

Ray Padgett – Traditionalist English Songs (Own Label, CD RP. 01/02)



There can't be many habitués of the folk scene (especially that of our beloved South Yorkshire) who haven't come across the estimable Ray Padgett from Barnsley, one of the region's most distinctive traditional-style acappella singers, who's always a very welcome pint-sized (I use that phrase advisedly!) presence at any singers' gathering whether locally or further afield. Although he's been a fixture of the South Yorkshire folk scene for more years than he'd care to admit, and singing for even longer, I think it was around 7 or 8 years ago that Ray finally got round to bringing out a CD

of his singing, which was (optimistically!) titled *Stand Up Raymond, Volume 1*. Sadly, its (apocryphal?) sequel, *Volume 2 (Hitch Up Thy Trousers Raymond)*, never actually saw the light of day... But the lengthy wait has at last borne fruit, not just in Ray's sterling long-term commitment to the vitally-important ongoing Yorkshire Garland project, but now in this handsome two-disc collection, a proud labour-of-love where under one convenient roof Ray has harvested for us a bumper crop, a veritable treasury of song that's nothing short of invaluable on so many counts. The connoisseur of traditional song will recognise that Ray has taken his cue and inspiration from Rod Stradling's Musical Traditions label, on whose acclaimed series of releases he's respectfully modelled the basic presentation of his own. So even before you place the discs in your player, there's a wondrous 28-page A5 booklet to peruse, whetting your appetite for the aural delights of the two well-filled CDs within the jewel-case itself: 49 songs in total, with a total playing-time of close on 2½ hours – now there's true pound-stretching Barnsley value for you!

At long last, here's a take-home-and-savour edition of the repertoire of Ray Padgett, performed by the master! It was recorded, by Matt Nelson, at Ray's own home just last November, and unerringly captures Ray's no-nonsense WYHIWYG delivery and vibrant personality, without indulging in any post-production studio manipulation; and this is exactly as it should be. And in characteristic manner, each song is (quite properly) audibly back-credited by Ray as part of the performance. But don't be fooled by the attractive cover shot of Ray with his trusty concertina, for although at sessions he'll doodle away happily on that instrument in picking out the melody to a song as a preamble to the singing, the set's 49 songs are performed entirely unaccompanied. Now I'm only too aware that such a fearsome dose of pure unadulterated unaccompanied singing tends (though entirely unfairly IMHO) to be regarded as the province of the diehard specialist and a real turnoff for any other music lover – but although (for any record label) producing an album like this is considered a resolutely non-commercial proposition, the guiding philosophy (as confirmed by labels like Veteran and Musical Traditions) is that it still needs to have been made, and made available, not least for its importance in enshrining for posterity Ray's unique singing style voicing a typical range of material, and of course in preserving the songs themselves.

In common with the source singers from whom Ray derives his own natural role (and inspiration) as a song-carrier within today's revival, the material encompasses several different categories. We encounter plenty of "truly traditional" songs, some often intriguing (and sometimes purely local or regional) variants of well-known traditional ballads and broadsides, as well as a number of overtly comic pieces and items from the music-hall tradition, topped up with a handful of choice contemporary songs written in (and now fast becoming part of) today's own tradition. A highlight of the latter category is Kay Sutcliffe's

Coal Not Dole, for which Ray has composed an entirely apt new melody that IMHO far better reflects the sentiment than the original tune. And singaround devotees will be intrigued by Ray's rendition of Miner's Life, which gives it a thoughtful dimension aside from the usual tub-thumping Wilsonian anthem.

There are some priceless songs here, including many which will be significant discoveries for any keen researcher, and Ray's cordial and occasionally anecdotal booklet notes illuminate many dark corners as to their origins. Each song is delivered to us in Ray's inimitable stylish (yes, some might also say quite stylised) manner. For, once heard, you'll never mistake Ray's singing for anyone else's, and this set is a well-balanced collection of what I can only describe as "typically Padgetty" renditions; he often has his own quirky version of "received pronunciation" (yes, RP!), and a slightly nasal quality to his delivery, while (as he'd probably be the first to agree) one or two of his personal idiosyncrasies can verge on mannerism or even affectation, but – as with any singer worth his salt – this is all part of the charm and what gives his singing true character. More important is the level of conviction Ray brings to his chosen songs, his belief in the message and his unswerving intent to carry the story across to the listener. And there can be no denying that while he treats his songs with respect, he derives enormous fun from the singing and communication – there's invariably a cheeky twinkle in his voice that betrays his bright-eyed (puckish) involvement in the story and his eagerness in its telling. And as always, a hallmark of Ray's singing is the clarity of enunciation, the precision in his diction.

