Rolling On: Emerging themes from the sessions and singarounds project 2018–2023

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Abstract: 'Rolling On' is a national touring project looking at the health of sessions and singarounds throughout the UK. Starting in 2018, a small team from the weekly session at the Plough and Fleece community pub in Horningsea, Cambridge started to venture further afield to experience at first hand what was going on. The session host and present author, Tony Phillips had won a songwriting competition with Rolling On, telling the story of community singing in local pubs since the 1700's, the period in which the Plough and Fleece was built. Members of the Plough and Fleece session group have subsequently visited 234 different sessions and singarounds as at August 2023 from the lowlands of Scotland to the south coast of England, collecting stories from attendees as they go, adding a selection of stories, videos and interviews to the website. This reflective paper identifies several key themes emerging from the project including discussions on the difference between performance and song-sharing, the role of hospitality, age and ethnicity; and the paradigm of an established tradition of folksong and the creation of an emerging tradition through the inclusion of new writing and contemporary song.

Introduction

'Rolling On' is a national touring project looking at the health of self-declared folk music sessions and singarounds throughout the UK. Our definition of the concept of health in this context focuses on aspects of both quantity and quality. Key questions include: is the sector currently expanding or shrinking in terms of numbers of venues as well as numbers of participants? What is the age profile of participants and are enough younger people (defined here as anyone under 45) involved? Is there a significant presence of both traditional folk song and contemporary music in the choice of songs and tunes? Are sessions and singarounds providing a place for sharing songs and tunes where joining in is valued as much, or indeed more, as excellence in performance? Are the events welcoming and well hosted or are they closed shops with little interest in welcoming new members? Is there a creative mix of participants from different ethnic backgrounds, people with mental health conditions or a personal impairment and people from the LGBTQ community that matches the demographic profile of the local community? While the team and I have made no attempt to collect verifiable data on these key areas, our observations following visits and discussion with fellow participants during and after the local events inevitably touched on many of the subjects without needing any prompting. This article summarises our observations on several of these key areas of interest, leaving several of the more challenging questions for subsequent publications.

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Background and terminology

Starting in 2018, a small team from the weekly session at the Plough and Fleece community pub in Horningsea, Cambridge started to venture further afield to experience first-hand what was going on in the UK folk scene.

The session host and present author, Tony Phillips, had won a songwriting competition with 'Rolling On', telling the story of community singing in local pubs since the 1700s, the period in which the Plough and Fleece was built. Members of the Plough and Fleece session group have subsequently visited 242 different sessions and singarounds as of December 2023 from the lowlands of Scotland to the south coast of England, collecting stories from attendees as they go, adding a selection of stories, videos and interviews to the website.

We should begin by describing how the main terms used to describe singing and playing in pubs and other community settings are divided unequally and with big overlapping verges into the following: the singaround; the singalong; the session; the open mic; and the acoustic night. These are the terms we have seen on websites, Facebook pages and pub 'What's On' lists all over the UK. We have also made good use of the various online folk music listings sites that are kept up to date by a small army of dedicated enthusiasts.

These terms have also been useful in describing the realities of the current folk club scene as well. Of the 242 places we have visited so far, around 40% described themselves as folk clubs but vary in content from places that are largely singarounds or open mics to the more traditional model of an event with floor singers and a paid guest artist. For the purposes of the project, we have focused on clubs and venues that feature the unpaid amateur over the professional, although there have been many venues that also feature unpaid professionals joining in for the fun of it.

Back to our main theme and you will find the definitions here are as good as any as a prelude to an argument:

> *Singaround:* Everyone who wants to do so takes a turn, usually in a clockwise direction but sometimes where your name comes on the list you signed as you came in. Everyone tends to join in unless you exercise your right to tell them to be quiet while presenting your masterwork. In hard-core singarounds, tunes are actively discouraged.
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> *Singalong:* Someone bashes out a set of old favourites and we all join in with the one verse we know and the chorus. Singalongs happen at singarounds when other people know at least one verse and everyone joins in the chorus.
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> *Session:* A single-focus instrumental workout with the option of exclusively Irish, exclusively English, exclusively Latvian or whatever the hard-core are into. Songs are generally rationed to one every hour at best, although many sessions are mixed, meaning that no one of a purist persuasion goes away happy.
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> *Open mic:* Like a singaround but much louder.
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> *Acoustic night:* Like a session, a singaround and a singalong combined but without the fear of getting it wrong.

We have actively encouraged participants to send in their own stories to add to the Rolling On website collection of first-hand accounts of why they love the sector, how and when they became involved plus any other thoughts they may have. The Rolling On project will continue to explore the session and singaround scene for as long as it takes to cover the whole of the UK

with a particular interest in mapping the areas we have yet to visit including the West Country, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. A short film is in preparation and ten chapters of the popular-market book version of our travels are currently available on the Rolling On website (Rolling On, n.d.).

Emerging themes

Performing and sharing

Performing a song is what you tend to have to do when someone stands you in front of the room, often with a microphone, and you enter into a contract with the audience to entertain them for which they agree to pay attention and either applaud either loudly or not so loudly, depending on their mood. Sharing a song is what you do when you are sitting in a cosy pub and the rule of going round clockwise means that it is now your turn. Some people are in love with performing for its own sake, but I am not one of them.

