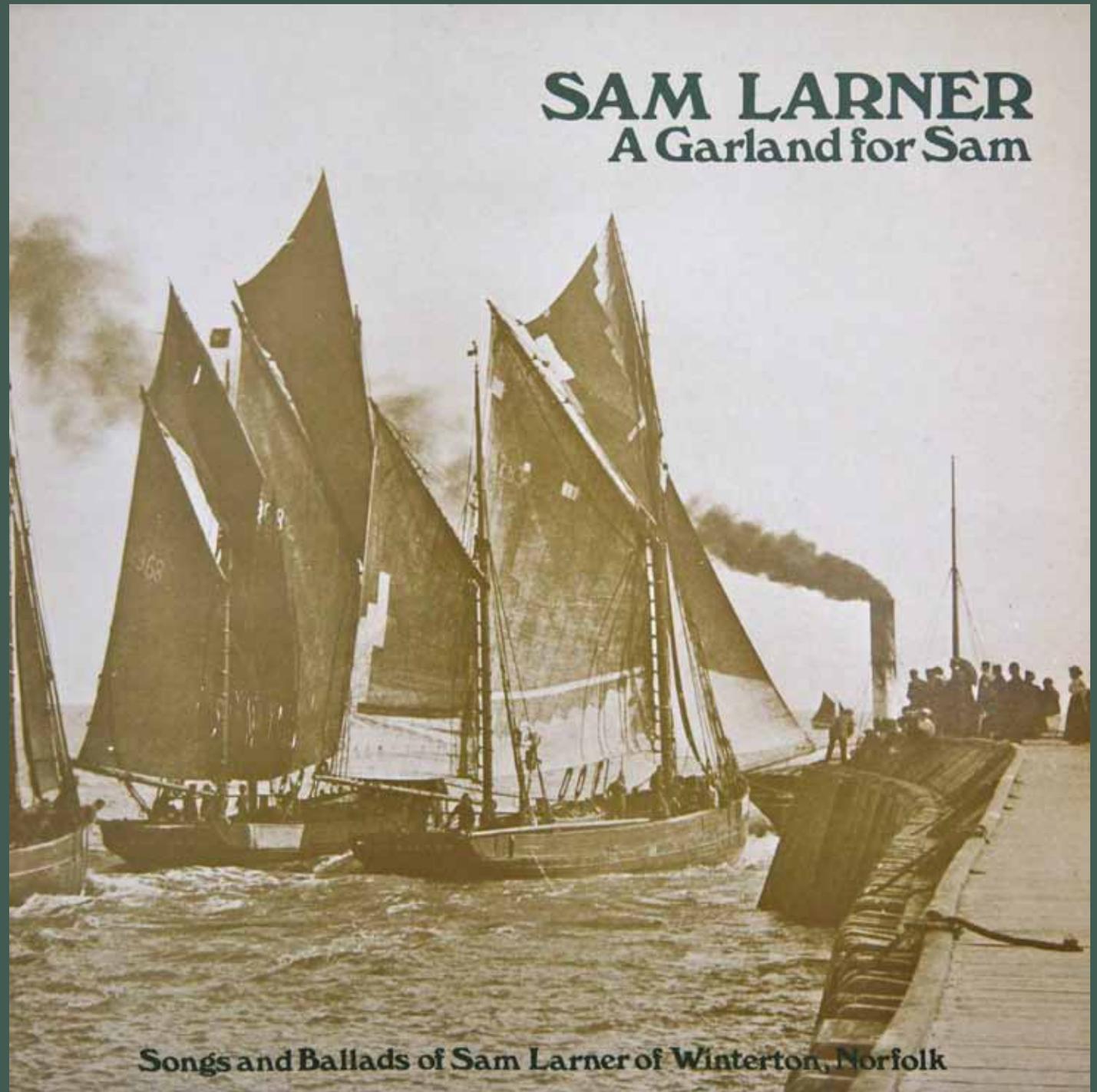


TSDL244

SAM LARNER
A GARLAND FOR SAM
Songs and Ballads of Sam
Larner of Winterton,
Norfolk

