

TSDL395

TRAVELLERS
Songs, Stories and Tunes
from English Gypsies

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LEWIS BRADY

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I'm a stranger in this country,
From America I came.

Chris Willett

Well, not quite from America! But gypsies, or travellers to use a preferred term, were strangers when they first set foot in the British Isles over 400 years ago. To this day many have remained apart from the rest of society. And yet, as this album attests, they have integrated sufficiently to pick up and retain much of the musical heritage that was once common to all. Paradoxically, much of the music performed here was originally the creation of the non-gypsy community. Today this music is often best remembered by the gypsies.

THE PERFORMERS

During the 1970s I spent much of my time crossing Southern England in search of gypsy singers and musicians. Some of the first singers that I recorded were living near to my home in Biggin Hill, Kent. Joe Jones, the oldest, was living in a rickety old trailer at St Mary Cray. Each time that I called to see him he would be crouched by an outdoor fire, no matter what the weather, and would always welcome me with an endless stream of riddles and conundrums. Bill Ellson, a horse dealer, was living at a farm a few miles to the south of Edenbridge; while Chris Willett had made his home at Paddock Wood. Chris

had previously recorded an album of songs with his father and brother (Topic 12T84) and I was especially pleased to be able to add a few more items from his family repertoire.

Jasper Smith and his son Derby were camping near Epsom in Surrey when their recordings were made. Mary Ann Haynes and Alice Penfold, however, had both given up the travelling life for settled homes. Mary was, without doubt, one of the best gypsy singers that I have ever recorded. We first met one late Sunday afternoon at her home in Brighton, Sussex. She was born in Portsmouth in 1905, the daughter of a horse dealer, and as a young girl she had travelled throughout England accompanying her father to fairs and markets. She later settled in Brighton where she worked as a flower seller. Although she gave me close to a hundred songs it is doubtful that I ever scratched the surface of her song store. The last time that we met she ended the recording session with the bawdy **Bush of Australia** adding, with a wink, that she knew other similar songs and that she would sing them at our next session. Sadly, this was not to be as Mary died in 1977. Alice Penfold learnt many of her songs from her father Eli Frankham, whilst others such as the love songs **Catch Me If You Can, The Shannon Side**

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and **Jenny on the Moor** came from her husband Edwin Penfold, a Cornish traveller.

The final group of singers on this album were all living in Gloucestershire when I met them. Wiggy Smith and his father Wisdom Smith were recorded one freezing evening in a Cheltenham pub, while brother and sister Harry and Lemmie Brazil were recorded either in their caravans or else in ‘The Pelican Inn’, Gloucester. In the 1920s they had spent some time travelling in Ireland where they picked up many songs and tunes. Debbie and Penny Davis, 14 years old at the time of recording, are the grand-daughters of Harry and Lemmie and, incidentally, are about the same age as their aunt Angela Brazil was when she sang a version of the ballad *Edward* for the BBC in the 1950s (Topic 12T160).

THEIR REPERTOIRE

The majority of items heard on this album come originally from the world of the 19th Century broadside printers such as John Pitts, James Catnach and Henry Parker Such.

Although **The American Stranger** may relate to the 18th Century American War of Independence – as Scots collector John Ord suggested – it is more likely that Chris Willett’s version, learnt from his father,

comes from the text printed c.1815 by John Pitts. **Sally Munroe** is a classic example of a broadside ballad. Writing of the song, Gavin Greig had this to say: ‘In none of our ballads is the note of sincerity more strong and convincing.’ Although cast in an Ulster setting, at least 14 19th-century English broadside printers listed the song in their respective catalogues. **Lovely Johnny** is also known as **The High Walls of Derry** or **The Diamonds of Derry** and has become an intense lyrical statement to Mary Ann Haynes. Paddy Tunney has a fuller version (Topic 12T165).

Harry Brazil’s short set of **The Loyal Lover** may appear puzzling on first hearing. Puzzling, that is, until one realises that the demented lover is confined not to a prison but to the 18th-century New Bedlam Hospital, then little better than a prison. For some reason it’s a song that has survived well in North America, where it is usually titled **Charming Beauty Bright**. The song **Hares in the Old Plantation** probably comes from the early 1800s, when the newly introduced game laws and enclosure acts were beginning to dig deep into the lower classes. Wiggy Smith, an outstanding singer, can be heard singing another such piece, **The Oakham Poachers**, on the record *Songs of the Open Road* (Topic 12T53), while

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Jasper Smith sings a macaronic (English/Romani) version of the present song on the same album.

