

## **Investigating the health of the UK folk club**

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### **Abstract**

This research addresses the conflicting views of the health of folk music by way of interviewing artists, agents, and folk club organisers/promoters. Exploring the more homogenous formats of performance observed as singarounds (including sessions), 'open mic' and concert clubs, it is concluded that the concert club is struggling to survive whilst the other formats are still offering opportunities to folk artists. However, the latter are finding both the formal venues such as arts centres and the emergence of young promoters provides compensatory opportunities for performance.

## **1. Aim of Research**

For many years, folk clubs have provided places of congregation for those of like musical mind to discuss, perform, enjoy and share their music. This paper explores the state of health found within the UK folk club scene where the phrase 'folk revival' seems to be mentioned as often as concerns are raised about the future of the folk club. In considering the state of the folk club, this work concentrates on the business models represented by different folk club formats and their relative health as opposed to the complex ethnomusicology behind the folk music format.

## **2. Methodology**

In order to address the health of the folk club, the author has interviewed twelve individuals including the artists who play these clubs, agents who book out the artists across the many venues and organisers/promoters who book the artists into these venues. As reflected in the purpose of the project that spawned the conference where this work is presented, secondary literature in this area is sparse but added into the discussion where possible.

In the following sections, the formats of folk clubs are first considered. Followed by a discussion of changes that have been seen over recent years and what motivates those who organise these events. Finally, some conclusions are drawn about the current health of the folk club.

## **3. Understanding the 'folk club' in its various guises**

Before embarking on a discussion of what constitutes a folk club and how it is organised, it's worth considering how folk music is perceived. Of course, many would balk against labelling any kind of music as it sets boundaries that limit its exploration. When asked his view of so-called 'nu-folk' or 'alt-folk' genres, Chris Wood<sup>1</sup> pointed to the requirements of those who write about music and described the latter as "old men making up names for stuff" and "whittling pigeon holes" (Wood, 2010). Though frustrating to many, providing some means to define a genre of music aids discussion even though this labelling of music is a subjective exercise fraught with difficulties. When it comes to discussing the 'folk' genre, it doesn't take long before the term 'tradition' is mentioned and the issue of authenticity is raised. Moore (2002) starts an examination of authenticity by looking at folk music and noting what he terms 'first person authenticity' as that which 'arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form with an audience'. His consideration of 'second person authenticity' brings about the idea of the 'authenticity of experience, which occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is 'telling it like it is' for them'. His final consideration of 'third person authenticity' occurs 'when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of

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<sup>1</sup>Chris Wood: Best known for his solo work as a contemporary folk song writer and his duo with Andy Cutting, member of Imagined Village with Martin Carthy et al, and English Acoustic Collective. Winner of BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards' Folk Singer of the Year in 2009 and 2011 as well as Best Album in 2009.

performance'. These might be interpreted as views of tradition that remain true to some combination of the original musical performance, the experience or the root sentiment as seen and heard within folk music.

As Moore (2002, p 220) indicates, these three views of authenticity overlap but 'first person authenticity' can be directly linked to the folk clubs noted by Boyes (2010, p 237) as 'policy clubs' based on 'rules' that might ban electric instruments or, even, insist on unaccompanied singing and the banning of all instruments. Whilst these comments on 'policy clubs' relate to the 1980's, many current folk clubs translate 'rules' into their own particular format to meet their specific needs. Formalisation of the club and its rules are often, but not always, reflected by a requirement for members to pay a small joining fee that can be set against expenses such as promotion of the club.

The formats of folk clubs vary considerably but can be broken into three distinct groupings: singarounds (including sessions), 'open mic'<sup>2</sup> and concert clubs. Starting with the **singaround**, typically, this occurs in smaller clubs without any form of amplification, sometimes using acoustic accompaniment, the musical baton is metaphorically passed around the room. Even with informal formats such as the singaround, 'rules' might be observed that reflect the club nature of the event. Though a non-performing audience might be accepted at some singaround based clubs, it can be an unwritten, unspoken rule that attendees at such clubs must perform. The author recalls investigating a small folk club in the upstairs room of a local pub, enjoying the supper made available but being somewhat embarrassed by the looks on the faces of other attendees when declining an offer to perform. Lucy Farrell<sup>3</sup> (2010) recalls the pressure, even, the terror that this might cause for some more eager musicians as they await their turn. When visiting one club, she was told "right, your turn" and when trying to politely decline was told "what ... get up and sing". Though Lucy obliged, she never returned to that particular club despite having had a long attachment to folk music through her family. Jonny Kearney<sup>4</sup>, her duo partner with less of a background in folk music, said:

