



Needles and Pins: Derek Piotr's Journey to the Heart of Britain's Folklands



“Yorkshire is not so dissimilar to my home in the Northeast of America,” [Derek Piotr](#) tells me from York, the latest stop on his great British journey. “Connecticut is part of New England, so that makes sense.” Piotr has just arrived back from a visit to the eastern county of Norfolk and has contacted me, a Yorkshireman, to ask whether I might have any connections he could speak to about folk music in the north of the country. “I grew up in the middle of the woods but with a through-line train to Manhattan,” he continues by way of example. “In York I have stayed in a lush, quiet neighbourhood which nevertheless has a train to London within walking distance. Both places have a crisp, orderly energy to them — enough space for you to enjoy quietude but still connected to a thriving community.”

He has been in country on a mission to trace connections between the folk songs he has heard performed in the Appalachians and the vestiges that remain in remote areas of England. His fascination runs deep, with early exposure coming via – of all things – the World Music section of the Encarta Encyclopedia CD-Rom. “I immediately connected with the music from the east,” he recalls. “Zithers from Egypt and gamelan from

Indonesia, but also Eastern European bagpipes and hurdy-gurdy. Things of that nature.” At the time, he says, the more familiar music – that of B.B. King and Elvis – was less interesting to him. “I would skip over them and go back to the Peking opera or whatever [but] that definitely planted the seed of my love of folk music.”

The links formed with experience: as Piotr was exposed more to the music of his homeland, the more he saw he could draw lines across the planet. “There’s a universal folk structure I’ve found I very much enjoy,” he clarifies. “Listening to Appalachian ballads performed with dulcimer accompaniment – they can sound positively Vietnamese in their modal qualities. It’s hard to say what that [link] is really, but there does seem to be a sort of common music made by folk communities, no matter where they are in the world.”

Recently, Piotr has been including more and more of what he’s picked up in his own output. His most recent release, *Making and Then Unmaking*, was the most radical departure yet, bringing in pedal steel guitar, clavinet, dulcimer and banjo to meld a selection of folk-inspired originals and time-weathered classics such as the ballad “Bolakins,” a grisly tune with a remarkable history and something of an obsession for the musician. “I originally fell in love with the ballad after hearing [a recording of] Mrs Lena Bare Turbyfill singing it for the Library of Congress in 1939,” Piotr explains. “At the time, I had no idea what any of it meant, but I was struck by Lena’s character, clarity of mind, precision, warmth and assuredness. I [then] met Lena’s last living daughter, Nicky Pritchard, who remembered the song as well, and, as my work with child ballads deepened, I began to realize most repositories of traditional folk-song contained a version or two of this tune, from [Helen Hartness Flanders](#), to West Virginia University, to University College of Dublin.”

“Nicky was an endless fountain of memory and the best source singer I’ve ever met,” remembers Piotr as he takes me back to the start of his “Bolakins” adventure. “[Visiting her] began my journey of looking for source singers or “non-singers”; informants who did not have a background in vocal performance but who were nevertheless sources of ballads through authentic immersion from their upbringing. I am sorry to say Nicky passed away last winter, but I remain an “honorary Turbyfill” and stay in close contact with the family.”

The English and Scottish Popular Ballads were published in ten volumes between 1882 and 1898, by which time their collector – the Boston, MA scholar Francis James Child – had passed away. His name, however, lived on: today the songs in his collection are universally referred to as the Child Ballads. There are 305 in all, with songs like “The Elfin Knight” (considered an early version of what we now know as “Scarborough Fair”) and “The Three Ravens” (recorded hundreds of times by artists such as Bert Jansch, Richard Thompson and Ewan MacColl) still well-known today. “Bolakins” – or “Lamkin” as it is perhaps more commonly known – is Child Ballad Number 93, and considered something of an obscurity by modern-day folklorists. It tells of the killing of a woman and her infant child and is quite shockingly brutal in its imagery: lyrics describe the baby’s blood being collected in a bowl, for example, with the possible reason being that the murderer considered it a cure for leprosy. Although musicians like Martin Carthy, Alasdair Roberts and Shirley Collins have versions of it in their catalogues, its grim protagonist – “Lamkin” himself – perhaps lives on most effectively as a kind of hideous bogeyman. The figure has been used by writers as diverse as Terry Pratchett and John Banville and, according to Carthy’s sleeve notes for *But Two Came By* (1968), there were reports even then of English parents using the threat of Lamkin to keep their children at bay.

“How will we get her down

Such a dark night as this?

We’ll stick her little baby

Full of needles and pins“

A verse from Lena Bare Turbyfill's telling of "Bolakins"

"Bolakins" is still widely performed in North Carolina, hence Piotr's exposure to the song and the Turbyfill family's in-depth knowledge of it, but many folklorists consider the English county of Northumberland a likely location for its inception. Some people even claim Welton Hall near Newcastle is haunted by the ghost of the murder victim and that Lamkin himself was hung from a nearby tree. Piotr landed in Northumberland in May this year to try and chase up the ballad's origins and gain local insight. "I have made approximately three dozen recordings in the last two months," he tells me. "I've noticed a lot of similarities with the agricultural and folk life between [Northumberland and Appalachia], however my time has primarily been spent documenting source singers who have memory of folk songs that are predominantly not ballads... ironically this tradition is more well-preserved in Appalachia!" Piotr says his trip to Norfolk was similarly fruitless, although he primarily visited to take a break near the sea and he did meet some shanty singers there. The great Norfolk folk singers [Harry Cox](#) and Walter Pardon "exist predominantly as phantoms and are not generally visible," he opines.

Making and Then Unmaking by Derek Piotr

Thankfully he had more luck on a visit to the West Yorkshire village of [Shepley](#) with the stone mason Will Noble. "Despite his extensive rehearsed and studio-recorded repertoire, [Will] grew up farming and learned songs through immersion from his father, and his father's two brothers," Piotr tells me, energised by the memories. "One song Will remembered an uncle singing was an American tune called "Roll Along Covered Wagon", popular in the 1930s. Another of Will's uncles remembered something much more ancient: a version of "The Maid Freed From The Gallows", which was sung to Will when he was 2 or 3 years old under the title "The Pricketty Bush". The song is indexed as Child Ballad 95, and, along with Lamkin, it is one of the oldest English ballads in existence. Will remembers riding around on an old Fordson tractor's mudguards while his uncle sang the song. The fact that the ballad still exists in living memory this way is truly remarkable. Many singers in Appalachia can, with great aplomb, sing songs learned through immersion from their parents or grandparents, and remember a great deal of songs passed knee-to-knee. Ironically, in Britain, the very birthplace of these ballads, this practice is dying out rapidly."

I wonder what Piotr aims to achieve by spending so much of his time and money over here. Although he has played shows in Leeds and London to help boost the coffers, he says train fairs have hit his pocket hard and he hasn't been able to make the necessary arrangements to work in the UK. "I think it would be very optimistic to think that I will collect enough significant material from this summer. I have had tremendous success with "non-singers" in North Carolina and the surrounding Appalachian region of the US, and I hope to make the same case [here]. This part of the world is of course the origin of these ballads." Is he saddened by the country's mishandling of its folk traditions? "I am a little disappointed, yes," he finishes. "I feel a sense of urgency to document these ballads from informants wherever they might be found. I want to prove that the Child Ballads are still remembered and sung in England."

Main image: Derek Piotr in Norfolk