Maybe I was a touch surprised at how relatively little Ray's interpretations seem to have changed generally since the time of his earlier CD (all but one of whose selections have been re-recorded for the new set), but a good number of them have since shorn half a minute or so in terms of playing-time and yet don't seem to be any more hurried or rushed in the new set. What I've personally noticed in Ray's performances of late is his more frequent departure from the (predictable or) strictly metrical line, creating an altogether freer and almost conversational delivery that often takes unexpected liberties with bar-lines or phrases – especially on some of the chorus songs on the disc (after all, you might feel that a CD is primarily for listening rather than joining-in). There's nothing wrong with this "considered individuality", of course – all the classic source singers have their own personal quirks, after all – and it can work very well. But on the other hand I was disturbed by Ray's decision to omit the chorus entirely between its first and last appearances, on Dave Evardson's North Wall, Henry Clements' Orgreave and the traditional Poacher's Fate; I can appreciate this may have been done for expediency and playing-time reasons, but to my mind it does seriously mar the impact of these fine songs that so richly deserve this exposure.

One other feature that also reduces the potential impact of the songs, and of the discs as a whole, is the apparent lack of consideration given to the optimum aesthetic sequencing of the songs, for they just seem to be almost arbitrarily shoved together. There seems to have been an observance of an alphabetical order for the largest portion of each individual disc, but the logic of this gambit eludes me and makes little practical sense as far as I can see. In addition, no regard is paid to musical issues such as relative key-centres, and so consecutive songs sometimes "jar" at first. And some tracks follow too quickly on from previous ones, with little or no breathing space (eg Rigs Of London Town to Rolling In The Grass).

In terms of actual performance quality, although Ray's singing is very much consistent in manner and technique, there are instances where his pitching can be curiously wandersome, either momentarily or over the course of a verse (although he usually manages to pull back to

the home key just fine!); on Butter And Cheese And All he even shifts key altogether midway through the first verse. And there are a few songs which plainly feel just a tad rushed, Ray's interpretation not appearing entirely formed or "sung in" (the tale of Glossop Road is peculiarly unconvincing here for instance – though I'm sure I've heard him sing it better live); and yet it's also clear that he's been comfortably singing most of these songs for years and is thoroughly familiar with their contours and import.

I'm reluctant to criticise the actual package, especially since it looks so good and so much effort has obviously been expended on it, but such is a reviewer's duty, and thus I must highlight a number of matters of detail that if attended to would I believe have turned a commendable product into an exceptional one. The booklet, which contains full texts for the songs performed, is de-rigueur for this type of presentation, standing comparison with issues of source singers and field recordings from the MT stable (while not attaining the glossier, commercially-produced status of Veteran and Topic, of course). Inevitably, occasional errors such as minor typos will creep in (Ray manfully owns up to all word-processing errors – we're all human after all!), but there are one or two editorial howlers that I'm sure could have been avoided (e.g. "yolk" in place of "yoke" in Nobleman And The Thresher, and the misspelling of the place-name as Kirby Steven). There's also a small number of instances of inconsistency, betwixt lyric and background note, in the titling of songs – eg Manchester Cornstalk/The Cornstalks, What's The Life Of A Man/The Leaf, (Poor) Crippled Miner, Nobleman's/Another Man's Wedding – and also in the identity of authorship (eg. Old Brown's Daughter is audibly credited as trad, but in the notes to another song entirely is referred to as being written by G.W. Hunt, which itself is a "disputed fact"...). And considering Ray's evident penchant for research and desire to educate today's song collectors (as well as entertain his audiences), it comes as a surprise that some songs are bereft of any background note at all.

More seriously however (and this is important to the listener/reader and the researcher/student of song alike), the layout of the booklet is at times quite untidy, sections of Ray's background note being split from their songs and continued almost arbitrarily across various columns, on occasion even appearing on a completely different page to the song lyric. I also believe the background notes would have been more easily locatable (and certainly better distinguishable from the lyrics) if a variation in font had been employed. Arguably the most disorienting feature, however, is that the order of songs as presented in the booklet is not contiguous with that heard on the discs themselves (which is, however, correctly reproduced on both the CD inlay tray and the booklet's back cover). It would, I feel, have been more helpful to provide at least a simple page-reference-by-title guide-cum-index to facilitate location of the songs within the booklet. Steve Gardham has supplied a useful concordance-index at the back of the booklet, which gives corresponding Roud and Child reference numbers for around two-thirds of the selections; however, the table entries columns have unfortunately been misaligned with the track titles.

In conclusion (and despite the "ha'porth of tar" shortcomings outlined above, which will not matter to everybody), this is an enjoyable and entertaining release which represents both a real personal achievement for Ray and an indispensable archive resource; Ray is thus to be heartily congratulated for his initiative. Notwithstanding any issues of consistency, his are interpretations of quiet stature which can hold their own with – and sometimes in their own way surpass – allcomers. Examples of Ray's singing would form a natural inclusion in any future Voice Of The People-type anthology – and that kind of compliment alone should be sufficient recommendation. (Footnote: Ray's not alone of course, for there are a number of

other fine local-based source singers who should be recorded for posterity before it's too late: singers who, like Ray, wholeheartedly embrace the song-carrier role and have our traditional heritage at their heart but recognise, and are equally unafraid to tackle, contemporary songs composed in the tradition.)

The set is available from Ray himself 68 Longcauseway, Barnsley S71 2JA or tel. 01226-284927, for only £10 + £2 P&P. Contact him at padgettray@yahoo.co.uk