1. Alphabet Song
2. Merry Month of May
3. Napoleon's Dream
4. London Steamer
5. Bonny Bunch of Roses
6. Barbara Allen
7. The Smacksman
8. The Lofty Tall Ship
9. Raking the Hay
10. Will Watch
11. The Outlandish Knight
12. Haisboro Light Song
13. Old Bob Ridley-o
14. The Bold Princess Royal
15. In Scarboro' Town



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This record celebrates one of the finest folk singers of our time, Sam Larner, born in Winterton, Norfolk, in 1878. Winterton is just north of Yarmouth, on the coastal edge of a stretch of flat watery country that, half a century ago, within a few square miles, sheltered a remarkable nest of singing birds, including Harry Cox of Barton (later Catfield), Ted Goffin of Catfield, Bob Miller of Sutton, and Jimmy Sutton (called 'Old Larpin') of Winterton. The composer E J Moeran noted fine songs from all these men during and shortly after the first world war, but he missed Sam Larner, who was perhaps away at sea.

The Life

When Sam was a boy, Winterton was a busy place with more than three hundred men working at the herring fishery. He declared: 'When Winterton boys left school, it was sea or gaol for them.' For himself, at twelve years old, he signed as 'peggy' (cabin boy) in a 40 ton sailing boat, the *Young John*, and a hard time he had of it, fishing the Minch in winter, running up to the Faeroes and across to the Norway Deeps. 'Rough and ready you were put through the ropes', he said. 'My uncle Jimmy, he used to flog me, and he used to cry after he'd done it.' And: 'When you're coming into harbour you're pleased, heart up. But when you're going to sea again, you're on the knuckle bones

of your arse.' After four years peggying, Sam got a berth as a deck-hand in the sailing lugger *Snowflake*, and he began to feel himself a real fisherman. 'I done eight years in sailing boats and then we were fully qualified, we could do anything there was to do aboard of sailing boats – knot, splice, mend the nets, set a rigging in, serve a rigging, all that. The more you done things aboard a boat, the more enlightenment you got.' Towards the end of the century, herring fishing techniques were undergoing a revolution, and in 1899 Sam got a job in one of the new fangled steam drifters the *Lottie*. He said 'There's something human about a sailing boat, how they answer. But as regards the work, that was like heaven when we got into the drifters, absolute heaven.' And another fisherman: 'The steam drifters were ideal for the job, never be beaten. They were like a house at sea, and they'd lay at a net like an old shoe.'

When the drifters came in, that was the start of the good fishing, and the years up to the first world war were a boom time for driftermen. Plenty of fish and good money. Sam recalled that as the men started to shoot their two mile long stretches of drift net, they'd cry: 'Heave nets in the name of the Lord!', like the tunny fishermen off the coast of Sicily. He declared: 'I've seen where you could walk across

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Yarmouth Harbour jammed right chock-a-block in boats. Herrin', ain't nowhere to put the herrin' on the quay. That's when the drifters first came. That's when that was good.' The boom lasted less than a quarter-century, when the fishing declined. The herring grew scarce, markets were poor, and already in 1921, well before the general depression, they said they were paying off fishermen with the stamp cards. And after 1930, the really bitter years set in. In 1933, when Sam was fifty five, his health would no longer stand the hard trips, and he left the drifters and improvised a living as best he could, on and off the dole, in and out of odd jobs, breaking stones on the road, planting trees for the Forestry Commission, whatever was going, he'd do. Poor end for a man who'd spent a lifetime learning the run of the sea, the handling of drifters, who could find where the good shoals of herring were by the sight of a whale's blow, by the grouping of birds, by the colour and thickness of the water.