"I was thinking the other day about folk music and the definition of it and how it's music of the people .... to serve as a kind of music for society, community and stuff but, then, like a lot of folk music or what is defined as folk music and folk clubs is, nowadays, quite cliquy and music of the people is what you would hear on Radio One, like Lady Gaga – could you call that folk music?" (Kearney, 2010)

When asked how he would categorise 'cliquy', Kearney points to "the exclusivity ... (lack of) accessibility to the general public ... the attitudes" (Kearney, 2010). Whilst some singarounds clearly are intimidating, almost competitive environments, others are more accessible. Bernard Cromerty (Open Door, 2011) makes the 'rules' of the club singaround quite clear (no electric instruments or backing tapes, for example) and sets expectations for those attending The Open Door Folk Club in a more welcoming way, as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'open mic' is an abbreviation of 'open microphone'

<sup>3</sup> Lucy Farrell: Member of duo with Jonny Kearney; nominated for the Horizon Award in the 2011 BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards.

<sup>4</sup> Jonny Kearney: Member of duo with Lucy Farrell. Jonny and Lucy met when studying folk music at Newcastle University.

“What exactly is a 'Singaround'? Well those who want to sing can sing, those who want to listen can listen, and those who want to join in with choruses can... erm... join in with choruses!” (Open Door, 2010)

For singarounds in particular, chorus singing is a common, less intimidating part of the format and, suggesting the singaround and the concert club as the two main categories of folk club, Andy Cutting<sup>5</sup> (2010) observes the following of singarounds:

“a backroom of a pub, chairs out for 30 ... great generalisation ... but sing the same songs and forget the same words every week ... and have their booklets and their folders (to suggest songs)” (Cutting, 2010)

His comment reflects the frustration of a more accomplished musician but, for those involved with the singaround, it is the participative element that forms the basis of their enjoyment whether that is derived from the social aspects of the meeting or the chance to practice their musical skills in public. These elements become more apparent when considering the **session** format which has many of the features of a singaround i.e. it is a small group gathered together in an informal setting (such as a pub) who join in the performance without the support of a public address (PA) system. The main difference between a session and a singaround is simply that the former are largely based on tunes and the latter on songs. In some geographical areas, the session is the preferred format for the informal performance and practice of folk music. For example, Chris Wood (2010) comments that ‘for Celtic players, it’s the session’ where inexperienced musicians learn their skills. Typically, the session has fewer formal elements than singarounds such as a lack of club membership or a separate meeting room. Gathering in any willing pub or bar is all that is required to the extent that, sometimes, the notion of a club is not even considered. Heidi Talbot<sup>6</sup> (2010) from Kildare reflects this when she says “we have no folk clubs as far as I’m aware.” Ireland is well known for its pub sessions and her comment implies the lack of formality in approach as opposed to the lack of gathering in groups that might be perceived as folk clubs. Hannah Peel<sup>7</sup> (2010), originally from Northern Ireland, highlights the differences when commenting on her experiences in sessions:

“It’s not strict ... everybody kind of just joins in and sings a song, or somebody sings this or somebody plays a melody and everyone joins in. Like a jam, really, whereas a folk club, I’d think more of the performance elements” (Peel, 2010).

Clearly, the social dynamics of singarounds and sessions could be explored much further but suffice to say, here, that some can be as intimidating as much as others are welcoming. Similarly, some are quite formal requiring membership of a club whilst others are more informal based around who comes along at a fixed time and place.

