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Abstract

Bob Fox has been performing as a folk musician since the early 1970s, when he first started playing in the folk clubs of northeast England. He then came to national and international notice as a result of a collaboration with Stu Luckley. Labelled “the progressive dynamic duo” by Melody Maker, the two parted company in 1982 and since then Fox has worked as both a solo artist and as a member of bands. During the 1990s, along with his great friend Benny Graham, he developed a songs/slide show that remembers the coal mining communities of Durham and Northumberland. This led to the CD How Are You Off For Coals, a compilation of mining songs. Bob possesses one of the best folk-singing voices in England and he evokes the world of the miners and, in general, the songs of the northeast, with power and clarity.

Keywords

folk singer, England, coal mining, unions

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When the Boat Comes In:
An Interview with Bob Fox

Interviewer: Anthony Ashbolt

[Bob Fox has been performing as a folk musician since the early 1970s, when he first started playing in the folk clubs of northeast England. He then came to national and international notice as a result of a collaboration with Stu Luckley. Labelled "the progressive dynamic duo" by *Melody Maker*, the two parted company in 1982 and since then Fox has worked as both a solo artist and as a member of bands. During the 1990s, along with his great friend Benny Graham, he developed a songs/slide show that remembers the coal mining communities of Durham and Northumberland. This led to the CD *How Are You Off For Coals*, a compilation of mining songs. Bob possesses one of the best folk-singing voices in England and he evokes the world of the miners and, in general, the songs of the northeast, with power and clarity.]

Come here, maw little Jacky,
Now aw've smoked mi backy,
Let's hev a bit o' cracky,
Till the boat comes in.

Chorus:

Dance ti' thy daddy, sing ti' thy mammy,
Dance ti' thy daddy, ti' thy mammy sing;
Thou shall hev a fishy on a little dishy,
Thou shall hev a fishy when the boat comes in

AA: I'd like you to talk a little bit about the relationship between folk music and the working class experience. Many of the songs you do are keeping alive a memory, some of which is fading, with regard to particular traditions like the mining tradition and so on. Can you tell us about that?

BF: Well, yes. When I was first drawn into folk music, I was very interested in pop music at the time. I was learning to play the guitar and I was listening to The Beatles and The Kinks and The Yardbirds and people like that and then all of a sudden I heard a Martin Carthy LP record and I heard a song called 'The Ballad of Springhill'. It was about a mining disaster in Springhill in Nova Scotia, written by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. And I suddenly thought by god what a fantastic song that is and I came from a mining area at the time and thought there must be, there's got to be some songs like, about my own area. In those days it was a little bit underground, the folk scene, so we had to go looking for it. But I found loads and loads of places, loads of little folk clubs around and that was where I first heard all the songs from my region, from the Northeast region and they were always almost all about coal mining obviously because that was the big thing. I was gob-smacked because these songs have phrases in them and they have feelings and emotions in them that come directly from the workplace, the miner's workplace. A lot of the community spirit in the Northeast of England, and I guess in other places as well, comes from the fact that the miners had to look after each other when they were at work underground. They had to watch each others' backs because it was very dangerous and it was a life threatening situation and so when they came up from work and they were on the surface and they were in normal, everyday life then they just did that as well, everybody looked after each other, you know. There's a lovely story that my mate Benny Graham tells—in those days if people came home and there was no washing, if they'd left washing out and they came home and their washing was missing from the line, it hadn't been stolen, it was just the person next door had come out and got it in for them because it was raining, or something like that. All these stories about being able to go out and leave your doors open, and stuff. That was all true. I lived at a time when that was possible and neighbourly activity and community spirit was fantastic. So a lot of the songs that talk about the work underground, a lot of the words and phrases that came into normal usage out of the workplace actually originated down underground, in the coal mines. So, everything was based on work. The fellows worked so hard that they didn't have time for any … I'm not saying that they didn't have time for crime, but

there was the odd fight, there was the odd, you know, the odd bit of crime. I mean, even when I was a kid I can remember there was a bit of honour. We're talking about honour amongst thieves … but there was a kind of thing that used to happen in a community, where if you had a disagreement then you took it outside and had a fight and then you were mates again at the end of the fight. I think that all of that's changed as those traditional industries have disappeared. I think we have a society that's a bit worse off for the fact that all of those working practices have gone because the actual industries have gone.