The last 15 years or so has seen a huge increase in performance-focused music making, for which a lot of the blame can be placed on tacky TV shows like *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent*, but open mics have got a lot to answer for as well. I uphold the principle that anyone is welcome to have a go at sharing a song or a tune in a pub session, whether or not they have a morsel of talent, but I do not extend that to include the right of a person without a morsel of talent to share a song loudly down a microphone. Sharing equals anything goes. Performing should equal a careful balance between talent and practice.

The love of performing as an end in itself has been one of the less enjoyable aspects of our tour. A substantial number of events that describe themselves as singarounds work to a model that means the singer must come to the front even if the format remains essentially a circle. This is also the case where the host provides a microphone and PA, effectively turning a singaround into an open mic.

The potential problem here is that it discourages participants who lack confidence and positively encourages participants who love performing for its own sake to have their five minutes of showtime irrespective of having learned the words or the tune beforehand. Conversely, the less formal circle or cafe style formats encourage the sharing of songs or tunes as the expectation is that every contribution is welcome and the overall expectation of perfection is naturally lower.

It is also true that we have witnessed many 'up the front' singarounds that are well hosted, and participants are encouraged to up their game to find that elusive mix of performance and sharing.

These observations are broadly in line with a number of writers and researchers including Peter Wilby's (2013) dissertation on folk clubs in the Midlands, which is well worth reading for his erudite analysis and often hilarious collection of responses to his research questionnaires, includes this gem:

> Some folk singarounds feel like criticism-free therapy for the players, and I feel that as an audience, I am validating a claim to be a 'performer' which feels false, because they are simply not trying to entertain or engage. Rant over. Music sessions are a different thing entirely! (Wilby 2013, p. 145)

The role of hospitality

Of the 242 sessions and singarounds so far attended, only five stand out as being so unwelcoming that we would not plan to go back. The best events have clearly internalised the essential principle of welcome and this extends from the hosts through to the attendees, achieving a tangible culture of warmth and welcome. The worst from a visitor's point of view

are self-perpetuating interest groups that view strangers as a risk to their own enjoyment and overall sense of control.

This is not necessarily a problem if the description of the events includes the words ‘for members only’ or some variation of ‘only tunes’ or ‘only songs that are at least 100 years old’, and it is a positive strength if you are looking for a night out or a long-term membership with that specific narrow focus in mind.

The most misleading case we came across was an event billed as an acoustic night that turned out to be an evening class for English folk tunes – a wonderful thing in its own right but certainly not an acoustic night.

Several events include detailed descriptions of what to expect on their websites. When written in a friendly and humorous manner, these guides are perfect examples of how to welcome in the stranger and equip them with all they need to know to fit in – or choose to go elsewhere if it is not to their liking. An excellent example of this can be found on the website of the ‘Goose is Out’ singaround in London, providing a detailed description of what actually goes on in their well-attended events (The Goose is Out, n.d).

The best examples of individual hosting we have come across exhibit all the key aspects of community development leadership where the participants are made to feel that they are in control, the leadership is gentle and practically invisible but always there to keep the atmosphere buoyant. The worst examples are the very rare events led with a heavy hand by small-minded ‘characters’ who appear to delight in upsetting as many people as possible. To be honest, these have also been some of the most bizarrely enjoyable nights as it is like watching a satirical TV series on how not to increase access to folk singing.

Age and ethnicity

The age pattern across the 242 places we have visited confirms a demographic that shifts significantly if we are talking about towns and cities with a large student population, venues near to festival sites or places where second and sometimes third generation folk ‘families’ are located. In these areas we have found plenty of young people turning up, We hear lots of reports of sessions and singarounds saying they do have young people turning up in numbers before they go off to university or to take up a job and when colleges and universities break up for the long holidays, but the general pattern is for younger visitors to come in batches when the time and circumstances make it possible.

In smaller towns and rural areas the scene tends to favour the over fifties with some events now holding afternoon sessions and singarounds for the post-retirement age group. The celebration of old age (we heard an 88-year-old singer giving us that folk classic ‘Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini’ alongside some lovely traditional songs in the Cotswolds and a 92-year-old singing her heart out in Coventry) is something the sector can be rightly proud of. It is interesting to note that the average age of attendees at folk sessions and singarounds that we have visited tends towards the 60-somethings. That gap of 32 years to our singer in Coventry raises the key question ‘What are the 30-somethings who love folk music up to today?’ The answer appears to be that jobs and kids get in way of leading a folk-centred life and it is not until their late 40s that the people we have met start to recall that they used to love playing music and go out and buy themselves an instrument.

There are also several notable sessions and singarounds run by people in their late 20s and early 30s that are an exception to the rule and attract a similarly aged extended friendship group, one of note located outside Oxford acting as a mixed session and singaround with the wonderful title of the Bastard English Session, hosted by James Bell (see Bell, n.d.).

