





Bob Copper

Sweet Rose in June

Countryside Songs from the South

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First published by Topic 1977
Recorded and produced by Tony Engle and
Mike Yates at Peacehaven, Sussex, December 1976
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My earliest memories, about 1920, are inextricably bound up with the singing of the old songs. To us children it was part of everyday life and I thought it was just a family characteristic. To my knowledge nobody else in the village sang the songs, or, if they did, certainly not to the same extent, for scarcely a day went by without hearing Dad or Grand-dad sing as they went about their workaday chores. The idea that the song might be part of our national folk heritage never for one moment crossed my mind. One day in 1950 Dad said, "They sang one of our songs on the wireless last week in a programme called 'Country Magazine'." I persuaded him to write to the BBC and Mr. Francis Collinson, musical director of the programme, came at once to Rottingdean and noted down the words and music of about forty songs as Dad and I sang them. Soon after we were invited to sing on "Country Magazine" and for the first time the old songs from the village were heard by a nationwide audience. The experiment seemed to be a success and a great number of people wrote to say how nice it was to hear "country songs sung by country singers" and how they were reminded of songs that used to be sung by older members of their families. As a result the BBC instigated a country-wide search making field recordings of traditional music and songs to be preserved for posterity. This marked the beginning of the folk song revival.

Apart from all Dad's old favourites he had dozens of incomplete fragments tucked away in his head which never found their way into his song book because he didn't know all the words. In an introductory rhyme on the first page of his book he included,

 "...Odd choruses we know galore,
 A hundred - yes - and hundreds more
 And if we fall into a lapse
 They just come into fill the gaps..."

Shortly before his death in 1954 I showed him a copy of "Folk Songs of the Upper Thames" by Alfred Williams and in it he found the words of songs of which he had hitherto known only the tunes and an odd verse or the chorus. He added a supplementary index giving the title of the song, the number of the page on which it could be found and the name of the village man who used to sing it when he had been a young fellow in, say, the 1890s. These included characters like Steve Barrow the shepherd, instantly recognisable in his mole-skin cap, who sang *Lord Thomas* and who boasted that he could jump a five-bar gate when he was seventy. Or Peter Weekly the wheelwright who wore a little black peaked cap with a button in the centre and who used to sing *Dogs and Ferrets*. Fred 'Nobby' Earle gave Dad *Dick Turpin*, but I have no recollection of Steve Parks the singer of *The Parson and the Sucking Pig*. William 'Bung' Dudeney, as his name implies, had a propensity for drinking beer. He gave Dad *The Bold Dragoon*. He once fell asleep after dinner and his clay pipe fell from his mouth, set a haystack on fire and eventually burnt down a barn and outbuilding at a place called Combe Bottom. One night when the pints were coming up thick and fast I took another over to Bung who already had two lined up on the table in front of him. "Come on, Bung," I said, "ol' Ron is just ordering you another." "Agh, boy," he said, sucking the ends of his moustache, "I'm buggered if 'e mairn't." In those last few months Dad sang the tunes over to me and, with Alfred Williams's book in hand, we were able to salvage a few more of the old songs that used to be sung in Rottingdean.

THE SONGS

Bob Copper needs little introduction to the present-day folk music revival.

In his books “A Song for Every Season” (1971) and “Early to Rise” (1976) he has chronicled his family history and songs, and elsewhere, in company with his cousin Ron and other members of his family he is to be heard on several gramophone records. The present record is somewhat different, in that it includes songs originally from outside the Copper Family repertoire.

Bold General Wolfe, The Farmer of Chester and The Mistletoe Bough came from Bob’s grandfather ‘Brasser’ Copper, whilst Uncle John Copper, shepherd and singer, was the source of **The Bold ‘Princess Royal’**.