AA: And your singing keeps alive a memory?

BF: Well, yes. I mean, I put together this thing, this coalmining thing with Benny Graham, which involves pictures. Pictures that were taken underground and we sing the songs and we tell the stories and we show the pictures and it's a kind of living record of what happened because what they did in England as soon as they actually closed the industries, whether it be the shipyards or the steelworks or the coalmines, they sort of very, very quickly eradicated any signs that there was an industry there. They'd landscape the area, build houses on it and so there are large communities over there now in England, in the Northeast of England, certainly, that don't really know where they've come from. You know, they exist and they exist mainly because of that heavy industry that was there, the coalmines, the shipyards, all that stuff. But I think that, personally, one of the reasons why we have so much trouble with the younger generation growing up is that they have no idea where they have come from and I think if you've got no idea where you come from, then you've got no idea where you are going.

AA: So historical memory is very important?

BF: I think so, yes. When I first started to sing I used to sing almost entirely traditional songs because it was what I was interested in and the stories were great. They were universal truths, you know. They were a little bit like parables. You know, folk songs and the old ballads are kind of parables, the things that we can learn from. And then I turned to people who were creating songs, song-writers who were creating songs using that … I mentioned the word this afternoon, using the traditional song template for story-telling songs, songs that are about events and I

think that's very important.

AA: And you particularly mentioned Ewan McColl and he was a central part of that scene.

BF: I think he was one of the first people to actually start writing songs that might be thought of as traditional songs because he was a great collector of songs. He had a fantastic repertoire. He knew the ballads, he knew all sorts of traditional Scots and English songs and Irish songs and he used that knowledge very well to write his own songs. And like I said in the concert this afternoon he didn't take that role lightly. I don't think he took the role lightly, he would always go back to the group of people that he was writing about and he would sing the song to them and try and get approval.

AA: These are the work songs?

BF: Yes, the fishing songs and the steam train songs and all that, the radio ballads, that he did.

AA: And he also did songs of struggle, as you do yourself.

BF: He was very much into the protest thing as well. I mean that was the thing of the day. That was a little bit before my time. But, you know, the Ban the Bomb and all that stuff, yes.

AA: But as you develop musically did song writing go in a different direction away from working class experience more towards other things or was there still that strong class element?

BF: I think what's happened is that there have been songwriters who have come along and done things that are not sort of working class based or related but there are also many people who are continuing that tradition. Jez Lowe is a fantastic example of that today. Going back earlier, there was the miner Tommy Armstrong. Tommy Armstrong was alive in the 1800s and he was a working coalminer so he contributed very much to the continuation of songs. He was one of the first ones that you can actually credit a song to … before that nobody knew where they came from but Tommy Armstrong was one of the first ones that people said, oh hey Tommy Armstrong wrote that one. I mean he didn't know about it in his own lifetime but he was one. And then after that came people from England like Ed Pickford from Sunderland, Jock Purdon. Jock Purdon died about three or four years ago but he wrote loads of songs about,

mostly about the working class struggle. But I think what also happened was the audiences have changed as well over the, I suppose, the last twenty years, well thirty years … I've been doing this for thirty years professionally and when I started the standpoint of the folk singer was very left wing, very protest, very working class and I've noticed over the thirty years that I've been doing it that audiences are less willing to take a lot of that kind of stuff.

AA: Really?

BF: Yes, Yes. And I think, well I think, I think audiences perceive, the general public perceive things to have got better than all of that stuff that was being protested about and being sung about. And things haven't actually got better, I don't think, I think its just got covered up and people have got distracted into this world thing that happens now.

AA: So there's no such thing as class even in Britain these days.

BF: Well that's what the governments would have you believe. You know the governments, and the royal family and all that, they all, everybody, everybody sort of tries to convince the working class that everybody is the same and that they are not the working class, they don't even call them the working class anymore. You know the working class are now what they call the middle class in England.

AA: And you've got particular hatred for, contempt for, Margaret Thatcher obviously, but that continues through to Tony Blair, doesn't it?

BF: Well it does, but I mean the hatred for Margaret Thatcher is mainly because of what she did to the miners because my particular area was almost devastated by her actions. She set family members against each other in the northeast, you know you would have sons going to work and fathers being on picket duty and the other way around and it split families, it split marriages, it was a real devastating situation … plus I firmly believe, that her actions during that 84–85 strike, and other things that she did as well during that government, changed English society, British society forever, for the worse.