The ethnic mix of participants in all areas of the country has proven to be largely white-British and we have seen some minor differences in representation in cities with a good ethnic

mix. We met a Chinese trio in Lincolnshire; Congolese, Nigerian, Jamaican, Russian, Ukrainian, Portuguese, Peruvian, Argentinian, American, Canadian, Swiss, French, German and Polish nationals in various parts of the country; and, of course, our Scottish, Welsh and Irish musical mates were well represented. The reasons for the underrepresentation of ethnic minority music lovers in the sessions and singarounds we have seen are complex and multifaceted – for an excellent discussion on the subject, read Simon Keegan-Phipps' (2017) article on multiculturalism in English folk music. Professional folk musicians Cohen Braithwaite-Kilcoyne (2020) and Angeline Morrison (2023) have both produced resources for the EFDSS on black history and folk song, providing a serious boost to the task of showing more black and ethnic minority music lovers that they have their own unique contribution to the folk singing world.

The key to involvement appeared to be by personal invitation by someone who already attended the session or singaround, public exposure to the music by some interviewees from ethnic minority groups who just popped in for a pint or by people who described themselves as black-British and who said they felt totally at home with the mix of traditional and contemporary tunes and songs on offer.

The under-representation of ethnic minority communities was a concern shared by many of the organisers and attendees we met, as was their concern about attracting younger participants and organisers.

Old tradition – new tradition

> Standing behind the singer is the ghost of the singer they learnt the song from. Standing behind that ghost is another ghost, back to the beginning of music. For a short time this common sense is ours to learn from, to add to and then to hand on. (Chris Wood, cited in Hield, 2010, p. 63)

We all have our heroes and my own favourite happens to be Chris Wood, singer, songwriter, instrumentalist and a man who has tuned into the eternal truth of what music actually means to us to such an extent that he can sum it all up in the three pithy sentences above.

Some people will immediately take exception to the last statement about the music being 'ours to … add to and then to hand on', preferring to focus on the bit about it being 'ours to learn from' and stopping there. Learning and improving are key components of achieving sufficient competence to sing a song in mixed company with a good chance of being asked to do another one.

It is beyond the scope of this project to define what a folk song is, and we prefer to observe what people (the folk) choose to sing (the song) when they go out to a session or singaround. A handful of the 242 places visited to date describe themselves openly as 'traditional singers' nights' but we did not visit one that was not really welcoming when a participant (often a visitor) sang something more contemporary.

This surprised us at first as the received wisdom is that hard-core traditionalists are clear about what is and what is not acceptable, but we have not yet run into any of those settings. This could well be because we tend to get recommendations from locals to visit other sessions and singarounds they know that all have the same welcoming approach so in that sense our project is being steered away from the less than friendly events on the circuit.

On the other hand, we have visited a good number of sessions that featured nothing at all that could be described as a traditional folk song, unless the ever popular 'Beeswing' by Richard Thompson or John Conolly's 'Fiddler's Green' have achieved traditional status.

Most events featured a mix of traditional and more contemporary songs and tunes and the Covid crisis helped to substantiate this in an unexpected way. Like many clubs, sessions and singarounds, Zoom became the go-to platform for stuck-at-home folk music lovers and the folk club at Cecil Sharp House was no exception.

The host pressed the record button for every song that was sung during the lockdown, amassing over 3,000 songs that I was able to analyse in a quiet week. Broadly speaking, the Sharp online mix was around 45% from the traditional canon, 40% from the new tradition (songwriting post 1950) and 15% 'other', comprising pop songs of all shapes and sizes.

Peter Wilby quotes one of his survey respondents musing on this mix of traditional and contemporary songs heard in most of the sessions and singarounds we have attended:

> 'Old pop songs have become the folk songs of today. They kind of fulfil the same kind of function. We grew up with them when we were little. Whether you've heard them for years or not, you know the song. You can sing along with them, whether you thought you knew the words or not.'(in Wilby 2013, p. 118)

Whether or not the balance between traditional and contemporary song is currently at the right level to build an increasingly popular folk song sector without modern popular cultural music memes winning out remains to be seen.

Conclusions

Like many self-declared folk music practitioners, our small group was interested to know if our happy band of singers and players meeting every Thursday night at our local pub was an exception or the rule.

Several of our regular attendees reported that they were drawn in by the special feeling it gave them when they came into the pub by chance and heard people singing as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The urge to travel the country and find out what was going on in sessions and singarounds grew into the Rolling On project and the more we saw, the more we became convinced that if you wanted to find folk singers and players somewhere near you, you just had to know who to ask or which website to look on.

The challenge for our Access Folk programme is to understand more about how to describe our sector so it has broad appeal while nurturing the traditional repertoire of songs that are waiting to be discovered by like-minded people who do not know that the third great folk revival in the UK is just around the corner.

As for the Rolling On team, we will continue to collect stories, run our own sessions and singarounds, visit the hundreds of others that keep popping up and continue to play a full part in participating and observing.

My personal ambition is to keep singing in pubs until I drop dead one night in the middle of a chorus of 'Pleasant and Delightful' (Old Tradition) or perhaps Graham Moore's 'Tom Paine's Bones' (New Tradition).

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