If amplification is added to the preceding simple singaround format, the result is the ‘**open mic**’ format. This takes away much of the pressure of performance felt at

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<sup>5</sup> Andy Cutting: Best known for his work accompanying Kate Rusby, Martin Simpson and others on the melodeon. Winner of Musician of the Year in BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards of 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Heidi Talbot: Came to prominence as lead singer with Cherish The Ladies and now building a solo career. She was nominated as Folk Singer of the Year in 2011 by BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards.

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Peel: Progressed from being part of The Unthanks expanded line up to release her first solo album in 2011 on the Static Caravan label, home of Tuung.

some singarounds by having a PA to focus on. Cutting (2010) ignores the 'open mic' format, above, when defining categories of folk club but this is easily explained when considering that the format has been adopted by a range of musical nights with or without the tag of 'folk club'. These might extend to performances of poetry, comedy, rap, hip-hop, beatbox and a host of other entertainments such as open reel for video. In some cases, the 'open mic' is seen as an audition for a paying gig or the chance to perform a full set, possibly, at the same venue. Myrna Reay<sup>8</sup> (2011) points to artists who are building a career such as Zoe Mulford<sup>9</sup> who travelled for a few hours to seize her chance at the club's occasional 'open mic' nights. Reay suggests that a different audience will turn up for these nights with performers vying for the attention of the organiser and audience to get the opportunity to open an evening when the club runs one of its concert nights.

The popularity of this format has led to web based search resources like Open Mic Finder (Open Mic Finder, 2011) and the commercialisation of these events as opportunities to find new talent (Open Mic UK, 2011). Indeed, Stage.tv offers a web based version of this format where a worldwide audience can watch live or archived 'open mic' performances and register their appreciation (Stage TV, 2011).

Whilst the feedback in this virtual world is limited to online comments, folk musicians like Jackie Oates<sup>10</sup> (2010) find the face to face 'open mic' audience is valuable in testing out new ideas:

"I play at 'open mic' nights ... myself and Jim Causley<sup>11</sup> frequently do our set there ... unannounced ... just play ... folk is very cool at the moment amongst our age group and it's even more cool because a lot of the people don't quite understand the depth of the term, they just think it's story songs or songs with an acoustic guitar and, so, when we go on and we are actually singing the traditional ballads and things. I think that's got even more cool about it because you don't get to learn those songs unless you know where to look" (Oates, 2010)

In this way, Oates can try out 'new' songs or whole sets of material but also her comment highlights the breadth of the music played within even a simple 'open mic' setting. She also highlights an increase in the popularity of folk music with young people whilst indicating a perceived lack of knowledge of traditional sources. In the terms of Moore (2002), it suggests that the authenticity of the music for some younger people within an 'open mic' is more of a 'second person authenticity' though this contrasts with the 'first person authenticity' implied by Oates.

The presence of young people in the typical 'open mic' can bring an atmosphere that surprises some audience members. Jez Lowe<sup>12</sup> (2011) said:

"A friend of mine tempted me down to an 'open mic' in York with the promise of some great music. He was right. Lots of good stuff. It ran from 10pm until 2am but there was lots of chat in the audience who seemed to be mainly other songwriters

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<sup>8</sup> Myrna Reay: Organiser of Carlisle Folk and Blues Club; mainly, a concert club but with occasional 'open mic' nights.

<sup>9</sup> Zoe Mulford: American songwriter now based in the Manchester area and developing her UK profile.

<sup>10</sup> Jackie Oates: Rising star in the folk world. Winner in 2009 of BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards' Horizon Award and Best Traditional Track.

<sup>11</sup> Jim Causley: Part of the folk scene in Devon appearing solo or as part of Mawkin-Causley. Also formed part of John McCusker's 'Under One Sky' ensemble including Graham Coxon of Blur.

<sup>12</sup> Jez Lowe: Over a thirty year career, performing solo or with The Bad Pennies, has established himself as a songwriter of contemporary folk songs about North East England.

waiting their turn. It's funny. It seems to have gone full circle. It reminded me of nights in the 70's where folk clubs were full of musicians inspired by John Martyn or Nick Drake" (Lowe, 2011)

Whilst recognising the increasing regard for folk music in 'open mic' nights, Lowe (2011) highlights the noisier room as compared to the more respectful **concert club** format in which, typically, he performs. This experience was reflected in the comments of concert folk club organisers who visited other venues. As such this reflects a belief that their audience needed a venue that was, as some describe it, 'a listening room'.

