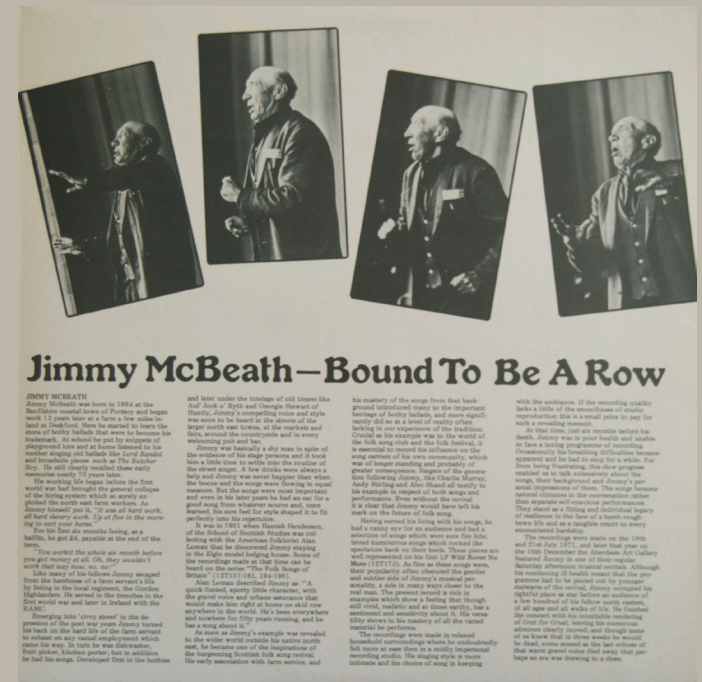




JIMMY MCBEATH Bound to Be a Row

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Jimmy McBeath—Bound To Be A Row

JIMMY MCBEATH

Jimmy McBeath was born in 1884 at the Banchory coastal town of Forres and began work 12 years later at a farm a few miles inland at Inshaford. There he learned to learn the story of holly holly that were to become his trademark. At school he put by snippets of playground lore and at home listened to his

father singing old ballads like Lord Randall and beautiful pieces such as The Bonny Broom. He still enjoys reading them 1977.

The working life began before the first world war had brought the general collapse of the herring system which as society exploited the north east farm workers. As Jimmy himself put it, "I set all hard work, all hard labour work. Up at five in the morning for the first six months living, as a

herring, to get it, maybe at the end of the year.

"You worked the whole six months before you got money at all. Oh, they wouldn't work that way now, no."

Like many of his fellows Jimmy escaped from the hardship of a farm servant's life by being in the local regiment, the Gordon Highlanders. He served in the trenches in the first world war and later in Ireland with the IRA.

Emerging into 'lively times' in the depression of the post war years Jimmy turned his back on the hard life of the farm servant to seek out any casual employment which came his way. In turn he was dishwasher, fruit picker, kitchen porter but in addition he had his songs. Developed first in the bottom

and later under the tutelage of old timers like Alf Jack o' Byth and George Howard of Banff, Jimmy's compelling voice and style was soon to be heard in the streets of the larger north east towns, at the markets and fairs, around the countryside and in every welcoming pub and bar.

Jimmy was basically a shy man in spite of the evidence of his stage persona and it took him a little time to settle into the routine of the street singer. A few drinks were always a help and Jimmy was never happier than when the house and the song were flowing in equal measure. But the songs were most important and even in his later years he had no fear of a good song from whatever source and, none better, his own had for style shaped it to fit perfectly into his repertoire.

It was in 1951 when Kenneth Henderson, of the School of Scottish Studies was collaborating with the American Folklore Alan Lomax that he discovered Jimmy singing in the Elgin music lodging house. Some of the recordings made at that time can be heard on the album "The Folk Songs of Britain" (1971) (1, 12, 13, 14).

Alan Lomax described Jimmy as "A quick tempered, witty little character, with the great voice and urbane assurance that would make him right at home on a stage anywhere in the world. He's been everywhere and everywhere for 50 years singing, and he has a song about it."

As soon as Jimmy's example was revealed to the wider world outside his native north east, he became one of the inspirations of the burgeoning Scottish folk song revival. The early association with farm service, and

his mastery of the songs from that background introduced many to the important linkages of holly holly, and more significantly did so as a level of reality often lacking in our experience of the tradition. Central to his example was the world of the folk song club and the folk festival. It is essential to record his influence on the song scene of his own community, which was of longer standing and probably of greater consequence. Jimmy of the generation following Jimmy, the Charlie Morris, Jacky Hirling and Alex Shand all testify to his example in terms of both songs and performance. Even without the revival it is clear that Jimmy would have left his mark on the future of folk song.

Having earned his living with his songs, he had a many more to his audience and had a selection of songs which were new for him, tried humorous songs which rocked the spectators back on their heels. These poems are well represented on his fine LP *Wild Rover No More* (1971). As few as these songs were, their popularity often obscured the gentle and subtle side of Jimmy's musical personality, a side in many ways closer to the real man. The greatest threat to such a sentiment and sensitivity about it. His verse ability shows in his mastery of all the usual material he performs.

