



THE UNHIPNESS OF FOLK

Karl Dallas

Why is it so unhip to like folk music? I'm not speaking of the commercial music industry, which has to break as well as make crazes, turn yesterday's heroes into tomorrow's also-rans, the applied logic of Detroit marketing. I'm thinking of otherwise intelligent people, who would not sacrifice a principle like Clause 4 of the Labour Party Constitution or the rights of trade unions to manage their own affairs merely because they had become unfashionable.

There has never been a greater hunger for songs, as the October 22 CND demo showed, and folk music is still the most approachable form for most activists. Yet many young musicians, like Ali and Robin Campbell of UB40 (sons of folksinger Ian Campbell) and Chris Foreman of Madness (son of John Foreman, the Broadsheet King), find the indigenous black culture of reggae more congenial than the songs their parents sang.

It is interesting that one of the most powerful songs on Steve Ashley's *More Demo Tapes* cassettes, *We Say No*, is performed with a reggae beat. Ashley is a thoughtful singer-songwriter whose past songs, like the lovely *Fire and Wine*, have indicated a feeling for tradition and the English countryside, and it is significant that he has felt that he has had to turn away from the clubs of the folksong revival back to the peace movement that gave them birth to find an audience for his newer, more politically-committed songs.

Musically, this is a stronger collection than 'Demo Tapes' to which it is a sequel, though the quality of the lyrics is more variable, ranging from the unfunny Johnny Cash parody, *Which War Son?* to the stirring *Easy Come* whose chorus line 'we are easy come but we are not easy go' reminded me of Pete Seeger's famous dictum, 'take it easy — but take it'. Seeger's populism was the fertile soil from which much that was good in the heyday of British folk grew, and Seeger's reunion with his old associates in The Weavers, still has the old spirit on the album of their 1980 Carnegie Hall meeting, *Together Again*, but far from being a sterile exercise in geriatric nostalgia (like, for instance, Paul Simon's recent concerts), one has the sense of a continuing tradition, especially when the superb Ronnie Gilbert sings Holly Near's moving *Hay Una Mujer*,

about a woman who has 'disappeared' in fascist Chile, followed closely by a fiery rendition of the old International Brigade song from the Spanish War, *Venga Jaleo*. Holly Near sings the song herself, incidentally, on a fine duet album with Ronnie Gilbert, *Lifeline*.

It's ironic that the populist strain carried into Britain by pioneers like MacColl is represented today almost solely by the Spinners, who this year celebrate their 25th anniversary with a double album *In Our Liverpool Home*, recorded at a concert for the unemployed. If folk is unfashionable, then the Spinners are doubly so, which is unjust not because they are not sometimes excessively cosy and undemanding of their audiences, which they are, but because I suspect what is held mainly against them is their expertise in manipulating the mass media, and in particular television. It is a pity, however, that they are not able to find more truly contemporary material than John Lennon's *Imagine* or Hughie Jones' *Stockholm Tar*.

Essentially, I see little difference between such living in the past and the musical attitudes revealed by Martin Carthy's new band, Brass Monkey, a potentially interesting collaboration between a group of our finest instrumentalists: Carthy himself, squeezebox-player John Kirkpatrick, and three 'horn players' (as jazzmen would term them), Howard Evans on trumpet/flugelhorn, Martin Brinsford on saxophone/mouth-organ and Roger Williams on trombone. What it sounds like, however, is deliberate archaism, and though some of the performances are enjoyable, Carthy's singing is particularly dispirited, apart from on the

reworking of *The Maid and the Palmer*.

Interestingly, it is Leon Rosselson who has produced one of the most musically stimulating albums in his latest for Fuse, 'Temporary Loss of Vision' and Evans and Carthy play on parts of it. Rosselson's reputation for incisive, carefully crafted lyrics was even acknowledged by Tony Palmer in 'All You Need Is Love', and though he is a fine musician, he has often tended to let the words speak for themselves, almost baldly. Here, there is more reliance on what he himself criticised as 'sounds' in the sixties (the string synthesizer on *My Daughter, My Son*, for instance, and the fade in and out of the voice on *Sun*) but as a blend of musical form and lyrical content it would be hard to better — though some of his recent work runs it very close.

Steve Ashley: 'More Demo Tapes' (£2.30 from PO Box 101, Cheltenham, Glos, GL52 6ET)

Brass Monkey: 'Brass Monkey' (Topic 12TS431, £4.50 from Topic Records, 50 Stroud Green Road, London N4)

Holly Near & Ronnie Gilbert: 'Lifeline' (Redwood RR404, £5.59 from Collets Folk Shop, Charing Cross Road, London WC2)

Leon Rosselson: 'Temporary Loss of Vision' (Fuse CF384, £4.50 from 28 Park Chase, Wembley Park, Middlesex)

Spinners: 'In Our Liverpool Home' (PRT SPN1, £5.99 plus postage from 24 Beresford Road, Wallasey, Mersey side)

Weavers: 'Together Again' (Loom 10681, £6.50 from Collets Folk Shop, Charing Cross Road, London WC2)

All prices include postage, except where specified.

New on FUSE RECORDS Leon Rosselson

His songs are fierce, funny, outraged, blasphemous, challenging and anarchic. And the tunes are good, too. *The Guardian*

Available from good record shops or by mail order price £4.50 (inc p&sp from: Fuse Records, 28 Park Chase, Wembley Park, Middx HA9 8EH)