Recalling their experiences at the folk clubs of Islington and Bodmin, Chris Wood and Andy Cutting (Wood, 2010; Cutting, 2010) emphasise concert clubs have clearly structured nights using defined intervals that finish early as the social elements of mixing together as an audience and mingling with the artist are of importance. Many of the concert format folk clubs may be described in this way though vary in terms of their programming and timing whilst their size tends to determine the possibilities for socialising within and between audience and artist.

Often, folk clubs that began as informal performance spaces such as a singaround have developed into the more formal concert club with their own resident performers (who, elsewhere, might be paid by other folk clubs for performing). So, naturally, folk clubs have developed that use resident acts to open for a visiting performer in a concert format. Often, the main act is termed the 'guest' in a manner that makes it quite clear that the visiting performer has been 'allowed' into a club populated by regular, local performers. Sweers (2005, p37) notes this format in the late 1950's to mid 1960's and little has changed in the format used today by concert clubs. However, at this point, where the amateur meets the professional, there can be concerns over the purpose of the night as indicated in this comment on resident performers from Chris Wood:

"the worst clubs, I think, are where the organiser has a kind of performance demon that they need to exorcise every week and the whole club is run such that they can take the stage" (Wood, 2010)

Wood's concern about organisers dominating proceedings is understandable but he counters this by commenting on how his own career has been helped by an astute organiser:

"I was playing Simon and Garfunkel's 'Scarborough Fair' at a school music day (at the age of 13 or 14) and the woman who ran Whitstable Folk Club was there, scouting. All those years ago, she was totally on the case. She saw me playing, came over and said did I want to go down the folk club. When I got down the folk club, because of the close proximity to Canterbury, there were loads of university students playing at the folk club. These people were, like, ten years older than me, that bit more accomplished and already quite dedicated. So, I was like a dog with two \*\*\*\*\*. And it turned out to be John Jones, Alan Prosser, Ian Telfer, people who went on to make a career out of it" (Wood, 2010)

Whilst Wood reflects fondly on the past; today, Alan Bearman<sup>13</sup> (2010), looking strictly at concert folk clubs, indicates that the position isn't totally healthy:

"Folk clubs have been closing faster than they have been opening for the past 25 years. I don't have any evidence that it's speeding up. I think a lot of those clubs that were strong 10 years ago are still keeping going one way or another"

Throughout the interviews, the importance of the organiser role in "keeping going one way or another" became clear. Wood (2010) summarised it like this:

"Organisers are like teachers. If they are good and dynamic, the club thrives."

#### **4. Observations on the changes in folk clubs over the last few years**

Talking of the general booking policy of her folk club, Pat Batty<sup>14</sup> (2011) stated the intention to expand its audience to those who wish to be entertained rather than contribute to the entertainment. Informality is jettisoned for more structure and the quality of the music has to be of a good level:

"The audience dictated the policy – as long as it was good and the people enjoyed it... the parameters of the music were very wide as long as it was quality. Quality came first and the likeability factor – it's always been entertainment"

Batty (2011) makes it quite clear that the booking policy does not have to include traditional folk music pointing to the folk comedians of the 1970's (Mike Harding<sup>15</sup>, for example) who used the folk club as a stepping stone to reach a wider audience. Similar views came from Gerry Evans<sup>16</sup> (2011):

"I pushed it to a broader canvas ... in about 2000. They never booked anyone who was non-British; they tended not to book anyone outside of the locality; certainly, nobody in the Americana fold; every now and again, they might book someone outside the folk fold. I remember Barb Jungr being booked"

Evans' more open minded view of music mirrors comments from Joe Boyd (2005, p166) who observed the early Fairport Convention as 'well-behaved middle-class kids from Muswell Hill whose taste in American singer-songwriters was better'. As well as "pushing the boundaries", Evans (2011) notes how people will travel a distance to see particular artists. On the other hand, Hooke<sup>17</sup> (2011) finds that the travelling fan is influenced by the day on which the club runs:

"We've recently had to move from Saturdays to Wednesdays because the brewery wanted to make more money from weddings and things on Saturdays. It hasn't

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<sup>13</sup> Alan Bearman: Leading UK folk music agent who started his career as a folk club organiser.

