

OAK

English Country Music and Sing Welcome to our Fair

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Tony Engle *voice anglo-concertina fiddle*
Danny Stradling *voice tambourine*
Rod Stradling *voice melodeon*
Peta Webb *voice fiddle*

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In musical folklore, as in other spheres, theory and practice don't always correspond. The non-folk, whether scholars or simple enthusiasts, have an idea of 'classic' folk song in their head, but it's seldom the kind of thing the country singer has readiest in his mouth. None is more aware of this than the group called Oak.

The group comprises Rod Stradling, his wife Danny, Tony Engle and his girl Peta Webb. If Oak is relatively new on the scene, its members nonetheless have an unusually clear idea of what they want to do. Their fancy is firmly set on the kind of traditional song that, in the twentieth century, countryfolk have liked to perform for themselves, rather than the sort the folklorist would prefer them to perform. That is, Oak go for the songs still alive among the folk, rather than for those beautiful ghosts surviving in amber among the scholars' collections.

Most of the pieces sung and played by Oak have been got straight from living folk singers and traditional instrumentalists. The group's preferred stage is the floor of a country pub. Likewise their favourite items are those 'trad' pieces that go down best in the bar-rooms of boozers not given over to chromium, rexine and the jukebox.

As zealots will, Oak protest that their interest in the songs they sing is entirely non-academic, and they would prefer the items on this record simply to speak for themselves without any further information, beyond the courtesy of naming the persons from whom the pieces were learnt. But some people like a bit of background to a song, and it's Topic's custom to provide it. So the notes here are a bit more ample than earnest Oak would have preferred. They need not have feared. The songs, and their performance, will stand up to it.
A. L. Lloyd.

Thousands or More

Oak got this one from the singing of the Copper family of Peacehaven, Sussex. The good old folk singer George Townsend, who lived not far from Peacehaven, used to sing a similar version in two-part harmony with his father. It's a composition by Samuel Arnold, proprietor of the Marylebone Entertainment Gardens and founder of several London glee clubs at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Thousands or More* became popular with country singers towards the middle of last century, when the choral society and part-singing club movement began to affect villages close to the towns.

New Rigged Ship/Rig-a-jig-jig

These come from the North Skelton melodeon player George Tremain and the Norfolk fiddler Herbert Smith, exponents of typical English country-style playing. Here Rod is playing the old fashioned four-reed melodeon with all the stops out, hence the instrument sounds a bit different from usual. The first tune was already in print by the mid-eighteenth century. Country players sometimes call it *The Piper's Fancy*.

The Lakes of Cool Flynn

Scan Tester is best known as a concertina player, but he has good songs too. This is one of his. It seems to have been almost as popular in England as in its native Ireland. Just recently it was reported from Cumberland, and the celebrated George Maynard used to sing it in the Cherry Tree pub at Cophthorne, near the Surrey / Sussex border. Probably it owes its wide distribution to the fact that it was often printed on broadsides. Irish singers have found more in it than meets the ear, associating it with the old folklore theme of the vengeful mermaid sweetheart, and suggesting that the line: 'he swam to an island but not to dry ground' (the phrase is a bit different in Tony's version) refers to the trick of mermaids in causing men to drown by making islands vanish.

The Nutley Waltz and The Faithful Sailor Boy

The *Nutley* is one of Oak's favourite waltzes. They had it from Scan Tester of Horsted Keynes, Sussex. Nutley is a village near his home. The song was got from Percy Webb of Tunstall Common, Suffolk. It belongs to that class of songs that arose between the thirties and eighties of the nineteenth century, a time when emotional expression was all the rage in the arts. The sentiments offered to the high bourgeoisie by the ballades of Chopin and the romances of Tchaikovsky were paralleled at petty-bourgeois level by such pieces as *She was poor but she was honest* and *The Little Flower Girl*. The latter song is a composition by G. W. Persley, who also wrote *The Faithful Sailor Boy*. Despite all the send-ups of this kind of 'oleograph in music', affection for the originals still lingers on.

Roving Round the County Tyrone

Peta Webb learnt this from the singing of Lal Smith, a 'traveller' (some would say 'tinker' - a disobliging term like 'nigger') from Northern Ireland. The song presents the woman as a free agent, a drifter, but perhaps forced into that position; ultimately it's a song of regret.

The Scarlet and the Blue

Alfie Ainger, landlord of the Royal Oak, Hooks Way, Sussex, used to sing this song, waving a false leg in the air like a rifle. His tune was a bit erratic and he had lost some of the words, but Oak were able to make up the complete song from a Suffolk singer, Bob Hart. The song is the work of John J. Blockley, "composer of the *Volunteer Rifles Polka*", and was published in the late eighteen-seventies (with a stirring lithographic cover) about the time of the Zulu War. It is still popular with country singers in the South.

Shepherds Arise

This handsome carol is also from the repertory of the Copper Family, who call it their "curly tune". Clearly it is of literary origin, probably eighteenth century, but extensive searches through old hymnbooks have failed to cast light on its origins. Listening to it reminds us what musical riches have dropped out of church use, due to the flannel ears of nineteenth century hymnbook compilers.

Scan's Polkas

Two dance tunes from Scan Tester. As is often the case he has no title for them. During the time that Oak have been playing them they've changed them a bit, particularly the second one.

Australia

Rod Stradling got this one from Bob Hart, of Snape, Suffolk, who called it *Come all you young fellows*. Hart ran away to sea at the age of fifteen, sailing in trawlers out of Grimsby. He got many of his songs at sea, including this one from a sailor who had worked on the Australia run. The song, by the way, has never been reported from Australia. It has borrowed a few phrases from the better-known transportation song called *Van Diemen's Land*. The first convicts arrived in Australia in 1788, and the last lot in 1852, so the song comes from somewhere between those dates.

Cupid's Garden

Another one learnt from the Copper Family. William Chappell, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, described it as 'one of the most generally known of traditional songs', and beside the London broadside houses, Pratt of Birmingham, Barr of Leeds, Harkness of Preston and Walker of Durham all did good business with the stall-ballad of *Cupid's Garden*. It's often said that the name is a corruption of 'Cuper's Gardens', an amusement place on the south bank of the Thames, not far from where the Festival Hall now stands. There's no good evidence for this persistent theory.

False, False

Danny Stradling heard this song at a festival in Blairgowrie some years ago, where it was sung, by Sheila MacGregor, of the extensive Stewart family of traveller-singers.

Our Good Ship Lies in Harbour

This oldtime pop favourite became widely known in town and countryside late on in the nineteenth century, after Henry Such of London published it as a stall-ballad. The version sung here is almost identical with Such's broadside.

**The Bunch of Thyme and The Perfect Cure/
The Sweets of May**

The song is from celebrated Jean Robertson of Aberdeen, but it had got changed around a bit before it reached Oak. As to the jigs, the first is from a Norfolk melodeon-player, H. R. Mallett, while the second one is familiar to Irish musicians under half a dozen titles.



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