

# FRANKIE ARMSTRONG

## SONGS AND BALLADS

*with Andrew Brown fiddle, Graham Goffee guitar,  
Susie Rothfield Appalachian dulcimer and voice,  
Heather Wood voice and Brian Pearson voice.*

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- 1 **Little Duke Arthur's Nurse**  
*(acc. fiddle, guitar, dulcimer)*
- 2 **The Pitmen's Union**  
*(acc. guitar)*
- 3 **Lady Diamond**  
*(unacc.)*
- 4 **Lament for the Hull Trawlers**  
*(acc. fiddle and guitar)*
- 5 **The Month of January**  
*(duet with Heather Wood)*
- 6 **Three Drunken Maidens**  
*(vocal trio with Heather Wood and Susie Rothfield)*
- 7 **Jack the Lad**  
*(acc. fiddle and guitar)*
- 8 **The Whore's Lament**  
*(acc. fiddle, with chorus)*
- 9 **Little Musgrave**  
*(acc. dulcimer)*
- 10 **The Collier Lass**  
*(unacc.)*
- 11 **The Female Drummer**  
*(acc. fiddle, guitar, dulcimer, with chorus)*

First published by Topic 1975  
Recorded and produced by Tony Enge, London, March 1975  
Notes by A. L. Lloyd  
Sleeve design and front sleeve photograph - Tony Enge  
Back sleeve photograph by Tony Russell



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**Little Duke Arthur's Nurse:** A jokey tale versified into a ballad balanced on a razor-edge of violence. Child called it *The Duke of Athol's Nurse*, and it's No. 212 in his collection. Seventy or eighty years ago it was still fairly common in Scotland, and Gavin Greig recorded seven versions in Aberdeenshire, mostly from women. This anglicized set is based mainly on the version sung to Greig by Alexander Robb, the school caretaker at New Deer, where Greig lived. We're used to songs in which women dress as men; those in which men are the cross-dressers are rare. Frankie Armstrong remarks that whereas women put on men's array for the sake of adventure and in search of wider horizons, the men merely end up looking silly. 'Such songs tell us a lot about the relative status of the sexes,' says she.

**The Pitmen's Union:** The words are on a broadside published by J. Bristow, 203 Gallowgate, Glasgow; no date, but probably issued a bit before the middle of the nineteenth century when the old rural kind of folk songs were giving way to the new industrial songs, and for a short time the two traditions mingled as here. We have no tune for the song, so the words have been fitted to the melody of another early industrial song, the mine-disaster ballad of *Johnny Seddon*. Rustic idyll combines nicely with trade union sentiment. Frankie Armstrong calls it 'a graceful hybrid.' Fair enough.

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**Lady Diamond:** The brutal story of the king who kills his daughter's low-born lover and sends her his heart in a golden cup, was on the go in the Middle Ages. Boccaccio re-tells it in his tale of Ghismonda and Guiscardo, and in later years it was several times made into a play in England and elsewhere. Versified into a ballad, it was widely known throughout Western Europe and Scandinavia. The version here is mainly that sung by Mary Johnston, 'dairymaid at Hoddam Castle,' and printed in C. K. Sharpe's *Ballad Book* (1823). The song is savage, but as Frankie Armstrong remarks, such savagery is hardly a thing of the past. 'As often with old ballads, the moral is not drawn; we experience through the action the consequences of possessiveness and jealousy. How better can we learn?'

**Lament for the Hull Trawlers:** In February 1968 the country was moved by the sad loss of three British trawlers off the cold coast of Iceland. Frankie Armstrong says: 'Many of us, including myself, had been ignorant till then of the appalling conditions in which trawlermen worked, and it was largely as a result of the protests of the fishermen's wives and mothers that the public was made aware. I just happened to be singing in Hull and Grimsby at the time, so I tried to capture some of my feelings in song.' Frankie wrote the words, and Ewan MacColl made the tune.

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**The Month of January:** Frankie finds this ‘one of the most beautiful of many songs of this kind, where the woman is left literally holding the baby while the errant father has gone off in search of fortune elsewhere.’ Her version reproduces that of Sarah Makem, the fine Ulster ballad singer. There’s a nice Donegal version called *The Fanaid Grove* in Herbert Hughes’s *Irish Country Songs*, vol. 1, and in Joyce’s *Old Irish Folk Music and Songs* is a fragmentary set sung by a reaper in a harvest field, containing the aromatic line: ‘My love is as sweet as the cinnamon tree.’

