

Martin Simpson
The Bramble Briar



For the past twelve years I have lived in the USA, and watched my childhood home from a great distance. During that time the music and songs of that home have come into sharp focus. What is very clear is the strength of expression, the richness of content, be it lyrical, musical, emotional or historical, and the reflection of people and places in the songs and tunes.

I was so delighted to be given this project, a reason to steep myself in this English music. The material felt so close at hand, some already in my repertoire, some just needing to be brushed up. I am not sure what it means, but the subject matter here contains three songs dealing with class distinction, six with ships, three with biblical allusions, and ten which deal with death and loss. There are ten traditional songs; a poem set to music and two recent compositions.

AIR FOR MAURICE OGG was written by Alistair Anderson in memory of a friend of ours. In the Scunthorpe Folk Club, Mo played concertina, whistle and flute, and sang many songs, some of which he had collected in North Lincolnshire. He was the leading light in reviving the Plough Jags in the early 1970s, and I was lucky enough to be involved in that, and also to accompany Mo on various occasions. When he died of lymph cancer he was the first of our generation of friends to be lost. Alistair wrote this tune after a session at the Cleethorpes Festival. He said that, even though Mo was gone, he was very much present in the music. Stylistically, this tune lies somewhere between Irish and Border styles.

Peter Bellamy has been a great influence on me over the years, and I learned three of these songs from his performances. **BETSY THE SERVING MAID**, which Peter learned from Harry Cox of Catfield, Norfolk, appeared as a solo rendition on a Young Tradition record. The timing variations insisted upon by the lyrics made arranging this for guitar a real joy. The song pre-dates the nasty business with the loss of American colonies, after which England was forced to invent Australia.

FAIR ANNIE was given to me on a cassette of a show that Peter did at McCabe's Guitar Shop in Santa Monica. My friend Josh Michael thought that I might like the song and, indeed, he was right. I looked for other versions, but found nothing so succinct, or with such a sting in the tail. I wonder to what extent Peter altered the lyrics.

ROUNDING THE HORN was published in the, sadly out of print, *Penguin Book of English Folksongs* and, again, I learned it from Peter. I suspect that the novels of Patrick O'Brien set to music might achieve similar heights of storytelling, yet it is the brevity of folksong which is so astonishing. In six verses this song conveys a novel's worth of motion and ideas.

I always enjoyed Peter's settings of the Rudyard Kipling poems and I was greatly surprised while reading *Songs from Books* to find that I had come up with a tune to **THE FOUR ANGELS**. I think it is an eerily timely lyric.

Angels can be found in lesser numbers in the ballad **DIVES AND LAZARUS**. The portrayal of callous wealth duly rewarded is immensely gratifying. The tune is one of the many uses of the Irish *Star of the County Down*. I really don't remember where I first heard, or learned, this song.

LEAVES OF LIFE I learned from Norma Waterson. It is a gypsy Easter carol which has been inside me since I first heard it as a teenager. I recorded an instrumental version of it in 1989 and then found myself singing it at every opportunity. Great singers have been so important to my development as a player, perhaps the major influence, beyond guitar.

THE LOVER'S GHOST was sung by Mrs Cecilia Costello who was recorded in Birmingham in 1951. It was also published in the Penguin Book. Again, I absorbed it through my ears sometime in the 1960s, whether at a concert, folk club, festival or record, I don't recall. I am delighted to have Martin Carthy accompany me on this, with his inimitable musicality.

I first heard **POLLY ON THE SHORE** from Martin, and, having learned it and recorded it, I went back to hear Pop Maynard's version on the Musical Traditions CD (see also Topic TSCD662 – *We've Received Orders To Sail*). I was fascinated immediately, again. This song is so vivid and starkly beautiful, and I am amazed at its power.

A more modern sailor's story is **SAMMY'S BAR**, which was written by Cyril Tawney. I learned it as a child and re-learned it from my wife, Jessica. An exquisite short story set in Malta, it says much about Europe's relationship with the USA, even now.

Mo Ogg would sing **BANKS OF THE SWEET PRIMEROSSES**, one of the great anthemic English love songs. There are fine versions recorded by Phil Tanner and The Copper Family and also Pop Maynard. I have always loved the verse: -

