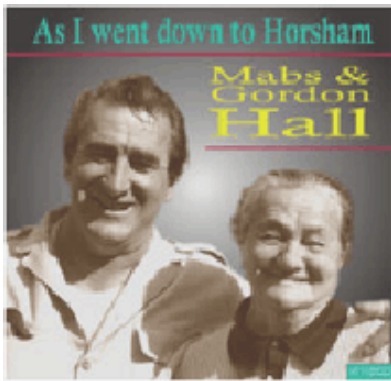


Mabs & Gordon Hall - AS I WENT DOWN TO HORSHAM (Veteran)



The Hall family of Horsham, West Sussex was a singing family, yet unlike the members of other more well-known "singing families", Mabs and her four sons would sing mostly at family gatherings; they did not frequent folk clubs, and not all their songs were folk songs.

One of the sons, Gordon, developed his own arguably quite idiosyncratic singing style entirely independently of the "folk" scene, for he had no specific knowledge of that scene until a visit to a folk club in the early 1980s and a chance reading of a folk magazine article about Bob Copper, whom he subsequently visited with his mother.

These occurrences made him realise that his mother's "quaint old songs" were more important than he'd hitherto realised, and so he devoted his retirement to researching these and other songs from the folk corpus.

Word got round about Gordon's dynamic singing and unusual songs, and Mike Yates recorded both Gordon and his mother in the mid-1980s.

Gordon (who died in 2000) was a fine singer indeed, with a truly unmistakable, forthright and intensely commanding (and loud!) delivery and a rich, full tone. Some distinctive features of his style (such as his penchant for emphasising ends of lines with an exaggerated "ya") verge on mannerism, and not everyone will warm to his singing (some folks found it positively intimidating!), but I find it easier to get used to than the interpretive quirks of some other more widely feted traditional singers and in the end Gordon's striking individuality and his compelling passion amply win through any initial misgivings.

Mabs was a singer of charm and character too, and although by the time she was recorded (then in her 80s) she lacked the evenness of tone and delivery with which Gordon was blessed she was still in remarkably good voice. The drawback was that by that time she had forgotten many of her songs, and so the majority of these recordings of Mabs are either short songs (including fascinating variants such as Cecilia) or fragmentary performances.

This disc has 28 tracks, out of which Mabs gives us 16 songs and one decidedly macabre little poem, whereas Mabs duets with Gordon on just two selections (including a strange

- to our Coppered ears! - variant of *Come Write Me Down*).

The remaining ten songs present Gordon in typically formidable full fettle, and although he was known for singing the fullest versions of his songs he would equally readily crop or omit verses in performance depending on his mood or how he was being received. Having said that, none of his renditions ever seem to drag or go on too long - you can decide for yourself on the marathon (eight-minute) rendition of *The Molecatcher* or the comparatively brief six-minute *Outlandish Knight and Horsham Ram* - a variant of the famous Derby beast. Gordon's take on *The Bitter Whaling* (amusingly typo-ed as *Wailing* on the outer track list!) *Grounds* is suitably persuasive, and economic at just two and a half minutes, while his gloriously stentorian *Sweet Lavender* street-cry would certainly persuade me to buy his wares! One or two of his performances (eg *Blandford In The Mud*, *Salonika*) verge on the "shouty" maybe, but I'd much rather hear this kind of unbridled involvement with a song any day than experience an anodyne rendition.

In fact, I find Gordon's singing both captivating and hugely enjoyable; if you do too, then I'd urge you to acquire his solo CD *Good Things Enough* (on the *Country Branch* label, and also available from *Veteran's* mail order service), also seeking out the four other *Veteran* releases which include tracks by him.

Even if you're not totally won over, you can't deny the importance of this treasurable release (which by the way comes with the usual excellent, fulsome standard of booklet) in bringing to our attention two under-appreciated traditional singers.

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