

Remembering Roy Harris

A personal tribute by Pete Castle

I was really pleased to be asked to write this appreciation of Roy Harris who I have described as my best mate and my mentor. I could have written a normal, factual obituary, putting in all the dates and achievements, but anyone could do that and it wouldn't do Roy justice so, instead, I thought I'd write a personal account of our relationship. Being personal, it will paint a slightly different picture to that which others of you might have produced but I think a lot of you, particularly if you are a performer, will find a lot to identify with.

I first met Roy Harris in about 1973. At the time, I was one of the residents at Carlton Folk Club in Nottingham and we had him as our guest. I hadn't met him before but at the end of the evening he asked me what I was doing at the weekend. "If you've got nothing on, would you fancy driving me to a gig?" he asked. Roy didn't drive and either went by public transport or got someone to drive him. He had a store of tales about his younger days when he hitchhiked and would have to spend hours waiting for a ride in the snow in the middle of nowhere and suchlike adventures. I think that first trip was to a club in Gloucestershire - maybe Dursley?

Over the next 40 years, I drove him all over the country from Teesside to London. Those rides were learning experiences for me. It was as the hours and miles rolled by that we discussed music and performing. After the club, we analysed the evening, discussed the floor singers, how the evening had been run and so on - what was good, what wasn't. It was an important part of my apprenticeship. The other part was watching Roy work and picking up tips on the art of performance. Some of his tricks worked for me,



some didn't, because Roy and I are very different performers. Overall, I suppose, it was what being 'professional' means which stuck most - the responsibilities and seriousness of it. By 1978, I had gone professional myself and the clubs I drove Roy to were a core part of my circuit. There are a lot of other people around who have had similar experiences.

Roy Harris started his professional career in 1964. As well as touring as a guest artist, he was also involved in organising a couple of very influential folk clubs: in Cardiff - the first folk club in Wales - and,

more famously, the Nottingham Traditional Music Club. Between 1976 and 1980 he was also the director of the Loughborough Folk Festival which later developed into the National. His message in the 1979 programme sums up Roy's approach to folk music: It "is a weekend set up to celebrate folk and its people. There are no stars, no main event, no greater or lesser stage, no more prestige in the concert hall than in the lecture theatre, and you, the visitors, are equally as important as the artists." The artists he booked covered the spectrum, from Billy Atkinson and Fred Jordan

to Martin Carthy and Ar Log, Muckram Wakes and Bert Lloyd. In 1978 and 79, he also included a Fringe to showcase some up-and-coming young singers and players. I was pleased to be included alongside people like Johnny Collins, Tim Laycock and Hot Vultures.

Everything seemed to be going well for Roy. He'd even appeared at the Royal Albert Hall. (Question: how does a little, solo figure with no instruments cope on that huge stage? Answer: you wear a red sweatshirt, get everyone singing and pretty soon it's as cosy as your front room!)

But then came the 1980s which were a very difficult time for Roy. For most of that decade I was living in Luton so I was a bit out of touch. I only saw Roy occasionally, so the details are a bit vague. There were a lot of problems linked to finance and work. The folk scene was contracting and changing, so bookings were harder to get. Elaine lost her job. To make matters worse, the BBC started on a reorganisation and closed Roy's *Copperplate Music Show* on Radio Nottingham, making the Radio Derby show, *Folkwaves*, into a regional show. Roy took this hard. He loved doing his show and was good at it - at least the music and chat side, he struggled a bit with the technical side, unlike his son, Neil, who went on to become a sound engineer and a bit of a technical whizz!

The stress of all this led to a health crisis. It was partly physical - he lost his voice and had all kinds of throat problems - and partly mental - a sort of agoraphobia which is not good for a performer! Then there was a minor stroke. He very much shut himself away and didn't see anybody. I would quite often drop in if I was passing (J25

of the M1 was a good place to take a break) and sometimes Elaine said he wasn't up to it. Overall, he was pleased to be kept up to date with the folk club gossip.

Roy did eventually recover and return to performing but his voice was never the Rolls Royce instrument it had been before. I remember some gigs where he could hardly sing at all. He got by through his stagecraft and by the good will of the audiences. I don't know whether anyone else could have done it. The journey home was then the awkward task of consoling him, saying "no, it wasn't as bad as that, the audience didn't notice", and stopping him from getting too despondent about it.

