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## English Folk Music as World Music

Dr Trish Winter and Dr Simon Keegan-Phipps

There has been, building over the last 10 years or so, a resurgence of interest in English folk arts – that is, in folk or traditional music, and dance that explicitly, often emphatically, identifies itself as *English*. Folk festivals in England have become increasingly popular; an increasing number of professional folk acts are foregrounding their Englishness; and it is now easier to secure bookings for English bands in England than for Irish or Celtic-identified bands (Alan Bearman, interview, 11 March 2008). The profile of folk has increased beyond the boundaries of the folk scene: folk artists have been nominated for Mercury Music Awards (Rachel Unthank in 2009; Seth Lakeman in 2006); the young English folk musician Jim Moray supported pop star Will Young on his 2003 UK tour; and the 2008 BBC proms featured a ‘folk day’ in which English acts were prominent. The media profile of folk has shifted too, with greater media visibility for folk within arts and cultural programming (such as BBC2’s *The Culture Show*) and popular entertainment shows (for example: *Later with Jools Holland*; *The Paul O’Grady Show*).

This paper will examine a related tendency towards the framing of English folk or traditional music as world music. We will describe this discursive and idiomatic

movement towards world music, with specific reference to the band The Imagined Village, before going on to consider what it means for English folk music to be reframed in this way, and in particular to examine the constructions of Englishness that are associated with it.

The discourse of ‘English folk music as world music’ has emerged and developed over the last decade. It appears to enter into public circulation in April 1997 with the publication of an issue of *Folk Roots* magazine with the headline reading ‘England: last undiscovered exotic outpost of World Music.’ *Folk roots* (now *fRoots*) is a world music magazine produced in England; the lead article, by music journalist Colin Irwin, ‘celebrates a culture every bit as exotic as the most distant of World Music destinations’ (Irwin, 1997, p. 36), and argues that *Folk Roots* has brought its readers exotic music from all over the globe, but has ignored the exotic within its own culture – England. Emphasising the bizarre and the eccentric within English traditions, the cover features images of the Bacup Britannia coconut dancers, men with blacked up faces, white hooped skirts, feathers and coconuts on their heads. The article itself is illustrated with images including the antler-wearing Abbots Bromley

Horn Dancers, ‘the single most bizarre curio in a nation full of them’ (Irwin, 1997, p. 37) (1).

In 1997 Folk Roots was able to characterise English traditional culture as ‘undiscovered’ within the world music industry. In subsequent years, however, it has become well and truly discovered by the genre: we now see, for example, the booking of some higher-profile English folk acts in world music contexts such as the WOMAD festivals, and we also see English folk acts beginning sometimes to describe themselves in this way. For example, the band Bellowhead had the descriptor ‘English World Music’ attached to their website in 2007. In contradistinction to the conventional positioning of English folk music, the world music genre can be generally regarded as a more commercially-orientated cultural realm – an integral facet of the wider mainstream music industry (see for instance: Taylor, 1997; Frith 2000; Feld, 2005) The current resurgence of English folk music is occurring in close alignment with a developing ‘folk industry’ (of which detailed discussion falls outside the scope of this paper), and it is possible to track the allegiance of English folk music with world music as a move into a more mainstream cultural context.

### **The Imagined Village**

The band The Imagined Village is the act perhaps most

closely associated with this alignment of English folk with world music, and is unique in that it is arguably born directly out of this discourse. Launched in 2007 at the WOMAD world music festival, the band is the brainchild of world music producer and musician Simon Emmerson. Emmerson’s professional musical background began in popular music during the 1980s, when he played with the jazz/soul group Working Week. However, his most significant work has been as a producer and performer in the world music genre: in 1992 he produced Manu Dibango’s acid jazz album *Polysonik*, and in 1996 he was nominated for a Grammy Award for his production of Baaba Maal’s album *Firin’ in Fouta*; in the early 1990s he formed the globally successful fusion act Afro Celt Sound System who have gone on to sell over 1.2 million albums and receive two Grammy Award nominations (Real World Records, 2009).