The Rambling Irishman is a popular and well-loved song among travellers, as is **A Blacksmith Courted Me**. Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger have identified a verse from the latter as being part of a 17th-century broadside, *A Dialogue Between a Town Spark and His Miss*, which Tom D'Urfey included in his *Pills to Purge Melancholy* (1719). Harry's tune, as is usual, is similar to that found in Sussex by Ralph Vaughan Williams and subsequently used by him for his setting of the Bunyan hymn *To Be a Pilgrim*. In one form or another **Once I Was a Servant** may be considered as almost the archetypal seduction ballad. The oldest known text is a blackletter broadside in the Roxburgh collection, titled *The Oak and the Ash* and sung to an old tune, *Quodling's Delight*, that was included in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (c. 1609 – 1619). Chris Willett had the song from a travelling horse dealer in Tonbridge. **The Gown So Green**, titled **The Answer to The Gown So Green** by broadside printers, is another seduction ballad, although nothing like as popular as **Once I Was a Servant**. Cecil Sharp found a set, as yet unpublished, in Sussex in 1908.

The trio of songs given together, **The Coachman**, **Bonny Black Hare** and **The Cuckoo's Nest**, also

appeared on 19th-century broadsides. **The Coachman** was titled **The Jolly Driver** by John Harkness of Preston in the 1840s. Harkness also printed a sheet bearing the words to **The Bonny Black Hare**, which, unlike **The Coachman** and **The Cuckoo's Nest**, appears to be a rather rare item today.

Five of the remaining songs are known to be considerably older than those mentioned so far. **Bold Keeper** is a portion of the long 17th-century ballad **The Master Piece of Love Songs**, which is closely related to the ballad *Earl Brand* (Child 7) and to the later broadside *The Bold Dragoon*. The earliest known British version of **Go from My Window** is the one printed in 1587-88 by John Wolfe of London. Another well-known version appears in Act III of Beaumont and Fletcher's play *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* (1613). After Wisdom Smith finished singing he leant across the microphone and said, 'You understand, don't you, that it was a gypsy woman singing that song. She sang it in her trailer. Her husband was out poaching, you see, and a policeman was waiting to catch him in the trailer when he returned. Now the woman heard her husband coming, so she warned him not to come in. She took her baby in her arms, because it wasn't sleeping, and sang that song. The policeman thought that she was singing the baby to

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sleep, but she wasn't, she was warning her husband not to come into the trailer. That's true, that is.' Early collectors considered **The Little Footman Boy** to be a version of the ballad **Lady Maisry** (Child 65), though recently Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger have disputed this by arguing that it is a song made up of lines from numerous other ballads. **Barbara Allen**, on the other hand, is a well-established item. The singers learnt it from their mother. According to the poet James Reeves we have, in the song **Down in the Meadows**, an example of the transition from ballad to lyric. In this case a come-down of the ballad **Jamie Douglas** (Child 204). If this is so then the change occurred some time ago, as Jasper's song was printed as **The Unfortunate Swain** on 18th-century broadsides.

The other songs on the album range from such items as **Swinging Down the Lane**, written by the Americans White and Kamplain in 1868, which was issued on an English 78rpm record by Vernon Dalhart (Regal MR23); to **The Flower Show**, an oddity to say the least. In a version collected in 1952 from the Norfolk singer Ben Baxter, it is clear that each flower is symbolic not only of a country but of a person as well. The red rose represents William Gladstone (1809-1898), while the thistle is Sir Colin Campbell

(1792-1862), the son of a Glasgow carpenter who rose to command the Highland Division in the Battle of Alma (1854). Mr Baxter's third verse agrees with the version sung here. Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847) is the shamrock, and in the fourth verse the primrose, 'the best I'll name tonight', is Lord Beaconsfield, the former Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881).

Finally we have a miscellaneous group of songs and stories. The *Beng*, or Devil, is still an important *persona* within many gypsy communities and there are many traditional songs and tales relating to him. Many travellers are excellent story tellers and whilst **Pepper and Salt** and **Waxey Candles** are separate stories to Jasper Smith, they are in fact parts of the same story, one in which the spirit of the murdered girl returns to seek revenge for her death. The Brothers Grimm called it **The Juniper Tree**. Jasper also sings a few of the many songs which he remembers from his childhood, including a **Bird Scaring Cry** which he would sing in the Kentish fruit fields. **Will There Be Any Travellers in Heaven?** Was written by Jasper's son and is based on the Jimmie Rodgers song *Hobo's Meditation* (Victor 23711), first issued in 1932. Any of these songs could have been sung, and indeed probably still are, in the hopfields of Kent. Mary's song **Hopping Down in**

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Kent is usually associated with London's East-enders, who would make a yearly holiday out of their visit to the hopfields. The significance of 'the measurer', in **My Lovely Hops**, will be appreciated when one realises that this person would only accept a basket of picked hops for payment once he had established that no more could be pushed down into the basket, hence the rather caustic lines, 'When he starts to measure 'em, he don't know when to stop/Why don't you jump into the bin and take the bloomin' lot!'

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Levi Smith & Nephew



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Debbie & Penny Davis



Harry Brazil



Joe Jones

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