In the mid 1950s Bob and his wife moved to Cheriton in Hampshire as landlord of the “H.H. Inn”, an episode described in his third book, “Songs and Southern Breezes” (1973). Here, working part-time on behalf of the BBC, Bob himself assumed the role of collector. Many of the songs that he collected are preserved on disc in the BBC archives, and a selection may be heard on a Topic record (12T317), but some songs (for reasons best known to the BBC) were wiped from the tape without being transferred to disc. Luckily for us, Bob’s receptive ear and memory ensured their survival. These include **The Trooper**, from Frank Cole of North Waltham; **The Squire’s Lost Lady**, from Ben Butcher of Popham; **The Fisherman**, from Victor ‘Turp’ Brown of Cheriton and both **The Rose in June** and **Young Johnny** from George Fosbury of Axford, supplemented in George Fosbury’s case by the texts in “Folk Songs of the Upper Thames”.

Although most of the songs on this record date from the late 18th and early 19th centuries, at least two are of considerable antiquity. **Lord Thomas** (Child 73) was first printed in England c. 1663 - though foreshadowing it, as a French lyric song, “De la vile issoit pensant” is known to date from at least the 12th century. The central theme of the ballad is that of Eleanor’s appearance at the wedding in rich clothes - a factor that distinguishes it from the similar ballad *Fair Margaret and Sweet William* (Child 74).

The Fisherman is likewise old. As *The Sea Crab* it was found in the mid 1600s by Bishop Percy in a ‘scrubby’ and ‘shabby’ manuscript ‘lying dirty on the floor under a Bureau in ye Parlour’ of Humphrey Pitt. But, as Gershon Legman has pointed out, it is possibly based on a joking tale of Levantine origin revealed first in Italy by Sacchetti at the start of the 15th century.

Three of Bob’s songs appear to be based on earlier ballads. **The Bold Dragoon** is a broadside re-write of *Earl Brand* (Child 7) and was published by Restoration printers such as William Thackeray who called it ‘the masterpiece of love songs’. **The Squire’s Lost Lady** resembles a part of the ballad *Glasgerion* (Child 67) whilst **The Farmer of Chester** probably stems from the tale of *The Crafty Farmer* (Child 283).

The Mistletoe Bough, on the other hand, is very much a composed song - in this case by Sir Henry Bishop (composer of *Home Sweet Home*) and T.H. Bayley. Although based on the story of the Lovell’s missing bride, it should be noted that several other old halls also carry the same legend; notably Marwell Hall near Owslebury in Hampshire. One reason for the Oxfordshire setting may be the fact that in 1487 Francis 1st Viscount Lovell - the occupant of Minster Lovell Hall - disappeared following a dispute with the then Royal Family.

Two centuries later, in 1708, some workmen encountered a secret room at the Hall and discovered 'the entire skeleton of a man, as having been at a table which was before him with a book, paper, pen...all much mouldered and decay'. Francis perhaps? The workmen were never to find out though, for the entire contents of the room turned to dust as they watched.

The remaining songs are 18th century compositions. Anonymous broadside verses; lyrical, as in **Rose in June** - a song known to Thomas Hardy - or again in **Young Johnny**, possibly a late 18th century stage song that is also known to country singers as *The Long and Wishing Eye* - a corruption of the term 'languishing eye'; or factual, with characters like **Bold General Wolfe** and **Dick Turpin**. Although opposites - Turpin started out as an East End butcher's boy who supplemented his living by stealing cattle in West Ham; he died on the gallows on April 6th, 1739 - their lives comprised the very stuff of folk heroes.

Although the song of **The Bold 'Princess Royal'** has all the characteristics of a true event, several 18th century ships carried the name, thus making it difficult to isolate this specific incident. In the early part of the 19th century the song was printed by James Catnach of Seven Dials, and this version fixed its form for later singers. Conversely the story of **The Trooper** is based on the well defined role assigned to the tailor in popular literature. The castration symbolism is especially obvious here.

Bob also includes three animal songs from the same period; the anti-clerical **Parson and the Sucking Pig** - called *The Tithe Pig* by the Reverend Baring-Gould who noted a couple of versions on Dartmoor; **The Fox**, a favourite of the young Sir Walter Scott and **Dogs and Ferrets**, a poaching song that still enjoys a widespread popularity in country areas today.

Elsewhere Bob Copper has written, "These (songs) are the very last remaining drops of the living essence of old English country life, the romance and realism of the past upon which all our dreams of the future must be laid."

Dream on then, with Bob and Brassier, Turp, Bung and all those other countless voices from the past.

Mike Yates

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