

It's your turn: Alison White

My dad has been in many bands throughout his life, playing the guitar and harmonica in at least one band, the Blown Bottle. He is a natural performer and he loves to perform; as he would tell you, he's not the best guitarist or the best singer in the world, but he knows how to sell a song. My mother used to play the piano for our primary school assemblies, but aside from that I know very little about her relationship with music as, as far back as I can remember she has only listened to Radio 4 and classical music.



For my part, music and singing have been an important part of my life since I was about 6 years of age. This is when my brother and I started going to Sierra Leone twice a year to visit our Dad. During these holidays we would listen to his music – Bobby Bare, Boney M., Johnny Cash, Leonard Cohen, Ian Dury & The Blockheads, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones and The Who, to name an important few – and my dad would often play the guitar and sing, and I would join in. Our first duets were *Scarborough Fair*, *Sweet Little Sixteen* and *Where Have All The Flowers Gone*, others include *Big Dupree*, *Faster Horses*, *Gimme A Ride To Heaven Boy* and *Marie Laveau*.

For a few years, my singing was limited to these holidays and singing to myself, and then at secondary school, I joined the choir. We did also have to play the recorder in our music lessons, but the least said about that the better – I could only read two notes of music, so they were the only notes I played! We moved to Paris when I was 14, where my singing was limited to my bedroom and as a member of the chorus in the annual school musical.

Since then, I have been in a couple more choirs, have continued to sing for myself and occasionally for friends, around the odd campfire... and with my father when we were in the same place at the same time, although his repertoire has definitely

moved on, and he sometimes despaired of my lack of projection! The exclamation mark is there, as I find that quite comical, as projection is definitely not something I now lack, possibly something I have a bit much of.

Whilst at university, back in 1994, I met my friend Mick, who was lead singer in a punk band back in the 80s, The Cheaters, and when he met his wife Carole, who has an incredible voice and was a karaoke queen in Majorca for a number of years, we started singing together. Fun evenings of food, wine, music, harmony and song.

And then I moved from Manchester to Cambridge in 2014. One of the first rental properties I was attracted to happened to be in Horningsea, and whilst investigating the area, I discovered that the pub in the village had a weekly singaround/music session. Although that property didn't work out, I was determined to get to those music sessions, which is partly why I chose to live in the next village.

My first Thursday in Waterbeach, I headed down to the Plough and Fleece to check it out. I got there early, treated myself to dinner, and then spotted someone arriving by bicycle who I thought might be part of the session, so I plucked up the courage to say hello. Fortunately I was right. You might ask what a session participant looks like, and the reality is that we are actually quite a diverse bunch really, I was just lucky, and he was obviously arriving at about the right time. Anyway, that was Peter, our sea shanty maestro who brings so much energy and joy to the sessions.

My plan had been to just listen, learn and enjoy, and work on building up the courage to actually participate some Thursday in the future, but that was scuppered when, whilst getting a drink at the bar, I heard shouts of 'Manchester, it's your turn' and, in the nicest possible way, they refused to let me decline. So I bit the bullet and sang a song. I think it was *Ready for the Storm* by Dougie MacLean, although I don't remember much about it, except for holding my hands under the table to stop them shaking, feeling like my cheeks were burning, worrying I'd made a hash of it, and then, everyone being very positive and encouraging. And that is key!

Tony (Phillips) ran the session at that time, and his passion for the sessions, his joy in the music, his skill at jamming with others, and his ever positive demeanour and encouragement made it a very special place for all involved, and particularly for

'newbies' who had very little experience of playing and/or singing in public. Drew and Paul stepped up to the mark to run the sessions when Tony moved out of the area, not an easy thing to do, and they did so with the same positivity, until the pandemic threw a spanner in all things social, but we will return.

Safe to say that following that first night I became one of the regulars, albeit sometimes somewhat intermittently. I did worry that people would get bored of me just singing without any musical accompaniment, and also with my very limited repertoire, but everyone has always been complimentary, which is a nice ego boost. I have added a few more songs to my repertoire, although I definitely need to keep working on that; have grown in confidence (I guess hence that projection), although my hands still shake; have worked on my ability to harmonise, which is a work in progress; and a few times, some of the musicians have joined in with me, which is a joy and there's no other feeling like it!

Over time a few of us started visiting other sessions in the region, which is fantastic. There is so much musical talent in this land, it is inspiring and so enjoyable. Our furthest adventure was a trip to the Amber Festival, Dougie MacLean's folk music festival in Dunkeld, Scotland. We stayed in a converted chapel, jammed 'at home', joined a number of sessions and started a couple. So beautiful and so much fun!

And when one of the posse, Polly, moved to Derby, she found a new musical home and in 2018 we went up to participate in the fringe to the Derby Folk Festival at the pub, The Last Post – a long weekend of almost 12 hour daily sessions. We enjoyed it so much, we returned in 2019, and we would have been there last year, if we hadn't been kiboshed by Covid.

This past year, with all the pandemic restrictions, has been a tough one. There have been regular virtual singaround/music sessions via Zoom, and I started out joining one set up by one of the Plough and Fleece regulars - Lockdown Folk hosted by Jeremy Harmer. It was fun to hear new people, but it just didn't work for me; I missed the atmosphere of the session and the jamming aspect, and I worried about how my unaccompanied voice carried through the ether, and my limited repertoire. I cannot wait for the day that we can all meet up in person and make music together again! And to the distinct possibility that I might have someone to accompany me on guitar

and to work with me on extending my repertoire! Roll on the next phase in all our musical lives, and in the words of a famous, far from folky band:

Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing

Thanks for all the joy they're bringing

Who can live without it? I ask in all honesty

What would life be?

Without a song or a dance, what are we?

So I say thank you for the music

For giving it to me.

Singing takes me out of myself, it makes my heart swell and my feelings soar. And long may it keep rolling on!

Cheers!