AA: And changed the Labour Party too, in a sense.

BF: Well the problem was, the problem with the Labour Party now, I think, is that the only way that they could become

electable was to move away from their left wing views because, like I say, the general public, the audiences I noticed were less willing to sort of accept the left wing ideas in songs as well you know. I used to sing quite a lot of stuff, quite a lot of the coal mining and the union songs and you get, you do sometimes get audiences saying 'come on man, that's old, old hat, we don't want that, it's the old cloth cap situation'. You know you're a cloth cap Labour party man, which is what I am. And so I started to sort of temper what I did with you know some traditional songs, some songs that weren't quite so heavy but slot them in every now and again and I think a lot of artists do that.

AA: How do you make a song about a heroic stockbroker for instance?

BF: Yes, yes, slaving away in the stock market all day, making, selling and buying his… yes, yes. Well I don't know but the fall of the stock market would be a great disaster song.

AA: Well indeed. I was talking to Alistair Hulett recently and he was quite optimistic about the folk protest tradition and it being revived because of Iraq and in a number of songs that were, and even in pop songs that were coming out, there were sort of protest songs, there must be something to that?

BF: Well I think if you want to look for who is writing the folk songs of the next generation then you really need to look at the pop scene as well because when you look at some of the best traditional songs they were brand new songs one day. They were the brand new songs, they were the pop songs of the day. The big difference these days, I think, is that the pop music industry is an industry and the songs are normally written in order to produce a hit record, in order to produce a lot of money, for the band, for their song writer, for their record company, for their this, for their that, for the other. So they're not actually … for a lot of the time they've got no depth, no meaning, whereas the songs that I've always been interested in have been songs that take a bit of thinking about, you know, they take a bit of understanding and they make points and their tell stories.

AA: They challenge you to think?

BF: Yes. I mean I agree with Alistair. I think there's a big upsurge in interest in, we should call it acoustic music,

folk music whatever you want to call it. There's a big upsurge in Britain in interest in the traditional songs and the singer-songwriters, which is very encouraging because it does mean that people are no longer being led by the nose, by the major record companies into liking this kind of music because it's pumped at them 24 hours a day at the radio stations. A lot of people are beginning to reject that and they're looking for this one man and a guitar situation where it's a solo voice and the material that that sort of voice is singing is challenging.

AA: So the tradition, you think, has a positive future?

BF: Absolutely, oh yes, yes. There's some great, there are some really good young artists coming through now and that's good because one of the things that we all notice as artists, I think, is that you have an audience which is kind of your age … as an artist I've noticed when I was in my twenties the people who came to see me were in their twenties, and when I was in my thirties, the people who came to see me were in their thirties, and now that I'm in my fifties, the people who come to see me are in their fifties. And so you've got to hope that what happened to me is happening to the new generation of folk artists. You know, the ones who are in their twenties are attracting the kids of the twenties. I mean there are no kids of twenty year old that are going to come and see me.

AA: Now, why do you think that is? Why can't twenty-year-olds, generally speaking and including my children, appreciate your music?

BF: Maybe if you played them people like Kate Rusby and Eliza Carthy and other younger artists because they actually appeal to the younger people simply because they are young people themselves, I think. You won't encourage young people in their twenties to come and see what I do because there's a barrier straight away, you know, because I'm old, I'm in my fifties. They're going to say, well there can't be anything interesting there. But, if there was someone in their twenties that was singing the same songs as me, they would probably go and see them and they would probably come to you and say, oh, you should hear this bloke, you know, you should hear these songs. So that's very encouraging.

AA: In the course I teach on the sixties in America I play a lot

of Phil Ochs and it's quite surprising the way that students are just fascinated by that material and how he sings a song written in 1965 ('Cops of the World') which could be written today about American imperialism.

BF: That's right, absolutely, yes, yes.

AA: You can revive the interest if they're kind of forced to listen to it, as I sit them there and say you've got to be quiet and just play it.