The Imagined Village project has encompassed an album and live touring performances since 2007. The project claims to

*‘recast age-old traditions in the shape of the twenty-first century. A daring mix of ancient and modern, The Imagined Village fuses fiddles and squeezebox with dub beats and sitars.’*

*(The Imagined Village, 2009)*



As this statement suggests, the band draws on a large pool of musicians and performers, all of whom explicitly identify themselves as ‘English’, but who fall into three generic categories: English folk musicians; world music performers; and those most readily associated with Western pop music. English folk music is represented here by a number of artists. The involvement of father-and-daughter team Martin and Eliza Carthy is particularly central; the Waterson-Carthy family (of which they are the most visible members) is often referred to as the “Royal Family” of English folk music, and very closely associated with the second period of revival (1950-1970s); Eliza is also well known for her combination of folk and popular music styles in earlier albums (such as *Red Rice*, 1998) They are joined by Chris Wood (fiddler, singer, guitarist and outspoken, self-styled champion of English traditional music and culture). Also involved are two Ceilidh (traditional English social dance) bands, the Glowworms and the Tiger Moths, representing the younger and older generations, respectively.

Finally, English folk music is represented in the project by The Young Coppers, who are presented as the seventh generation of a family of traditional singers. Here, they are offered as the embodiment of a direct link with preindustrial rural England: singers from earlier generations of the Copper family have played important roles in the revival movements of both the

early- and mid-twentieth century. The Young Coppers are, however, the first to acknowledge that they are not renowned for their singing *abilities* per se – rather, they present themselves simply as ordinary people who enjoy singing. Clearly, then, they are involved in the Imagined Village project because of who they are (or what they represent) rather than what they can do.

World Music performers involved in the Imagined Village include the Dhol Foundation front-man and prolific percussionist, Johnny Kalsi; the singer Sheila Chandra; and performance poet Benjamin Zephaniah. The members of Transglobal Underground are heavily involved in producing sequencing for the project, whilst their sitar player, Sheema Mukherjee takes a particularly prominent role in the band’s music and live performances. Pop musicians involved include the popular Brit-Pop artist Paul Weller, (although he only sings lead vocals on one track of the album, and never appears live with the group) and the kit-drummer Andy Gangadeen, formerly a drummer for Lisa Stansfield and The Spice Girls. Finally, a central figure to the Imagined Village’s live performances is the singer-songwriter and left-wing activist Billy Bragg, whose outspoken political orientations have enabled his bridging – in recent years – of the divide between the English folk music culture and pop music.

Since its inception, The Imagined Village has obtained a considerable profile within the national media: the touring band has appeared live on the popular television music programme *Later with Jools Holland*, and was awarded the BBC Radio 2 Folk Award for Best Traditional Song in 2008. The project is signed to the world music label Real World Records and, since its premier at WOMAD, has appeared at both Folk and World Music festivals nationally – although it has not toured outside of England.

That this is a project to do with Englishness is very much foregrounded by the band. They have made it their mission to generate debate about the nature of English identity, and many of their performances have been preceded by a Q&A discussion with the audience on the topic of English identity. Their website also offers itself as a forum for debate. The discourse generated by the project is dominated by a number of discrete but closely interrelated constructions of Englishness. Firstly, as has just been implied, Englishness is presented as a *subject for debate*. The Imagined Village doesn't attempt to present a monolithic or even coherent concept of Englishness – in fact the point is regularly made that the constituent members of the group do not necessarily agree on the topic. It can be inferred, however, that the members do universally consider English national identity as something that is open to discussion, and is

not fixed but in the process of being negotiated. The debate around Englishness is acknowledged as a political one, too. The Imagined Village doesn't speak as a unified front on this, but one of the dominant voices is that of Billy Bragg, who has written a book on English identity and is associated with the endorsement of a left wing 'radical patriotism' that seeks to reclaim the celebration of English identity from the domain of the extreme right (2).