<sup>14</sup> Pat Batty: Member of Auld Triangle but, mainly, known for her role as organiser of the Westhoughton Folk Club, awarded Folk Club of the Year in 2000 by BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards.

<sup>15</sup> Mike Harding: Career as a folk musician with a humorous side blossomed in the 70's before he took over the role of radio DJ on BBC 2 programme of folk and acoustic music.

<sup>16</sup> Gerry Evans: Organiser of Twickenham Folk Club since the 1990's.

<sup>17</sup> Della Hooke: Organiser of The Red Lion Folk Club; awarded Folk Club of the Year in 2006 by BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards.

actually hurt us anything like as much as I expected, audience numbers are still good ... but there is a preponderance of people that are fifty plus. We've lost the people that travel a distance ... in fact, often they are coming specifically for the particular person that we are putting on. These performers have their own followers. The largest numbers of people some weeks are not our own members" (Hooke, 2011)

Hooke's observation suggests an erosion of the club membership itself, remaining regular club members are of an older age group and recognition that survival requires booking acts with a wide appeal. The latter point is made above by Evans (2011) and by Batty (2011) who suggested that "we were one of the few local clubs booking national guests ... the more we spent on the guests, the more we got in".

Myrna Reay (2011) highlights another argument for booking established entertainers in the risk with acts 'unknown' to the local club audience:

"How far can you go in putting on new artists ... my experience is that generally audiences only come out for someone that they know"

Organisers also pointed to the impact of the changing venues in the UK with Batty (2011) stating that her club began in the early 70's at the local rugby league club where the audience was seated cabaret style in a format familiar to them from other entertainment. The rise and fall of this type of working men's club has been well charted (Cherrington, 2009; Club Historians, 2011) but Batty notes that a move to a local pub in 1974 led to almost twenty years of relative stability. Over time, the attitudes of landlords to the folk club changed and, the search for a younger drinking crowd eventually led to the club moving. As Batty says, "Karaoke came in. That's what drove us out". However, the switch in venue to a local golf club was seen as a "move with the times" satisfying increased audience expectations for the concert club format (Batty, 2011).

Furthermore, she points to the importance of building the potential audience at the club moving from the early days of just advertising in the local paper to targeting the audience through leaflets and posters in libraries, and so on, before adding in email lists. Similarly, a season ticket system was used to encourage regular members and, at the same time, fill the gaps left by those who came for particular acts. On top of this, partly to generate publicity in an effort to widen their audience, the club promoted larger concerts at outside venues such as the local theatre (The Octagon in Bolton), was involved in festivals such as Horwich Folk Festival and ran ceilidhs. Successful that this approach was for the club in counteracting a culture suggested as where "people go out less", it has now closed due to both "ill health, really, amongst ourselves and it's harder as you get older" and "issues with the venue ... the fact that the golf club was a member's club and it was a huge step to let us in" (Batty, 2011). Reasons reflective of, both, the increasing age of those involved in the folk club format and the limitations presented by venues not intended for formal entertainment.

Whilst some comment that the arts in the UK has ebbed and flowed with political support (Brighton, 2006), it is clear that there has been an overall development of arts centre venues in UK cities over the past years driven by funding from the Arts Council and the National Lottery. As more folk music is being programmed at these venues, they have emerged as competitors to concert folk clubs as now this format is presented in venues more suiting to the formality expected by the audience.



