

Although I was a complete dunce at school I somehow managed to get a really good education. Part of that was through the music department. It stimulated my interest more than any other subject and when an older boy brought a guitar to school and, to his own accompaniment, sang a song I had never heard before - "The Foggy Foggy Dew" - I felt a surge of excitement. From that day on my consuming interest was divided between learning to be an actor and learning to play the guitar and sing.

So began a life-long fascination with folk song. I never excelled as a guitarist but I quickly learned how to put across a good lyric. And then, studying at the Central School of Speech and Drama, my fast burgeoning collection of songs - mostly derived from recordings of singers like Burl Ives and Elton Hayes - began to pay dividends. I was able to sing for my supper - and a good deal more! Guitar case in hand, I only had to walk a few paces along the Kings Road Chelsea to be accosted by some "Hooray Harry" and invited to every posh - sometimes un-posh - party going. I earned the most modest of livings to supplement my student allowance but I had lots of lovely girlfriends!

When I was in third year at Central, which had just moved from the Albert Hall to the Embassy Theatre, Swiss Cottage, someone suggested I should go to a coffee bar nearby called the "Beau Brummel" where a young singer-guitarist was appearing. He turned out to be a Scot and his name was Robin Hall. He had the most beautiful voice I have ever heard.

Between lectures I would wander off to the Vaughan Williams library of Cecil Sharp House, home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society. I rifled their ancient volumes to add to my collection. Robin Hall always seemed to be there too and that's really where I got to know him best. Although I had a few Scottish songs in my repertoire I gleaned a whole lot more from Robin, who was generous in giving me his lyrics and chord structures. When Robin later teamed up with Glaswegian Jimmie MacGregor they were a huge success, appearing nightly on BBC TV and touring the world. I subsequently worked with them both on a TV musical and bought many of their LP records.

Between theatre and television acting work I made a supplementary living by singing. I appeared a few times at the legendary "Troubadour" folk club where I was also taught to cook spaghetti. I gigged in cafes, on the London stage, even at May Balls. Eventually the constant pressure of acting work got the better of me. I had also begun to have ambitions to move into television production as a director and, after completing the BBC directors' training course, the singing and playing were neglected and, very shakily, my career as a director took off.

After more than fifty years in show biz, the last ten of which I spent directing "Hollyoaks", directing was losing its magic so I revived my acting career, started writing seriously, picked up the guitar once again and revised some of my songs. I had so lost touch that I found it very difficult to find inspiration.

One sunny day I was sitting outside my little bachelor flat in Largs with a glass of Chardonnay and my guitar, trying to work up my old accompaniments. A guy who worked nearby came over and asked me if I was interested in folk song. He suggested I sample the Irvine Folk Club. I went and was amazed at the quality of visiting performers they were able to acquire.

I was beginning to wake up again.

Watching the BBC's 2011 Hogmanay show, a particularly impressive young lady appeared and sang a wonderful number called "And Sae Will We Yet". I found the song in a collection which I owned called "Vagabond Songs and Ballads of Scotland". Later, that same young woman was guesting in duo at the Irvine club so I hastened to see her. Her name was Siobhan Miller and she was appearing with Jeana Leslie.

I was completely entranced by their delightful performance and chatted to Siobhan briefly after the show. Her directness, brilliance and beauty made a big impression. She got me thinking that I should really start to make an effort to restore my passion for music.

I was beginning to be inspired!

As I drove home after that memorable evening I thought that Siobhan would appreciate my vast collection of folk song source books, garnered over nearly sixty years. I didn't want to sell them and had been considering offering them to someone whom I could rely on to take care of them and use them properly. I decided that Siobhan was that person and, a few days later, I contacted her. She was delighted to accept. I became a kind of "groupie" and went to see as many of her gigs as I could and got to know her a little, all the time getting more and more deeply immersed back into the idiom I loved best.

I have owned a Generation penny whistle ever since childhood but could do nothing with it. I knew the notes and could play simple tunes but was utterly ignorant of its nature and capabilities or its repertoire. As I delved into my large collection of traditional music LP's and CD's I became aware that there were some amazing examples of whistling which I had hardly noticed before. I was particularly taken by Finbar Furey's low whistle performances and began toying with the idea of perhaps learning the instrument properly myself.

One of Siobhan's gigs was at the Royal Concert Hall during Celtic Connections last year. While I waited to go into the Strathclyde Suite for her appearance I wandered around the stalls in the foyer, set up to sell various items appropriate to an audience of traditional music lovers. There was one which grabbed my attention. A concertina and a banjo lay on it. Thinking they might be there to be played I stopped to listen. A guy called Roy - or was it Ron - appeared and asked if I would like to join the Glasgow Fiddle Workshop. No, I don't want to play the fiddle. What about the ukulele? No not that either. Do you fancy the accordion? No ... but do they teach the whistle? Oh, yes, indeed they do was the reply. Ok, I'll join.

That first day, I stood in the Enterprise Suite of Stow College frozen to the spot. As an experienced actor, dealing with every kind of audience - folk making ribald comments, walking out or walking in, talking, tripping over, being sick, falling from the balcony in the auditorium, falling from the balcony on stage, having the set fall about my ears - I was never so nervous or apprehensive.

When I heard the level of playing the whistle tutor was demonstrating I wanted to cave in. My fingers were like uncontrollable spaghetti.

I tried to conjure up past successes - singing in O'Donahue's with Luke Kelly, singing to my guitar in a show with Diana Rigg, to my concertina in another with John Hurt, to my banjo on tv with Mike Caine, singing a tv lead with Robin & Jimmie - surely I wasn't defeated?

Something drove me to make myself go back. I even asked if I could also join the mixed instrument class, having no idea what it was!

Of course Katherine McLeod, who teaches whistle at GFW and plays the flute equally divinely was an inspiration and through her I began to regain that old confidence. Within six weeks or so I was playing things I could never have dreamed of before. And I was becoming familiar with the musical notation, which though I played easiest by ear, turned out to be a bit of an advantage.

The classes and the good nature of all the people at the workshop have become really important to me and being involved with it is part of my life now. The springing of new interests, far and away beyond what I did in the past, has been an inspiration and is driving me on to consider gigging again at last! The moment when I felt brave enough to put a whistle to my lips at the Islay Inn was the first step towards being a serious player again!