Secondly, a pervasive discourse around the couching of English folk music as world music is the notion of Englishness as a lost identity – an identity that needs to be rediscovered. We have already seen how this has been expressed in the Folk Roots 'undiscovered outpost' article. In many versions of this discourse, English identity is seen not merely as lost, but as beleaguered. This has been made perhaps most explicit in the programme notes to a separate touring music and dance project – *On English Ground* – in which The Imagined Village member Chris Wood featured heavily: the notes cite Alan Lomax's 'Appeal for Cultural Equity', quoting his insistence that 'All cultures need their fair share of the airtime...' (On English Ground, 2005). Thus it mobilises, in the service of Englishness, a plea designed to speak for marginalised cultures. And the lyrics to the title song of that show, co-written by Chris Wood, explain to what this suggested suppression of

English traditional culture is in relation:

*'We hear the songs of Africa, we hear the Celtic  
bard*

*But the gold that we are searching for is in our  
own backyard'*

*(On English Ground, 2005)*

This text posits English traditional music and dance as the underdog in direct competition with Celtic traditional music, and a generic World Music canon and market, airing a view oft-repeated in folk circles that people in England will listen to traditional music from all over the world, but not their own musical traditions. The reference to the 'Celtic bard' also points to the predominance of Irish and Scottish traditional music in England's folk scene in recent history (prior to the current English folk resurgence). The 'gold [...] in our own backyard' imagery is echoed by Emmerson, who describes his investigations of English folk music through The Imagined Village project as motivated by a desire to explore his own identity as an English musician:

*'I just started thinking about doing something that was kind of rooted in my own culture and Baaba Maal had always said to me "you don't have to become a West African Sufi mystic to discover your own roots. You should look under your own*

*feet. You should look at the earth under your own feet'"*

*(Simon Emmerson, interview, 27 February 2008)*

The comparison in this quote between English culture and African Sufism is a quiet acknowledgement of the novelty of this approach amongst English musicians, and therefore also speaks to the construct of a beleaguered, lost or ignored English identity, albeit in subtler, more personal terms than those of *On English Ground*.

Specifically, this discourse of a beleaguered England is often mobilised in relation to the place of English national identity within a contemporary multicultural society. In an interview with the Telegraph, the young English folk musician and singer Jim Moray described his sense of English identity thus:

*'Where I live in Birmingham is a predominantly Asian area... And just as there's a large British-Asian community, I feel with the music I'm playing I'm part of a kind of British-English community...'*

*(Jim Moray, quoted in McCormick 2009)*

This is by far the most common construction of English identity within discourse on the subject: a discrete partner within the composite whole that is multicultural society in modern Britain. Whilst potentially implying an

essentialising approach to Englishness as synonymous with a white – impossibly indigenous – ethnicity, this construct of English identity is often born out of an underlying perception that the cultural activities of non-English cultural groups (such as the British-Asian community to which Moray refers) receive strong state and public support and respect, and that such support and respect should also be – but is not currently – afforded to English traditional culture.

The Imagined Village, however, offers a conspicuously different construction of Englishness: one that portrays English identity as itself inherently multicultural. The band present – visually in performance, and aurally in their music – a strikingly multicultural and multi-ethnic vision of contemporary Englishness, that contrasts starkly with the almost universally white world of the English folk scene. At the pre-show talk at WOMAD in 2007, Billy Bragg made this construct explicit:

*'The fact that Anglo-Saxon has a hyphen in it; it's the only racial type in the world that has a hyphen in it, that little hyphen has been there ever since our country was founded.'*

*(Bragg, 2007)*

However, the numerous musical and discursive negotiations of this English multicultural identity are

riddled with contradictions, and it is these that we will end by considering here.