Such was the working life of this notable singer, well known in his locality but unheard of beyond it, till in 1958 when Sam was touching eighty, he was 'discovered' by the BBC producer Philip Donnellan, who recorded him again in 1959. Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger also recorded him intensively (they

edited a disc of his songs for Folkways), and in 1960 the noble old man, through his songs and reminiscences, provided much of the backbone of the outstanding MacColl-Seeger-Parker radio ballad, *Singing the Fishing*. Incidentally, most of the direct speech quotations in this Note come from recordings made during the preparation of the radio ballad. The songs on this record are from Philip Donnellan's recordings deposited in the Sound Archive of the BBC.

The Songs

Musicality, life experience and zest made Sam Lerner the singer he was; a splendid example of the 'showman singer'. The term was used by pioneer folklorists as something of a put-down; their theory was that the good traditional singer gave an impassive, objective performance, and that open expressiveness was unseemly. But in fact that prized impassivity could as well be a sign of decay, of the loosening hold of the tradition, of the singer's diminished involvement in the songs. Anyway, it's a matter of temperament, and Sam Lerner's temperament was such that he vividly savoured every line he sang; songs excited him, and made him laugh right out, or snort with indignation, or murmur with sympathy. He loved to comment at the end – and sometimes between verses too – and his remarks

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were always pointed and aimed to reinforce the sense of the song.

Like Harry Cox, Larner had a sizeable repertory of about sixty songs ready on the tip of his mind, with many others lurking half-submerged in the depths. Probably, earlier on he had a larger number of 'ready' pieces; after all, he wasn't recorded till he was an old man with limited chances of airing his repertory. He learned most of his songs from his father, or from his neighbour, 'Old Larpin' Sutton, or from shipmates on the luggers and drifters.

In composition, his repertory may be taken as standard for his part of coastal-cum-Broads Norfolk. He had a handful of broadside versions of 'classic' ballads of the kind shown on this record by *The Outlandish Knight*, *Barbara Allen*, and *Henry Martin (The Lofty Tall Ship)*. Inevitably he has many sea songs such as *Coil Away the Trawl-warp*, *Boys (The Smacksman)* and *Windy Old Weather (Haisboro Light Song)*, a song made widely known of recent years through the singing of the East Coast spritsailbarge skipper Bob Roberts. Sam Larner hadn't many stage pieces on tap, though he enjoyed singing *Old Bob Ridley*, introduced into England by the blackface Christy Minstrels in the 1850s; also he was stirred by the drama of *Will Watch, the Bold Smuggler*, a

composition by Dibdin's contemporary, Cory (Sam's version shows remarkably little difference from the one printed in *The Universal Songster*, or *The Museum of Mirth* of 1832). As expected, the majority of Larner's songs were broadside lyrics, whether historical, such as *The Bonny Bunch of Roses* or the rare *Napoleon's Dream*, (Sam was fascinated by Bonaparte's downfall), rustic love encounters of the kind of *The Grass Cut Very Dry (Merry Month of May)* and *The Girl Raking the Hay*, or pathetic melodramas such as the remarkably widespread *Scarborough Dear Town*, or *The Drunken Lover*.

This exemplary old singer, who loved life however hard it treated him, died on 11 September 1965.

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Recorded by Philip Donnellan for the BBC, 1958/59