Indeed, the inclusion of folk music in venue programmes expands beyond the small arts centres to larger venues. For example, whilst Hooke feels relaxed about the direction of the local arts centre, she comments on acts appearing at larger venues by saying:

“I don’t understand the success (of) The Town Hall and The Symphony Hall ... even if they put on small names they will get a big audience simply because it’s The Town Hall. If they came to a club, they would get a much more intimate atmosphere but a lot of people would rather go to a big venue and not dream of going to a function room over a pub”. (Hooke, 2011)

In reality, arts centres and other larger venues have marketing resources that outweigh those of the smaller, more intimate local folk club. Similarly, there may be access to wider amenities such as restaurants this are appealing to the casual concert goer. Hence, these factors mean the presence venues intended for performance is a considerable threat to the concert folk club. In a more rural part of the country, Myrna Reay (2011) notes the benefits of less competition:

“there are singarounds in the local villages ... but, as far as Carlisle is concerned, it’s big stuff in The Sands Centre, the Jazz Club and ourselves ... we’re doing OK”

To get a broader, overall perspective of the above impacts on concert folk clubs, it is useful to consider the thoughts of musician, Gary Wilcox<sup>18</sup> (2011):

“One of the other factors as we call it a day as a band, we have noticed it has become more difficult to get the gigs over the last twelve months ... can’t afford to pay the band ... less guest nights ... quite a few venues have closed, such as The Rockingham Arms. Looking back at our touring schedule of 2004, I would guess 60% of those clubs have closed.”

As an agent, Alan Bearman has a wider view of venues and promoters of live folk music and folk club organisers and he notes how the artist’s affection for folk clubs has led to interesting developments like Bright Phoebus<sup>19</sup> as well as the emergence of a number of young promoters of acoustic events (2010). Also, the author notes from personal experience the rise in the number of promoters and a shift of attitude from being seen as a person who makes money at the expense of both artist and audience to someone who is fashionably involved with the live music scene. O’Dell<sup>20</sup> (2011), an occasional promoter in Leeds who just “takes it a gig or two at a time”, says:

“There’s so many promoters now. The people in the bands themselves, if they want a gig, they can just arrange it themselves. There’s so many venues now too - loads of the pubs and bars have a gig room upstairs. If they have friends in a band in another city, they can do a swap. In that sense, everyone is a promoter.”

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<sup>18</sup> Gary Wilcox: A member of The Queensbury Rules, signed to Fellside Records, a popular folk act in the Stoke area that has announced its break up in 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Bright Phoebus: A folk club in Sheffield with a house band that includes artists already established in their own right such as Martin Simpson and Jon Boden.

<sup>20</sup> Dan O’Dell: Music fan, occasional promoter and releaser of recorded music as Hide and Seek Records.

## 5. The motivations of organisers and musicians

Having considered the health of various folk club formats and the impact of the organiser, it's useful to consider what benefits are accrued from this effort. It is quite clear from the interviews that many organisers cite 'the love of it' as their aim relates to the pursuit of a hobby. Alan Bearman (2010), points out that this goes beyond the music itself for the organiser:

"they want to be part of it, they want to contribute ...there's not many other things that you can just do that instantly get you rubbing shoulders with the top echelon of the music that you're particularly into"

With a young promoter like Dan O'Dell (2011) who may be happy to organise an occasional concert, this is particularly true:

"I book just anyone I like really. In a couple of weeks I've got an indie-pop band from Australia ... Booking the last one, Drever McCusker Woomble<sup>21</sup> ... Nothing was lined up (for them). So, I thought I'd just do it myself"

Others see their involvement in organising folk clubs as being motivated by having a social life with a purpose. Perhaps in providing quality entertainment, as Myrna Reay (2011) simply puts it, "If I didn't do it, it wouldn't be there". These social aims are important to many and have led to Batty (2011) organising both house concerts and trips to see favourite artists for the core membership of her now defunct concert club. Others might see their purpose as providing a friendly environment in which to improve musical skills and avoidance of the sometime intimidating atmosphere of the session. Johansson and Murray<sup>22</sup> (2011) have taken this route in forming their student club:

"I did feel quite out of my depth (in the folk club session) ... put in a position where you just have to play ... this is why it was important to set up The Folk Society (at Leeds University) to provide a folk club experience and go off to folk clubs without feeling any intimidation"

Whether or not the organiser benefits from being a performer as well, for those willing to organise a regular club, it has been seen above that their pastime has become quite sophisticated in its approach and may lead to a variety of promotional activities and a professional career for some. However, this depends on the organiser with Brocken (2003, pp 114-117) foretelling the dangers of more backward viewpoints in describing some of the clubs in the 1970's as headed for 'a musical cul-de-sac'.

