

Monday, June 12, 2023

Piotr: The Music of John Bellairs in the Wild: Five Field Recordings

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



We've interviewed musician and historian [Derek Piotr](#), but we're turning over this week's post to him this time.

I've been traveling around field recording folk music for the last three years. In August 2022, I launched the [Derek Piotr Fieldwork Archive](#), a repository for the nearly 600 songs I've encountered in my travels so far.

The focus of this collection is on the "non-singer"; in other words, someone with no background in musical performance who can nevertheless relate a song or folkloric memory. However, this collection features a wide variety of informants, including professional singers, descendants of musicians, laypeople, and ballad scholars. The vast majority of the recordings in this archive showcase unaccompanied vocal performances.

Occasionally I come across a song that has featured in the works of John Bellairs and Brad Strickland – John certainly had a proclivity towards folksong, and incorporated many songs into his books (going so far as to make "The Hills of Isle Au Haut" a major component of *The Spell of the Sorceror's Skull*). Below are five recordings I've made that link to specific Bellairs books.

"Pink Pajamas"

The Specter From the Magician's Museum

This song, sung to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic", is a popular Scout song. I remember being tickled by its silly imagery when I first read the lyrics in *Specter*, then, over ten years later, recorded the song as performed by Judy Cook. Our mutual friend Ellie also knows this song and sang it as a child, but I have yet to hear Ellie's version in full.

"The Walloping Window Blind"

The House Where Nobody Lived

Another song with perfectly absurd lyrics (for more Bellairs musical goofiness, see "Flat Foot Floogie" and "Mairzy Doats"), this was evidently a favorite of Mrs. Zimmermann's, who taught new kid David at least the

chorus in *The House Where Nobody Lived*. It is not common to find someone who knows the entire thing top-to-bottom, but once again, Judy Cook provides an outstanding performance of the song in its entirety.

"Dark as a Dungeon"

The Eyes of the Killer Robot



Guy Wolff is a potter and musician who lives about twenty minutes away from me in northern Connecticut. His pottery work has graced the likes of Martha Stewart Living, and his musicianship is no less impressive: Guy can play everything from concertina to spoons, and imbues this song, "Dark as a Dungeon" with a kind of early blues slide improvisation. It also must be said that with his cranky countenance, nest of white hair, and muttonchops, the first time I met Guy I had the impression I was meeting Professor Childermass in the flesh! That he also happened to know this song, from Johnny Dixon novel *The Eyes of the Killer Robot*, was suspiciously synchronous...

"Yon Yonson"

The Dark Secret of Weatherend

Sung *ad nauseum* by John Johnson of Eau Claire to the chagrin of Anthony and Miss Eells, *Yon Yonson* is probably one of the shortest songs in existence, with just two recursive lines. Paul Smith, of Terre Haute, Indiana, knows a variant on this song from his grandfather, and shared it with me for my archive.

"The Mountains of Mourne"

The Spell of the Sorceror's Skull

Not technically in the Bellairs books, I include this song by virtue of the fact that the singer, Gordon Bok, wrote "The Hills of Isle Au Haut", which, aside from being a wonderful song in its own right, features prominently in the plot of *The Spell of the Sorceror's Skull*. I have spoken (via telephone) to residents of Isle Au Haut and have hopes to do some collecting on the island this summer. One resident, Billy Barter, has lived there his entire life; his family were among the first settlers in the late 18th century. Billy is, naturally, a lobsterman. Author: bellairsia