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Interview Again: Derek Piotr

Labels: [fans - interview](#), [people - musicians](#), [things - music](#)



We met [musician Derek Piotr in 2018](#), and now we hear he's researching and recording traditional folk music. We had to know more; he was nice enough to share his answers again. He's sharing his [archive](#) online, too, and the best thing is you can contribute to it. But first - a few words on how he got started.

Q: How do you compare the music you made in 2018 versus folk music?

The music I made in 2018, [Grunt](#), came from a desire to connect the voice, the body, and sound to recorded personal expression. The archival recordings from the 1930s housed in repositories like the Library of Congress achieve the same end, using slightly different means. There is always an interplay of vaguely alien vocal recordings and surface noise.

Q: A good observation. So how do you define folk music, and what sparked your interest?

For the average reader, it's the way of life of a rural or traditional community. These "folkways" are not always documented - once a folkway undergoes documentation, it becomes folklore, a tricky tightrope to walk. The best folklorists avoid subjecting these traditions to anything resembling dipping the material in formaldehyde or pinning it to a boy scout-bug-cotton. However, plenty of dipping and pinning exists out there. At best, folklife can still breathe and vibrantly exist even when housed in an archive, a vivid resistance to over-academic or unnecessarily stringent intellectual practices.

I have adored folk music of all stripes since I was young - some of the earliest experiences I had discovering music were from a "world music tour" featured on *Encarta Encyclopedia's* CD-ROM offerings in the late 1990s.

Q: Was there a song or two to prompt the start of your collection?

For years, I had recorded bits of conversation and stories from my grandmother to remember her. This was an informal, personal practice, and I barely shared any of these recordings with the outside world. Then, in 2019, I heard the singing of [Lena Bare Turbyfill](#), of Elk Park, North Carolina. The only published ballad of hers, "[Bolakins](#)", was a chillingly alien story about a mason who seeks revenge for unpaid labor by sneaking into a castle and "stick[ing] the little baby full of needles and pins". The wild imagery juxtaposed so strongly with Lena's beautiful singing that I craved knowing more about her, and I ended up connected to her last living daughter at the time, Nicola Pritchard.

At first, the only song Nicky remembered was "Bolakins" (I'm not surprised, a song like that one doesn't soon forget), so the first three recordings in the archive document Nicky slowly remembering how to sing the ballad. Spoken all the way through down the phone at first, then parts were sung, and then, once I got to Elk Park in person and was sitting on Nicky's couch - she sang the entire thing for me.

Q: Is your archive primarily music?

Yes, it is mostly music. Every once in a great while, someone will recite a poem (such as [one](#), [two](#), and [three](#)), and I do occasionally preserve interview excerpts. In general, I select short interview fragments for preservation that feel like a real insight into how one lived their life decades ago, so there's some historical "folklife" aspect, i.e., "we had paddling back then", or "during the war, I called home from Germany, and my grandpa couldn't believe it, he said it sounded like I was right next door" - something that firmly frames the information in a specific time.

Q: How do you get new content for the archive?

Mostly I just ask. I ask everyone, and can even ask now:

Dear reader, did your parents or grandparents ever sing songs around the house that you remember?

This has yielded some wonderful surprises from longtime friends who come forward with song memories and from new friends too – some of my newer acquaintances have made field recordings on my behalf while traveling in the UK to visit their family. I also solicit informants due to their connection to singers represented in the Library of Congress or other repositories, but mostly just generally, I constantly ask everyone.

Q: Is there a type of song or content you're interested in or from a specific area or region?

I am interested in everything, but I am mainly preoccupied with smaller local ballads – "[Lee Mills](#)" or the "[Alabama State Song](#)" – things that are regional and might otherwise get lost to obscurity if not documented. Part of the charm of asking everyone about this project is that it has exposed me to many smaller songs that are uncommon but were important enough to a particular family's history that they are still remembered.

Q: What has been the public response?

This project has sprawled immensely since I launched the [website](#) in August 2022. People from all walks of life have entrusted me to document their family or community songs. From nuns to bartenders; twentysomethings to centenarians; folksong scholars, siblings making barnyard noises in unison, residents of a nursing home collectively remembering patriotic standards, farmers singing murder ballads, and legends of the folk scene sharing their earliest remembrances of learning through home-singing. I have been very blessed to be able to tell many kinds of stories with my work, and not just "hone in" on one type of music.

Q: Have you encountered any stories from the songs or interviews with singers coming off as a bit mysterious?

Many of the songs are quite old. "[I'll Sell My Hat, I'll Sell My Coat](#)" has roots in an Irish song from 1691, although the form of the song as it is remembered today is very far removed from the original and quite Americanized. Many of the [Child ballads](#) in my archive are hundreds of years old. My goal with this archive was to prove that ancient songs like these are still on the common tongue today. And they are!

Q: Is it an audio archive only, or is there a physical component?

Right now, it is just a website, but all sorts of ephemera get passed along to me: old photos, song lists, even the odd broken dulcimer or two. At some point, I would like to set up a physical representation of the archive – perhaps a small library somewhere someday.

Q: What is your goal for this? A song from every state?

Representing all 50 states is certainly a rose-tinted goal but, in actuality, this project continues to expand organically. More and more people have come forward with all stripes of song, so the goal is to continue. I encourage anyone reading this with a family song or musical memory from early childhood to come forward and [email me](#).

Q: Bellairs was a fan of folksongs, with [The Vicar of Bray](#) being a favorite. Plus, he mentioned a few dozen more across his books. Is there any song that stands out?

The one that always stood out was "Rugbug", the foxtrot allegedly composed by Maxine Hollister (as referenced in *The House with a Clock in its Walls*). I am confused by John's inclusion of what appears to be an invented piece of music – I've never found any information on Hollister or "Rugbug", so I assume they only existed within the New Zebedee universe. I'd love to know if someone has evidence to the contrary.

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Thank you, Derek. So here's your assignment:

1. Consider contributing a song or two to the [Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive](#)
2. Figure out who Maxine Hollister was

And Derek has further thoughts about Bellairs's use of folk music in his books – coming soon.