The recordings were made in relaxed, homely surroundings where he comfortably felt more at ease than in a noisily impressed recording studio. His singing style is more intimate and his choice of song to keep to

with the audience. If the recording quality lacks a little of the smoothness of studio reproduction this is a small price to pay for such a revealing memory.

At this time, just six months before his death, Jimmy was in poor health and unable to leave a strong impression of himself. For apparent and he had to stay for a while. For Jimmy, his working difficulties became a life of a herring, as Jimmy himself put it, "I set all hard work, all hard labour work. Up at five in the morning for the first six months living, as a herring, to get it, maybe at the end of the year."

The recordings were made on the 19th and 21st July 1971, and show that even on the 19th December the Aberdeen Art Gallery featured Jimmy in one of their regular literary afternoons musical sessions. Although his condition it health meant that the programme had to be pared down to program moments of the evening Jimmy sang to a few hundred of his fellow community of all ages and all walks of life. He finished the evening with his inevitable recording of *Crin for Crin*, leaving his audience admiringly clapped, and though none of us knew that in three weeks he would be dead, some stood on the last volume of that were given round that night that people are now drawing to a close.

Jimmy McBeath was born in 1894 at the Banffshire coastal town of Portsoy and began work 13 years later at a farm a few miles inland at Deskford. Here he started to learn the store of bothy ballads that were to become his trademark. At school he put by snippets of playground lore and at home listened to his mother singing old ballads like *Lord Randal* and broadside pieces such as *The Butcher Boy*. He still clearly recalled these early memories nearly 70 years later. His working life began before the first world war had brought the general collapse of the hiring system which so sorely exploited the north east farm workers. As Jimmy himself put it, "It was all hard work, all hard slavery work. Up at five in the morning to sort your horse."

For his first six months feeing, as a halflin, he got £4, payable at the end of the term. "You workit the whole six month before you got money at all. Oh, they wouldn't work that way now, no, no!"

Like many of his fellows Jimmy escaped from the harshness of a farm servant's life by listing in the local regiment, the Gordon Highlanders. He served in the trenches in the 1st world war and later in Ireland with the RAMC.

Emerging into 'civvy street' in the depression of the post war years Jimmy turned his back on the hard life of the farm servant to subsist on any casual employment which came his way. In turn he was dishwasher, fruit picker, kitchen porter; but in addition he had his songs. Developed first in the bothies and later under the tutelage of old timers like Aul' Jock o' Byth and Georgie Stewart of Huntly, Jimmy's compelling voice and style was soon to be heard in the streets of the larger north east towns, at the markets and fairs, around the countryside and in every welcoming pub and bar.

Jimmy was basically a shy man in spite of the evidence of his stage persona and it took him a little time to settle into the routine of the street singer. A few drinks were always a help and Jimmy was never happier than when the booze and the songs were flowing in equal measure. But the songs were most

important and even in his later years he had an ear for a good song from whatever source and, once learned, his sure feel for style shaped it to fit perfectly into his repertoire.

It was in 1951 when Hamish Henderson, of the School of Scottish Studies was collecting with the American folklorist Alan Lomax that he discovered Jimmy staying in the Elgin model lodging house. Some of the recordings made at that time can be heard on the series "The Folk Songs of Britain" (12T157-161, 194-198).

Alan Lomax described Jimmy as: "A quick-footed, sporty little character, with the gravel voice and urbane assurance that would make him right at home on skid row anywhere in the world. He's been everywhere and nowhere for fifty years running, and he has a song about it."

As soon as Jimmy's example was revealed to the wider world outside his native north east, he became one of the inspirations of the burgeoning Scottish folk song revival. His early association with farm service, and his mastery of the songs from that background introduced many to the important heritage of bothy ballads, and more significantly did so at a level of reality often lacking in our experience of the tradition. Crucial as his example was to the world of the folk song club and the folk festival, it is essential to record his influence on the song carriers of his own community, which was of longer standing and probably of greater consequence. Singers of the generation following Jimmy, like Charlie Murray, Andy Stirling and Alec Shand all testify to his example in respect of both songs and performance. Even without the revival it is clear that Jimmy would have left his mark on the future of folk song. Having earned his living with his songs, he had a canny eye for an audience and had a selection of songs which were sure fire hits; broad humorous songs which rocked the spectators back on their heels. These pieces are well represented on his first LP *Wild Rover No More* (12T173). As fine as these songs were, their popularity often obscured the gentler and subtler side of Jimmy's musical personality, a side in many ways closer to the

real man. The present record is rich in examples which show a feeling that though still vivid, realistic and at times earthy, has a sentiment and sensitivity about it. His versatility shows in his mastery of all the varied material he performs.