This trend of increasing professionalism amongst surviving clubs may be seen from a variety of angles with Batty (2011) observing this of artists:

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<sup>21</sup> Drever McCusker Woomble: A folk 'super group' comprising Kris Drever, John McCusker and Roddy Woomble.

<sup>22</sup> Natasha Johansson (with a background in folk music) has formed The Folk Society and is DJs with Sam Murray on a programme called 'Folk Off' on Leeds Student Radio.

“At first, they didn’t used to ask for percentages, it was a fixed fee. Then, they moved onto percentages<sup>23</sup> which I think was fairer. You might say that they’d been quite kind (in the past)”

This shift away from a hobbyist approach to the professional can also be seen from the agent’s perspective when Bearman (2010) notes of one of his longest established artists the need to “control his generosity” and, yet, acknowledges the “musical portfolio” of other younger artists who have been astute in setting up a different income sources such as writing commissions or workshops.

In interviewing folk musicians, many highlighted a family background that led them into folk music even if it was only by listening to their parent’s record collection. Others had developed their interest through a university education, particularly, at Newcastle where also there is the Folkworks<sup>24</sup> project at The Sage in Gateshead. These resources are typical of those identified by Livingstone (1999) as fundamental to music revivals and, here, it might be considered that their importance relates to survival of the traditional elements of the folk genre too.

The folk club plays an important role in an artist’s career development as somewhere to play, to learn, to audition, and, to be paid. Looking back at the formats described earlier, the progression of career development can be seen as moving from session to concert club. Though, for some artists, the route is less obvious. For example, an artist like Hannah Peel (2010) whose music draws upon folk but in a contemporary style may feel the concert folk club is an inappropriate venue at which to play:

“I don’t think – if I’m honest, I don’t think I would because what I do is a bit too strange, a bit too alternative. I think the age group that go to folk clubs, from what I’ve seen, would not necessarily buy my record or listen to my music”

Both the family and education based routes into folk music are distinctive and might be argued to act to exclude those with a more casual interest in folk as suggested by Wilcox (2011):

“a number of artists in the folk scene have grown up in the folk scene, like Eliza Carthy, and, in recent years, a group of artists have come though the music course at Gateshead. I always felt like, in some ways, we were a little bit of an outsider though no one treated us such. The three of us had a bit of a siege mentality and ploughed our own furrow and believed that we had an audience”

This comment from Wilcox (2011) shows that an artist’s motivation to perform is rooted in a belief in their music whether developed through their family, a formal education or with their friends.

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<sup>23</sup> Describes a situation where an artist has a guaranteed fee but may earn more if an agreed percentage of net revenue after costs exceeds that fee.

<sup>24</sup> Folkworks: Directed by world-renowned Northumbrian piper, Kathryn Tickell, to provide an opportunity to watch, listen and participate in traditional music, song and dance.

## 6. Conclusion

A number of concluding points are suggested. Firstly, rather than examining the popularity or otherwise of specific musical genres or sub-genres, this research has found it more useful to consider the health of folk music within different performance formats as they offer more homogenous groupings than musical genre which can be difficult to define, is more heterogeneous in nature and seen as a viewpoint that stifles creativity. By identifying singarounds, 'open mic' and concert clubs, these are seen as a potential route for folk artists to develop their skills raising them from amateur to professional status.

Secondly, the singaround (and session) is seen as a format that remains in good health albeit varying from a welcoming learning environment to an intimidating, competitive situation. The 'open mic' has grown in popularity though taking in many different performance opportunities whether for (traditional) folk artists or others such as comedians. Yet, the concert club format is struggling with ageing organisers and audience, fewer venues suited to the formal 'listening room' approach and competitive pressures from venues such as arts centres.

Thirdly, young promoters have emerged who are happy to promote gigs that include folk music as a core or occasional element to their, sometimes, limited programme. This is made easier by the access to new technologies (social networks, websites, etc.) that offer cheap ways to promote their events and a more favourable view of promotion as an activity.

In summary, the conflicting ideas of revival and demise amongst folk clubs is explained by the increased folk music in the 'open mic' and gigs organised by young promoters alongside the decline of the concert club format.

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