Sleeve design by Tony Engle

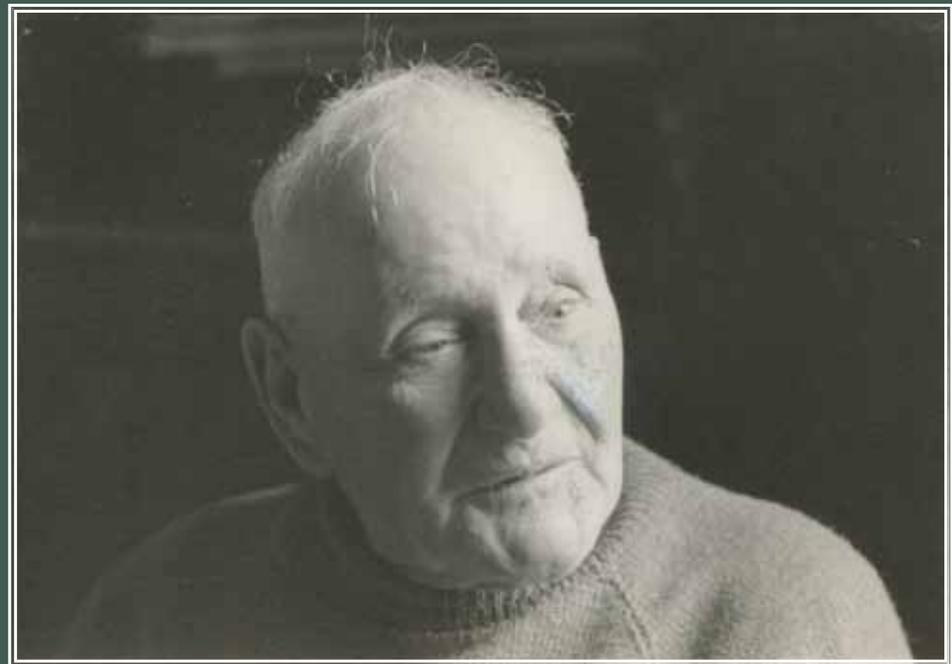
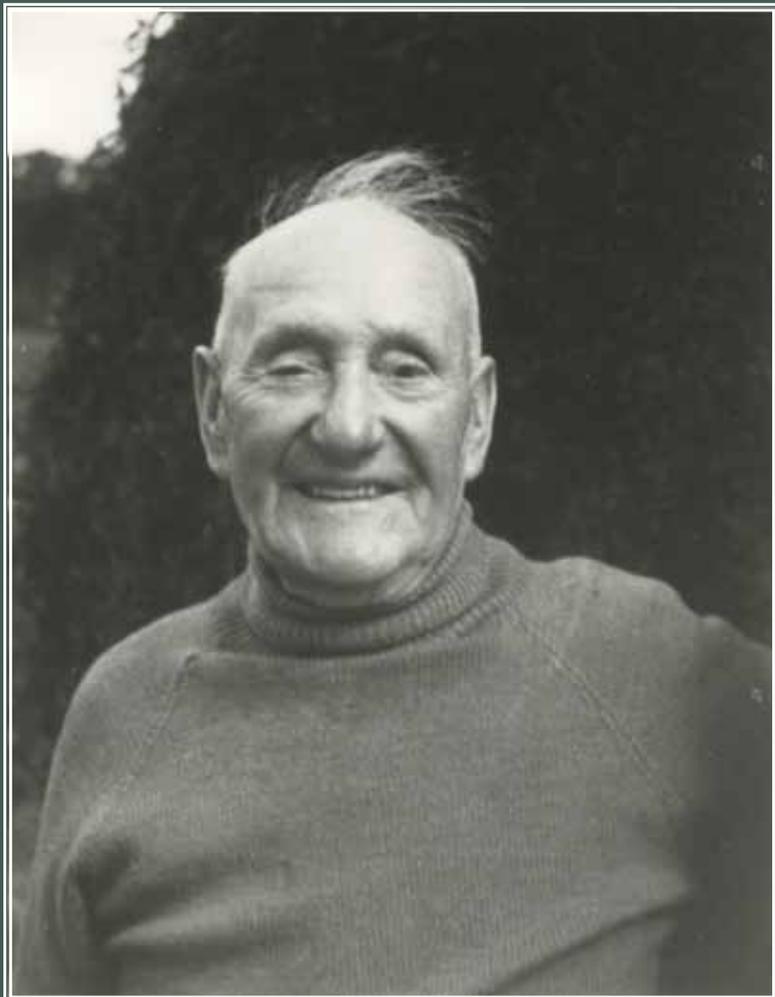
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