblance to the original. I may want to breathe in a different place, ornament it differently, put stresses in or change the tunes slightly - which drives the purists crazy. When I feel it's ready, I'll put it into a set."

"With a song, what speaks to me first is a melody. If I find one that I really like, it sticks in my head. However, if I don't like the words that are with it, I have to find words that also speak to me, and that seem to fit - although I don't write myself."

Usher's Well is an example. It is a Child ballad which I've set to a tune which isn't even traditional. The song had always spoken to me because I've got three sons, like the lady in the song. I would read it and think about how I would feel if I lost my three sons like the wife of Usher's Well. It would be devastating, but there's not a lot in the song about how she feels. It's more about the supernatural elements. The setting came about because I heard my son playing a tune which turned out to be African. The melody stuck in my head until I was singing it, and it suddenly struck me that I might be able to fit *The Wife Of Usher's Well* words to it - two completely different ideas that, for some reason, got scrambled in my head. It was hard fitting the words into the African rhythms, but Chris Marra (who collaborates on the albums) helped a lot."

"I'm interested in the ballads and their words, and sometimes go the Ballad Workshop in Glasgow - it was run by Anne Neilson and the late Ronnie Clark, who sadly passed away earlier this year. I like songs that tell good stories

and make sense, although some of the ballads don't! There seem to be verses missing or they've been written down wrongly. A wee bit of me doesn't like the fact that the story's incomplete. Also, because I'm a doctor, I don't like songs where people die for no good reason! I understand people can die of a broken heart and it's a fact, but if it all happens in one verse, the doctor in me says - 'no, wait a minute!' - so I tend not to sing songs like that!"

"I also think that none of ballads' subject matter should be taboo. A lot of their stories are about rape and incest and murder, and somehow it's OK to sing about murder but not about rape. They're both serious crimes so why is it OK to sing about one and not the other? It's just a perception of society. Are the non-PC songs going to get buried because nobody can sing them? I've got two songs about rape on *Leaf An' Thorn*."

"To me, the ballads are 'life' in verse. Although some of them are fantastical and mythical, with stuff about fairies, sprites and elves, all life is there. They would have been like a newspaper of their day, being taken round the country by minstrels or travellers, announcing: 'Guess what the wifey up in the big hoose got up tae last week!' Also, the ballads are written in the language that I was brought up speaking, and that appeals to me. In Methil, I spoke Scots all my childhood, and had to unlearn it when I went to University. At medical school, speaking in Scots was completely frowned upon! That's partly why I liked the folk club, because I could sing in Scots. I do think it's very important to keep Scots alive. It's a shame to let all those things that made us different disappear. Society is becoming so homogenised. I've always tried to teach my children - and now my grand-daughters - Scots. They think I'm daft, but eventually they will remember."

"I also like contemporary folk, and if a contemporary song with a decent story and a melody speaks to me, I'll do it. An example is *Brookie Lads* written by Jez Lowe. Because I come from a mining community, his songs about miners also attract me."



Barbara with Chris Marra

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We moved on to discuss how Barbara came to record her two CDs. “When I first came back after my gap, I was mostly singing unaccompanied. As I’ve said, that’s not my comfort zone. I feel exposed when it’s just me. I was then asked to join a band called Fonabhorð which had seven people in it. It didn’t work out, mostly because trying to get seven musicians organised is like herding cats. We went to make a CD, but it was never completed to the satisfaction of all seven, so that was frustrating. Putting the effort in made me realise that I wanted some record of my stuff. I’d never recorded anything before, so it was all new. (Ceolbeg’s recordings came after I had left.)”

“I then made an album with Christine Kydd, whom I’d known at Uni. We had sung together very briefly back in the early 80s. Around 2007, we met up and did some gigs together, then recorded an album called *Lift*, which did very well. After that, I thought I needed to do one that was just me, not driven by a group or a duo. Tom, my husband, also encouraged me, but it was a big leap. I don’t take myself seriously, but it still gives me a thrill to think that I have made my versions of songs in the way that I want to present them.”

An important part of the process for Barbara was having the right people to work with; people she could trust and share ideas with. She found the answer in the Marra brothers! Both stand high in her estimation. Michael produced her

first album (*Hilbert’s Hotel*) and Chris her second (*Leaf An’ Thorn*).

“Michael was fab. He was the most generous person ever. He would give you anything willingly - his time, his advice - but you daren’t tell Michael a story, because whatever you told him, he would store away some place and bring out later in a different form, in lyrics, or in a play. He was fantastic to work with, very laid back and knowledgeable about music.”