**Three Drunken Maidens:** Before the days of the seaside boarding house and the Royal Yacht Squadron, the Isle of Wight was an off-loading point for liquor smugglers from France, and a place of brandy and boisterousness, rum and riot. A. L. Lloyd found the words in W. H. Logan’s *Pedlar’s Pack of Ballads and Songs* (1869) and he made a tune for them. Later he came across an old melody for the song in a North Tyne piper’s manuscript tune-book (John Vickers’ *Tune Book*, compiled c. 1770), and a nice air too, but the song now seems to be stuck with Lloyd’s melody. Originally the drunken maidens numbered four, but singing the song with Heather Wood and Susie Rothfield, Frankie has found it apt to reduce the boozy line-up.

**Jack the Lad:** The song was made by a school teacher, John Pole, and its words are based on the life and death of a South London schoolboy. Frankie Armstrong, who has worked among drug-users for a good while, was immediately struck by the song when she first heard Pole sing it, and she has made it into something of her own. She says: ‘Judging from the number of people who come up and remark on it after a performance, it has affected and moved a great many people.’

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**The Whore’s Lament:** It’s too bad when the lady is the victim of a sexual assault and nonetheless finds herself in gaol. Nonetheless in this case she seems philosophical about it. The words - decorously titled *The Magdalene’s Lament* - were printed in G. R. Kinloch’s *Ballad Book* (1827). The tune, a re-working of the *Keach in the Creel* melody, is by Don Martin of Glasgow.

**Little Musgrave:** Many people connect the events of this ballad with the district of Barnard Castle, Co. Durham. Perhaps. Anyway, the song tells a powerful story that unrolls like a film scenario, exterior, interior, distant shots that cut to close-up. Frankie Armstrong finds this exceptionally powerful: the wife trapped in a marriage probably not of her own choosing; the lover whose ardour outweighs his caution; the husband who has to be seen to do the right thing and who desperately tries to avoid the tragic outcome. The words of this version are substantially those obtained by William Motherwell ‘from the recitation of Mrs. McConechie, Kilmarnock’ at the start of the nineteenth century. A bit of the ballad is quoted in Beaumont and Fletcher’s *Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1611), and it was printed on broadsides several times in the seventeenth century but by the mid-nineteenth century it was rarely reported; such a good song, one wonders why; especially as it remained popular among American folk singers.

**The Collier Lass:** John Harkness, of 121 Church Street, Preston, published a broadside of this in the early 1850s. It's a touching portrait of the kind of women and girls who worked in the coal-pits. Some writers present them as a coarse and brutalized lot, but their songs, and their testimony to the various Commissions of Enquiry of the time, show otherwise. Frankie Armstrong admires the quiet dignity of this song, and suggests that - though different in timbre - it has something of the strength of the songs of Molly Jackson and other women ballad-makers of the American coalfields in the inter-War period. The broadside didn't specify a tune, so one has been fitted by A. L. Lloyd.

**The Female Drummer:** Evidently a great favourite, this song, not so long ago. 'Well known in Aberdeenshire,' said Gavin Greig. Hammond found versions in Somerset. About the same time, Grainger heard it in Lincolnshire. Frankie got her version from the singing of Harry Cox of Catfield, Norfolk. It goes back at least to the eighteenth century, and there's a broadside of it, c.1790, in the Bodleian Library. The adventurous girl who disguises herself as a drummer-boy runs her risks with admirable lightness. One version of the song has: 'In pulling on my breeches, it causes me to smile, To think I lay with a thousand men and a maiden all the while.'

319, Clapham Rd  
SW9  
25<sup>th</sup> May

Dear Tony,  
As promised here  
are some ideas for the  
notes. I've made no attempt at  
scholarly source references as  
Ber's much better at that.  
I've tried to offer a  
little of what I see in the  
songs, which hopefully he can  
use. They're unashamedly  
fairly feminist in their

outlook and while I don't  
exactly expect it to sell as a  
'Feminist' record I would like  
to see it as having something  
to say to those sympathetic  
to the women's movement. Let  
me stoop so low as to appeal to  
your purse - I think there's  
quite a potential for sales in that  
field - especially in the US!  
I know you'll do your  
best, thanks,  
fond wishes  
Frankie



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