Roy found it very hard to cope with ill health. He came from a tough working class background and illness was alien to him. He had always been fit. He ran no end of marathons - I've no idea how many, it could easily be 10 or more, some of them with Elaine. Before their marriage, Roy had done his national service in the army and then enlisted in the RAF as a PT instructor. He'd represented the RAF in 'bayonet fencing' (whatever that is!) at the 1956 Royal Tournament and, when he was a teenager, had had a trial for his beloved Nottingham Forest. So he was fit and strong although he gave the impression of being small, plump and cuddly and often signed his autographs with a little figure made up of a couple of circles with arms, legs and a smile. It was just that he had a round face rather like one of his early influences - Burl Ives.

As the years passed Roy developed diabetes which grew increasingly serious and meant a serious overhaul of his eating habits - breakfast became muesli

with fruit juice, the number of drinks he'd consume at a gig diminished... (Another of Roy's stories - he used to drink like his dad, two at a time, one in each hand. When he asked his dad why he did so, he replied that it was "because of the accident." "What accident, Dad?" asked Roy. "I once had one knocked over!" came the reply.) The biggest change though, was that after the gig, we didn't scour unknown towns looking for a chippy which was still open or stop off at the Services for an all-day-breakfast!

By the early 1990s I was back in Derby and Roy was back on top of things and he launched a new project, a new folk club. I think he had it all planned out in detail before anyone else knew about it so it started with a bang in February 1991 and built on his past organising experiences. It flew in the face of how the folk scene was going at that time as it again honoured source singers and the traditional end of the revival (although, when you think about it there is a huge range of music within that.) The guests on the first night were Benny Graham and the Elliots of Birtley - not names guaranteed to draw in the general public or even casual folkies, but to everyone's surprise it was a huge success. Traditions At The Tiger met in a large room over the Tiger public house in Long Eaton and that large room was almost always comfortably full and 'house full' signs were by no means rare. It started promptly at 7.30pm, which meant that Roy could get round a lot of floor singers while making sure the guests got their full time too. The club is still going successfully 25 years later at the Stumble Inn, just up the road from its original home. A list of the artists who have performed at TATT is like a Who's Who of the folk scene - or the end of the folk scene who play and sing folk songs anyway!

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An off shoot of Traditions At The Tiger was Tales At The Tiger, which Roy started the following year. A new storytelling scene was beginning to appear and although Roy was a great raconteur and liked storytelling, he didn't feel that stories always worked in a folk club setting, mainly because they often need more time and a more relaxed atmosphere. He described the Tales club as "a failure, but a proud failure", which is a bit hard on himself.

After a year or so, Roy left the area to go back to Cardiff leaving the clubs in safe hands. The song club continues as you've read above, run by a committee. I took over Tales, but soon decided to move the venue. Roy had always said that one of the biggest difficulties was the size of the room. We ran on for a year or so in a much better space until one evening we turned up and found ourselves locked out and the owner unwilling to open up! I decided to knock it on the head then, a thing I later regretted.

That move back to Cardiff in 1994 took Roy and Elaine back into the bosom of their family. Although Roy was Sandiacre born and bred, Elaine was from Cardiff and their son, Neil, was also based there with his family. In Cardiff, Roy was happy in the midst of his 'tribe'. Roy and Elaine were devoted to each other (they were married for nearly 60 years) and he loved and was proud of his grandchildren and, later, his great-grandchildren, and was quick to regale you with their exploits. I particularly remember his pride/wonder/surprise when the first 'Harris' went to university!

Touring was more difficult from Wales but Roy continued to do so although, as his health deteriorated, you had to be prepared for cancellations. The

last time I worked with him was at Tenterden Folk Festival in Kent in 2010. He was on good form and enjoyed himself. One of the events we did together was a 'Meet' where I interviewed him in front of an audience. I've done the same with a lot of other people over the years but Roy must be the easiest ever. When you interviewed him you introduced him, asked him a question, and then sat back for an hour while he covered everything you would have wanted. Then you found a suitable stopping point, said thank you, and wound it up! A real professional.

So what is Roy Harris' legacy? A look through the internet comes up with surprisingly little and there's hardly anything on YouTube. He recorded possibly 10 albums (with the odd track on several others) but he was the first to say that the recording studio was not his favourite setting. My favourite Roy Harris album is the 1975 Topic LP, *Champions Of Folly*, on which he was joined by Martin Carthy on guitar, Bobby Campbell on fiddle and Vic Gammon on melodeon and concertina. His ambition was to do a live album and he could have done a great one but, unfortunately, the one he did do (*Live At The Lion* for Wildgoose) came at a time when his voice and confidence were low.

Rather than some artefact in a museum or a work in an archive, Roy Harris' legacy is a living one - the huge number of singers who continue his work. Almost every singer of my generation pays tribute to the help and support Roy has given us and to the opportunities he has opened up for us. His influence will continue as long as people are singing folk songs in a setting anything like a folk club or festival.