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‘Country life’? Rurality, folk music and ‘Show of Hands’

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A B S T R A C T

This paper examines the contribution of folk music to understanding the dynamic, fluid and multi-experiential nature of the countryside. Drawing from literature on the geographies of music, it examines the work of ‘Show of Hands’, a contemporary folk band from Devon in England. Three areas are studied. First, the paper examines the musical style of Show of Hands in order to explore how hybridised, yet distinctive, styles of music emerge in particular places. Second, it demonstrates how Show of Hands’ hybrid musical style has become closely associated with the Southwest of England. Finally, within these spatial and hybrid contexts, attention is given to the ways in which their music represents the ‘everyday lives of the rural’. Taken together these themes assess the relevance of music in the understanding of rurality as hybrid space.

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1. Introduction

Over recent years there has been much interest in the way that representations of the rural contribute to discourses of rurality and the spatialities of everyday life in the countryside (Cloke, 2003a; Halfacree, 2006b). As work in this area has progressed, commentators have moved beyond studying representations of the countryside as idyllic and towards texts that show the dynamic, fluid and multi-experiential nature of rural living from a range of viewpoints. In doing so, academics with an interest in the countryside are using a wider range of media sources to engage with different discourses and spatialities in the countryside (Phillips et al., 2001). However, despite moves in other areas of social sciences to engage with non-visual media (Smith, 1997), less attention has been given to music and musical performance in the representation of rurality. This is despite a surge of interest in the geographies of music (Anderson et al., 2005; Connell and Gibson, 2003; Leyshon et al., 1995; Rawding, 2007; Smith, 1997, 2000) and some apparently close connections between particular rural places and musical styles (Gold, 1998; Johnston, 2006; Matless, 2005; Stradling, 1998).

A focus on music has the potential to contribute to rural studies in three ways. First, music can play an important role in the social construction of identity and the promotion of particular places (Hudson, 2006; Kong, 1995; Revill, 2000; Smith, 2000). The association of songs with specific places means that music is often linked with national or regional identity through its celebration of local events, characters and landscapes (Storey, 2001). While some attention has been given to these processes, work on the relationship between music and place has been rather selective in its geography and genre, tending to focus on ‘mainstream’, popular music in urban locations (Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996; Hollows and Milestone, 1997; Meegan, 1995). Yet music can also contribute to the marketing and promotion of rural places, whether it is through country music festivals in Australia (Gibson and Davidson, 2004), the recruitment of ‘traditional music’ as a potent ingredient in the appeal of rural Ireland (Kneafsey, 2002), or the heritage marketing of places such as ‘Elgar country’ in Worcestershire, UK (Stradling, 1998). However, identities are rarely fixed, stable or given and are constantly shifting and evolving (Brace, 2003). Significantly, music has the potential not only to reveal much about *identity*, but *identities*. Music is important as a medium by which individuals develop personal attachments to a complex suite of emotions, experiences, and in many cases, places. Indeed, a glance at many people’s music collections reveals “the sheer profusion of identities and selves that we possess” (Stokes, 1994, p. 3).

Second, music from specific rural localities has the potential to represent the lives, grievances and celebrations of those living in rural areas. Kong (1995) notes that ‘country’ music (originally associated with the southern states of the USA) is capable of evoking symbolic meanings of rurality held by those living, or seeking to live, in rural places. Similarly, Bell (2006) suggests that country and western music can be interpreted as an image of “rustic authenticity” that portrays “a nostalgia for paradise, symbolised by a yearning for a simpler way of life, a looking back to an uncomplicated place and time” that is important to its listeners (Kong, 1995, p. 8).

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Finally, listening (Morton, 2005), performing (Revill, 2005) or dancing to (Revill, 2004) music is a corporeal performance that has the potential to engage people with places in emotional ways. It has also been recognised that music from or about places makes important contributions to the "sonic geographies" (Matless, 2005) of particular regions and the emotional geographies of people's lives therein (Kong, 1996). In the same way that there has been interest in various activities and rituals that engage people with the rural landscape, a focus on the performance of music has the potential to contribute to hybridised understandings of rurality that attempt to articulate the "mystery, spirituality and ghostliness of rural places" (Cloke, 2003b, p. 6).

To begin exploring some of these themes, this paper continues by examining folk music and its association, imagined or otherwise, with rural places (Boyes, 1993). The following sections examine folk music and how it has been revived and developed in England. The main part of the paper uses the example of 'Show of Hands', a contemporary English folk band, to examine the value of folk music to rural studies.

1.1. Folk music

Folk music has come to be associated with a wide range of styles, influences and social practices. It has become closely linked with an oral tradition in which songs are passed down between generations and/or places through performance, rather than formal transcription. A rather normative definition of folk music is that it is:

> "collectively owned, of ancient and anonymous authorship and transmitted across generations by word of mouth; a canon celebrating life in the past and urging change for tomorrow, the performance being on simple instruments in natural settings.. the joyful performance by specially gifted but not 'professional' musicians", (Ennis, 1992, p. 88, quoted in Connell and Gibson, 2003, p. 30).