It was Michael who suggested that Barbara ask “the brother” - as he always called Chris - to play guitars on the first album, and Barbara has continued to work with him. She is enthusiastic about his talents. “The first time I ever

saw him was playing with Michael, in a folk band, with Dougie MacLean. They were called Hen’s Teeth, but I don’t think they went outside Dundee. That’s when I was at Uni, around 1973, a long time ago. Equally as generous and easy to work with, he has the same sense of humour, but is his own person. He has been performing since he was 14 and has been in every kind of band you can imagine.”

Even with the circumstances, it was not all easy. “It is a long, long process from beginning to sing a song to getting it on a CD. It can take a couple of years. By the time you come to record the song, you could almost sing it in your sleep, which gives it a kind of natural feel because it’s not studio-contrived. I don’t enjoy the end bit, when you’ve got to critique what you have produced and maybe try to change things. I hate listening to myself - it is excruciating.”

We had time to briefly chat about how Barbara sees the value of music from her doctor’s perspective. “People are generally more isolated than they were, despite the fact that we have more ways of getting in touch with each other. A lot of old people, especially, have no old friends and neighbours they can call on.” However, music can have a role in helping reverse this trend. “There are lots of studies that show there are health benefits, certainly of group singing, because of the camaraderie, the feel-good factor, the enjoyment, the socialising and the getting-out and about, and such like. Many of the benefits are hard to actually measure, but I took part in a project involving patients

who had Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). We taught them singing once a week for two hours, along with posture and breathing exercises. The results were amazing. People who were normally breathless with COPD were amazed at how they could sing a whole line, and hold the note at the end. They felt the singing had improved their breathing.”

When Barbara returned to the folk scene after her 20 year gap, she found that, in some respects, it hadn’t changed much! “I noticed it was almost the same people that were in the folk clubs! I knew a lot of them. Their average age is probably 50+, and their numbers are falling. The club as an entity doesn’t seem to be for today’s world. There are few youngsters. Maybe, to them, folk clubs seem set in their ways and perhaps a bit purist in outlook. I worry for the youngsters now. There are so many of them who are so talented and professional coming out of traditional music courses, all expecting and hoping to make a living out of the ‘folk music industry’. They are changing things, and the tradition is changing - as it always has. That’s a good thing, but the competition is ferocious. That is very different to how it was 20 years ago.”

Barbara has managed to span the two eras with ease, bringing traditional songs to modern ears. Able to see both sides, her skills and experience still captivate audiences. With two CDs and many gigs under her belt, it is to be hoped there is a lot more to come.

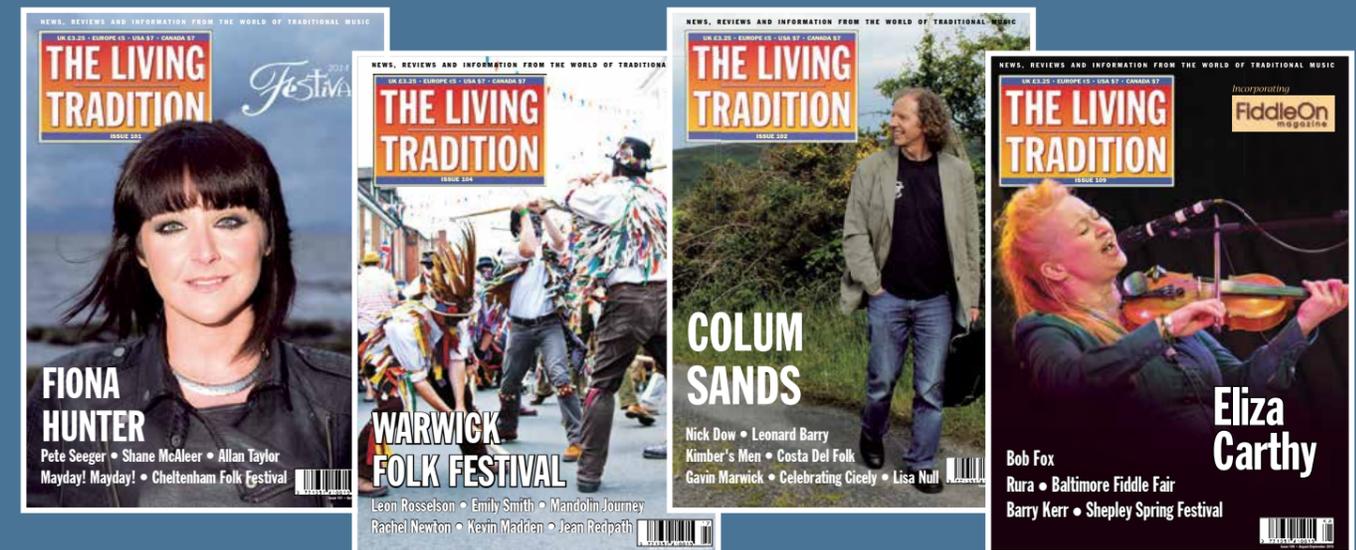
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