BF: I think what I was trying to say when I was on about the fact that the pop music that people are encouraged to like is shallow and meaningless because it's designed to make money, whereas the people who are writing songs like Phil Ochs did and a lot of the songs that Ewan McColl wrote as well … if you sing them today, they remain the same as they did thirty years ago when they wrote them. They have the same power and there's a lot of them that don't. There's a lot of songs that don't have that meaning, you know, these pop songs, they're transitory. You know, they're there just for one minute, they make a load of money, they make the band a load of money, you know, and then all of a sudden that band's gone and there's another band in their place who are exactly the same as that band was. And the only thing that stays constant in that is the people above all of that, the major controllers who make all the money.

AA: I mean there is a real difference between the kind of music celebrity that you've got now, which is kind of like a fashion celebrity or a film star celebrity or whatever and the sort of folk troubadours of the 60s who were celebrities of a sort but had a different relationship to their audience it seems to me, not just a money making one.

BF: That's right and I think the establishment was very scared of people like that. You know, the likes of Tom Paxton, who was one of the first ones to come over to Britain singing songs that poked fingers at things. But I mean Woody Guthrie as well, if you're talking about American people. So yes, I think the traditions are still there. We were talking about Jez Lowe this morning and Jez is one person whose not scared to, you know, write songs that make very serious points about what's happened in the northeast of England and in other places as well.

AA: Jez Lowe told a most amusing story story when he was last in Australia about the film and the musical *Billy*

Elliot, which is set in the region you and he come from. The climax of his tale was that the producers of the stage musical chose that great northeastern working class roots man Elton John to write the songs for it.

BF: *Billy Elliot* was actually filmed in and around the place where Jez comes from, and I think some of the shots were even from my village. Jez and I were born and brought up in villages six miles from each other, six or eight miles, both pit villages and *Billy Elliot* was filmed all around that area. I think there is a stage musical of the story of Billy Elliot, yes. But I mean the thing is this—the number of times that there are great opportunities to use either traditional music or music by people like Jez, the number of times that those opportunities are wasted by the people who make the films and make the TV programmes … it's all the time, all the time. I see things that are great, the great things, the drama's great, they're making all the right points, and then the music's awful.

AA: They haven't got the music right.

BF: Yes, there was a thing on the telly in England recently that was about the miners' strike in Yorkshire, the 84–85 strike, and it was set in Yorkshire and the person that got the job of doing the music was Sinead O'Connor. I mean what's she going to do with it? You know, a bald-headed Irish woman … probably the reason she got the job was because she's one of these huge superstars who has made an album recently of folk songs. And it got highly acclaimed in the music press because she's Sinead O'Connor, and I heard it and it's awful. You know what I mean, I think it's awful.

AA: One of the songs you played evoked memories for all of us of a particular generation, the memories of the English television series *When the Boat Comes In*. Could you tell us a little about that song 'Dance to Your Daddy', also known as 'When the Boat Comes In'?

BF: Well as far as I know it's always been regarded as a traditional song from the northeast of England but I think it probably exists in lots of different areas because I've heard lots of versions of it and I think it probably comes from the old thing that used to happen during the herring fishing and that was that the herring gutters, the women who were the fish gutters … the herring gutters would

travel from Aberdeen, I think it started off in Aberdeen, and they would follow the fishing fleet as the fishing fleet went out to follow the herring and then they would come in further down the coast. They would travel down the land so that they were there when the fishing fleet came in and they would travel all the way from Aberdeen down to Great Yarmouth which is a distance of, I don't know, 400 miles or something, maybe more than that. And I think the Scots would claim 'Dance to Your Daddy' but certainly the northeastern people would claim it as a northeastern song. I've always heard it as a northeastern song. My mum used to sing it and not only did she used to sing the song but it's the kind of, it's a philosophy thing, it was always a hopeful philosophy. The phrase 'when the boat comes in' always conjured up the image that, you know, things were going to get better when the boat comes in. Because when the boat comes in it brings a catch of something, you know, and its very interesting because all the way through the song it talks about the ordinary things that fishing fleet might bring in, like haddock and mackerel, a herring, a bloater, and then the final thing which is the fish that everybody was hoping that they would get, the thing that was really, really special in those days was the salmon. And the salmon is like the cheapest fish you can get today and you will pay much more money for a cod than you will for a salmon in England. Cod and haddock are becoming rare now as they are becoming overfished. With regard to the television series, it was a huge hit and when I first started doing gigs outside the northeast in the mid 70s … whenever I went to an area outside the northeast, and said hello and started to talk, the whole kind of murmur around was oh, when the boat comes in, when the boat comes in, that's were he's from, you know.