Nettl (1965) suggests that these practices led to the emergence of 'standards' that are accepted and maintained in particular forms in particular places. Consequently, rather dualistic comparisons have been drawn between folk that represents the "historic practices of small (often by implication rural) communities" (Kassabin, 1999 p. 114) and popular or mainstream music that is "contemporary, mass produced and consumed" (Kassabin, 1999 p. 116). However, this binary does not withstand close scrutiny (Brocken, 2003; Kent, 2007).[1]

Ethnomusicologists have used sound, singing style, form, polyphony, rhythm, tempo, melody and scales to link particular types of folk music with particular places (Nettl, 1965). It is still possible to identify music that is based on oral traditions, regional styles of playing and local instruments, especially in less-economically developed countries (Nettl, 2005; Nettl et al., 1992). However, folk music is more widely recognised as a constantly evolving hybrid of many different musical styles and forms generated by diverse economic, cultural and institutional influences (Nettl, 1965). This is evidenced by a series of 'revivals' that have occurred in folk music in different parts of the world at different times when traditional tunes were re-discovered, re-imagined and re-played using different technologies, instruments and styles by new generations of musicians (Brocken, 2003; McCann, 1995; Vallely, 1999).

Folk music is therefore a broad canon that has some elements of, or at least associations with, more traditional forms described above (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Revill and Gold, 2007). Thus, contemporary folk music may be played by professional musicians to high standards for commercial gain. Yet co-existing with professionalisation is a strong amateur scene that attempts to maintain (or re-invent) some of the many 'traditions' (or at least imagined traditions) of folk such as communal playing by amateur musicians. Labels such as 'traditional', 'folk-rock', 'punk-folk' 'nu-folk', 'roots' or 'world' are largely meaningless terms that have been applied to the music industry to categorise their products. They nevertheless serve to highlight the diversity of the genre, hinting at both the tensions and innovations that have shaped contemporary folk music.

It is therefore important to study folk music in a way that recognises it is a complex product of different, sometimes competing, discourses rather than seeking to distinguish whether it conforms to particular, normative definitions. In this vein, the following sections start to explore the associations between folk music and rurality. They argue that the countryside is often a prominent, but by no means dominant, discourse in folk music, but these associations are more imagined than real. Given the breadth of folk music, it does not seek to provide comprehensive account of the genre (see BBC, 2006; Boyes, 1993; Brocken, 2003; Nettl, 1965) but, instead, focuses on English folk music to explore its value to rural studies.

English folk music provides a timely case study because it is currently enjoying a resurgence of interest. This is the latest in a series of revivals that has seen English folk music re-discovered and re-interpreted in different, hybridised ways. Each revival has engaged with rurality in different ways. Opinion varies on the timing and significance of each revival (BBC, 2006; Brocken, 2003; Connell and Gibson, 2004) and, rather like academic paradigms, new revivals have built upon previous ones rather than entirely superseding them. Nevertheless, a number of key developments can be identified, which are briefly discussed in the following sections.

1.2. The first folk revival: imagining the village

The first English folk revival is associated with 'collectors' of folk music, such as Rev Sabine Baring-Gould, Cecil Sharp (Gold and Revill, 2006) and Percy Grainger (Matthews, 1998) in the late Victorian/Edwardian period. These formally trained musicians collected 'living songs' (those that had been performed and passed on by oral tradition) from rustic characters living in different (mainly rural) parts of England (Roud et al., 2003). These tunes were transcribed for first time and published in portfolios such as 'Songs of the West' (Baring Gould et al., 1905) and the 'Cornish Song Book' (Dunstan, 1929). Their activities were given impetus by the formation of The Folk-Song Society in 1898 and the English Folk Dance Society in 1911 (Schofield, 2007). Their work is credited with 'saving' many folk tunes and dances, bringing folk music to a wider audience and contributing to the commercial growth of 'world music' (Boyes, 1993; Brocken, 2003; Revill and Gold, 2007).

However, many collections of folk music were written and edited to reflect standard musical notations of the era to such an extent that English musical conventions and styles were imposed on folk music in other parts of the world (Gold and Revill, 2006; Thompson, 2006). The revival 'had less to do with preserving the past (which in the sense of rural community life was ever more distant) than with invoking a particular historic image' (Connell and Gibson, 2003, p. 38). This first revival therefore reflected an 'Imagined Village' (Boyes, 1993) rather the continuation of a rural, oral tradition. Despite this, the work of early collectors started a discourse that emphasised the 'authenticity' of folk music as 'an indicator of a musical past, as a historical meter in the re-establishment of a living dialogue with a tradition' (Brocken, 2003, p. 89). Such views fail to take account of how migration, social mobility

[1] This is summarised by the quotation "All music is folk music, I've never heard a horse sing" that has been attributed to various artists (Nettl, 2005, p. 357).

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