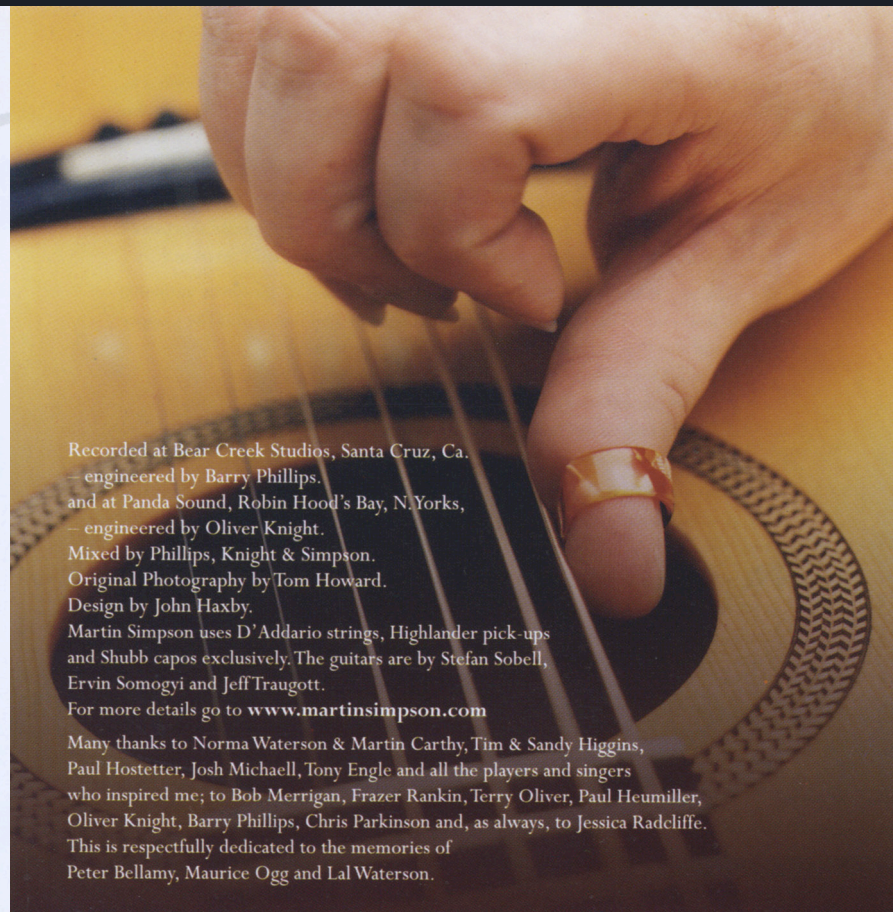
*"Come all you young maids who go a-courting
And pray pay attention to what I say:
For there's many a dark and a cloudy morning
Turns out to be a sunshiney day"*

I learned the **PRINCESS ROYAL** from Mo Ogg, probably during a session at East Ferry. It is both a Morris tune and the melody for a splendidly verbose paean of praise for Lord Nelson.

THE BRAMBLE BRIAR is more commonly known as *Bruton Town*. This version, again published in the Penguin Book was beautifully sung by Louis Killen (Topic TSCD480 *English and Scottish Folk Ballads*). Much like *Betsy the Serving Maid*, it is a far from flattering depiction of class attitudes.

I hope that these notes might lead a few readers to go and listen further. I'm always asked by guitar students in particular, where they can find material, and there is an enormous wealth of melody within the field recordings of traditional music, whatever its country of origin. If you are interested in guitar arrangements, the tunings or any other details, feel free to get in touch via www.martinsimpson.com.

M.S. Feb, 2001, New Orleans



Recorded at Bear Creek Studios, Santa Cruz, Ca.

— engineered by Barry Phillips.

and at Panda Sound, Robin Hood's Bay, N.Yorks,

— engineered by Oliver Knight.

Mixed by Phillips, Knight & Simpson.

Original Photography by Tom Howard.

Design by John Haxby.

Martin Simpson uses D'Addario strings, Highlander pick-ups and Shubb capos exclusively. The guitars are by Stefan Sobell, Ervin Somogyi and Jeff Traugott.

For more details go to www.martinsimpson.com

Many thanks to Norma Waterson & Martin Carthy, Tim & Sandy Higgins, Paul Hostetter, Josh Michael, Tony Engle and all the players and singers who inspired me; to Bob Merrigan, Frazer Rankin, Terry Oliver, Paul Heumiller, Oliver Knight, Barry Phillips, Chris Parkinson and, as always, to Jessica Radcliffe. This is respectfully dedicated to the memories of Peter Bellamy, Maurice Ogg and Lal Waterson.



1	<i>Polly on the Shore</i>	4.16
2	<i>The Lover's Ghost</i>	3.16
3	<i>Fair Annie</i>	6.08
4	<i>Dives and Lazarus</i>	5.34
5	<i>The Four Angels</i>	3.17
6	<i>Betsy the Serving Maid</i>	4.11
7	<i>The Bramble Briar</i>	4.58
8	<i>Banks of Sweet Primroses</i>	2.51
9	<i>Rounding the Horn</i>	3.44
10	<i>The Princess Royal</i>	2.20
11	<i>Sammy's Bar</i>	4.26
	<i>Cyril Tawney pub Gwyneth Music</i>	
12	<i>Leaves of Life</i>	4.05
13	<i>Air for Maurice Ogg</i>	3.32
	<i>Alistair Anderson pub Topic Records</i>	

*All tracks Martin Simpson guitar or guitar & vocal
2,10,11, add Martin Carthy guitar
10,11 add Chris Parkinson accordion & harmonica
11 add Jessica Radcliffe backing vocals
4,12 add Barry Phillips cello*

*All tracks trad arr M Simpson pub
Topic Records Ltd except where indicated*