The desire to preserve or recapture symbolic elements of a preindustrial, organic and rural community has, as Boyes (1993) and others have illustrated, often been a key impulse within folk revivals. The Imagined Village, however, acknowledges the constructedness of 'folk' – the imaginary nature of its village: it makes titular reference to Georgina Boyes' book, of which a central aim is to demonstrate the invented nature of the first revival's content; the album cover self-consciously juxtaposes pre-industrial Delftware-like appearance of a Victorian Willow-Pattern design and a scene within that design depicting a burnt-out car, tower block and aeroplane. Nonetheless, there are ways in which the project is still invested in nostalgia for the authentic, linked to the rural and the historical, and, implicitly, in a historically rooted construct of traditional (and implicitly white) Englishness. The presence of the Copper family exemplifies that investment.

We have already argued that by offering Englishness as a subject of debate the project presents it not as a fixed identity but in flux, contested. This can, however, lapse into a discourse of 'We all have our own stories': and in the talk around the Imagined Village some of its stories and voices are more powerfully and clearly heard than

others. For example, it is the voices of the four middle-class, middle-aged white men (Simon Emmerson, Chris Wood, Martin Carthy and Billy Bragg) that come through most powerfully in the Q&A sessions.

Contradiction also resides in the discourse surrounding the selection and arrangement of musical content within the band's output. In line with its claims to mix 'ancient and modern', a dominant strategy of The Imagined Village is the "updating" of "source texts" of an English folk repertory canonised through the first and second revival periods. The historicity of this material is emphasised by its presentation as something that needs to be "brought up to date": a return to the claims of the band's website show how English folk music and song is equated with 'ancient', whilst the World and Pop elements of the group's sound (including, bizarrely, the sitar) are conflated as 'modern':

*'The Imagined Village recast age-old traditions in the shape of the twenty-first century. A daring mix of ancient and modern, The Imagined Village fuses fiddles and squeezebox with dub beats and sitars.'*

*(The Imagined Village 2009)*

Thus, the high status of historical 'source text' is reserved for the English traditional material, resulting

in the dominance of a historically-inflected 'authentic' Englishness. At the live performances, Sheila Chandra performs her version of such a source text (The Blacksmith), employing Indian vocal ornamentation, but no need is felt for cultural reciprocity – that is, we do not hear one of the English folk musicians offering an 'English' interpretation of a traditional Indian musical text. And this, despite a discourse that presumably includes performers of such texts within its broad, multicultural definition of Englishness.

Within the inherently Western concept of 'World Music', non-Western musical elements generally play one of two roles. On the one hand, they are offered up as the exotic other, for the voyeuristic consumption of a culturally aware, middle-class Euro-American audience. Alternatively, the non-Western element within a hybridized music may form the focus of identification amongst a glocal, non-Western, domestic audience, often as a resistance to Anglo-American cultural globalization (in which case the label of World Music is usually assigned subsequent to its appearance in the Western music market). Nonetheless, whether the music is glocal or global – at the points of production or consumption – the pop musical element (Frith's 'Universal Pop Aesthetic': Frith, 1989, p.2) h

has generally operated as a symbol of a homogenised cultural modernity, through which traditional musics of



the world may be updated. In this context, perhaps the most significant characteristic of the Imagined Village project is its ability to construct a multilayered set of hybridities by conflating the two scenarios outlined above with multiple alterities: here, non-Western music (particularly that of Indian origin) is combined with a pop soundscape to represent 'World Music' as a contemporising, monolithic musical substance. The group's discourse encourages an understanding of the contributions of Kalsi, Mukherjee and Chandra as representative of a contemporary multicultural England (and *English*), but those contributions remain available to the orientalist gaze. In fact, their 'world musical' presence invites such a distancing voyeurism towards the English folk music element as an exoticised other, albeit one that continues to be, in musical, ethnic and historical terms, unambiguously monocultural.

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## Endnotes

1. This discovery of an exoticised other within the hegemonic culture has some parallels in the attention, since the 1980s, of young Japanese people to their indigenous musical traditions, an attention that Mitsui terms 'domestic exoticism' (Mitsui 1998).
2. Since the presentation of this paper, the tendency of English folk to align itself against right wing nationalist politics has gathered pace, culminating in the formation in 2009 of the organisation Folk Against Fascism, created to resist the targeting and appropriation of folk music by the extreme right British National Party.

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