The recordings were made in relaxed household surroundings where he undoubtedly felt more at ease than in a coldly impersonal recording studio. His singing style is more intimate and his choice of song in keeping with the ambience. If the recording quality lacks a little of the smoothness of studio reproduction this is a small price to pay for such a revealing memoir. At that time, just six months before his death, Jimmy was in poor health and unable to face a taxing programme of recording.

Occasionally his breathing difficulties became apparent and he had to stop for a while. Far from being frustrating, this slow progress enabled us to talk extensively about the songs, their background and Jimmy's personal impressions of them. The songs became natural climaxes in the conversation rather than separate self-conscious performances. They stand as a fitting and individual legacy of resilience in the face of a harsh rough-hewn life and as a tangible retort to every encountered hardship.

The recordings were made on the 19th and 21st July 1971, and later that year on the 16th December, the Aberdeen Art Gallery featured Jimmy in one of their regular Saturday afternoon musical recitals. Although his continuing ill health meant that the programme had to be pieced out by younger stalwarts of the revival, Jimmy occupied his rightful place as star before an audience of a few hundred of his fellow north easters, of all ages and all walks of life. He finished the concert with his inimitable rendering of *Grat for Gruel*, leaving his numerous admirers clearly moved; and though none of us knew that in three weeks he would be dead, some sensed as the last echoes of that warm gravel voice died away that perhaps an era was drawing to a close.

Bound To Be A Row

A somewhat cynical view of married life, which Jimmy as a bachelor always delivered with a good deal of relish. It seems to have been known all over Scotland, for the Border shepherd Willie Scott has a version, and the great Aberdeenshire collector Gavin Greig found it current in the north at the beginning of the century.

The Banks of Inverurie

According to Grieg this piece was common sixty years ago. It is still known but not nearly so widely.

Ythanside

On to the simple rural love song have been grafted the sort of realistic details that belong to the classic bothy ballad and so we can fairly confidently date this piece to the latter part of the nineteenth century. It is often encountered today and the text is quite stable except for the end which varies considerably, as if the singers were uncertain of the emotional direction of the song.

Erin Go Bragh

As well as being about anti-Irish feeling this song emphasises the contrast between the east and the west of Scotland, when inhabitants of the latter can be mistaken for foreigners by natives of the capital, Edinburgh, here referred to as Aul' Reekie.

Bogie's Bonnie Belle

The Strathbogie region, where this piece is from, is the very heart of the bothy ballad country and the rejection of social pretension which underlies the song is typical of the genre. A note in Gavin Grieg's MS has the hero as John Geddes and Jimmy's last verse gives independent backing to this tradition.

The Cow Wi' The Iron Tail

The cow referred to is of course the old style hand-operated water pump.

Arlin's Fine Braes

Unlike most bothy ballads there is no traceable locality for this one and the title may derive from a metaphorical association with 'arles', the payment made to farm servants when first hired. The most common title formerly was *The Carse of Pommaize* but the present name has probably been fixed by broadside circulation.

The Bonnie Lass o' Fyvie

One of the most popular of Aberdeenshire songs and for that reason often given a lacklustre performance. Jimmy brings new life to the melody with impeccable timing and subtle dotted rhythms. The north east version has been known for more than a century and appears in Dean Christie's *Traditional Ballad Airs*. Ford found the same piece in southern Scotland with the scene set in Derby but the motif is so universal and the details so sketchy that no sensible guess could be made as to the original event, if any.

Pittenweem Jo

John Watt is one of the best of our modern song writers and this is probably his most accomplished piece. Jimmy always claimed that he had learned it many years ago and this indicates John's rare talent for creating with an individual voice and yet staying perfectly within the tradition. If anyone asks where the folk songs of tomorrow are to come from here is one I would care to bet on.

Ye Canna Pit It On Tae Sandy

A close relative of Sandy, Jamie Fleming, features as the clever simpleton in a number of droll north east stories.

The Boston Smuggler

The widespread Boston Burglar has been known in this version in Aberdeenshire for the past hundred years.

Hielan' Rory

Working the titles of other pieces into a song seems to have been a characteristic of platform singers before the first world war and a number of even more 'orra' examples exist.

The Magdalen Green

In 1582 this area of Dundee was called *Maidlane Geir* and although the spelling changed soon after the pronunciation in the song, and among older Dundonians has not until recently become modified.

Marnin' Fair

This song in its various guises is popular to this day. In former times such fairs were the only proper holidays farm servants had. *Fogie Loan* is the local by-name for the village of Aberchirder.

The Feeing Time

Despite its south-west setting the song has long been known in the north east and appears in *Ord's Bothy Ballads*. Its rather quaint tune suggests a non traditional origin.

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Sept or Oct '77

90, Blenheim Place,
Aberdeen.

Dear Tony,

Find enclosed photographs
of Aberdeen Model Lodging House,
where Jimmy MacBeath spent his last
14 years, for possible use as record
cover material.

Best Wishes

Peter A. Hall

