

Interview Transcript – Hands Up for Trad Archie Fisher

***Interview Start**

Interviewer (ST) : Fifty-five years in the business, that's amazing!

Interviewee (AF) : Yeah, it's amazing in the sense of I actually took some time out with the broadcasting, because I was what 27 years in the middle nearer the end of it which acted as a conservation in a way because I wasn't on the road all the time. And it also acted as a sort of source of inspiration because I was open to all of the things that were happening on record and in live performance. I mean I have so many privilege one to one in the studio, well you could include Danny Kyle in that so it was one to two! That had a very deep influence of what I ended up doing because in the beginning we were all picking up bits and pieces here and there. Yeah there wasn't a lot of resource.

Interviewer (ST) : What brought you to music?

Interviewee (AF) : Ah it was always in the family anyway. My dad, he sang in the City of Glasgow police choir, he was a tenor and he rather liked what you would call now Parlor music, the leaning on the piano type stuff. In amongst all that, he had a few ballads, few traditional songs. I often wondered why that fitted into his repertoire, a lot of Music Hall as well. That was what actually happened when he was on the beat, he used to go into the back of the theatre, take the helmet off and hear a free showing of Empire or the Metropole in Glasgow and back in these days, folk singers were called novelty acts and you'd get bothy ballad singers coming in. The very first time I saw the McPeake family was in Glasgow and they were billed as a novelty act in the middle of a music Hall. So, he had a few sorts of traditional songs and a ballad or two and that was an intriguing part of it. His main repertoire was definitely the clutching breast type tenor singing, he had a great voice and my mum, a Gaelic speaker who lilted a few tunes so there was always singing going on.

Interviewer (ST) : So, you were singing, did you learn the songs?

Interviewee (AF) : There was no great encouragement in school to sing anything other than Cherry Ripe and a few other things like that uh so when I was about sixteen, there was this skiffle thing I just started up, I first heard Lonnie Donegan when I was in the merchant navy, I was on an oil tanker in Newark, New Jersey. I went to a café show and there was a jukebox and Rock Island Line was playing endlessly people wanted to hear it and I thought it was this great American kind of music and I went home and discovered he came from Glasgow. Ah, so that was the start of the kind of Americana type of thing. I picked up a guitar here and there and there was a few people who'd been to school with me that also played the guitar and more or less take it from there.

Interviewer (ST): And was it easy to get guitars in those days?

Interviewee (AF): Well, my mum bought me a guitar for my 18th birthday, I'd borrowed the guitar before that which was the nearest thing to playing a barbed wire fence. It was purple and had palm trees stenciled on it and it would not stay in tune so we all fell into the tune to a chord type thing so you could get a three chord trick quite easily that way and then performed in a little skiffle group, the main problem was how easily guitars all tuned to the same pitch which was very rare and I didn't really have any interest in playing guitar, any further than that until I started to well listen to Ray sing and I really used to sing Jazz a lot before, trad jazz. She sang with a trad jazz band, my sister Ray and then I got into a sense of accompaniment or arrangement and I wasn't really interested in being a singer, I just wanted to be a guitarist and a backing guitarist and so I dedicated a lot of time to that and I discovered that in that time when it was LPs and fortifiers if you slowed a fortifier down to 43, it was the same pitch but an octave below. You could copy guitar styles and Big Bull Broozy in slow motion and the same with 45 down to 33 so that was an octave jump below but it was exactly the same pitch so you could learn things very slowly. I didn't tell a lot of people that!

Interviewer (ST): When you were performing were there microphones?

Interviewee (AF): In general, we used to go and play in a trad jazz club with a few skiffle singers in the interval as skiffle groups were in these times. The first time I ever saw microphones was a band called the Reivers and they were on STV black and white and I was roped in for standing in for Josh, they were more concerned whether I was wearing the right color of shirt than whether I knew all the songs so I played the old royal British hotel and that was the first time I saw a microphone. They were little Reslo ribbon mics and no guitar amplification, just that went acoustically but we weren't playing big venues because big venues weren't interested in us at the time until well into the 60s, in St Andrews halls in Glasgow and the Barkley Hall was a smaller version of that where you'd do an opening set, four or five songs and that was it.

Interviewer (ST): When did you make your first album?

Interviewee (AF): 1968 was the first album for XTRA with John Doogan and Irish Geordie, flute and whistle player and John Mackinnon, fiddle and mandolin. I'd done a couple of tracks with Ray on an EP before that called Far Over the Forth for Topic Records but that was the first time I'd actually put a whole set together on an album and the first album is always a sort of accumulation of all the things you'd been doing up until that point. I'm not a prolific recorder, I think I've done eight in my whole life in all this time.

Interviewer (ST): Was it easy to make records in the Sixties?

Interviewee (AF): No, you had to be really asked! There was big companies that weren't really interested, there was a wee boom which you could always put round the Bob Dylan and Joan Baez time when Decca for example were looking for another British – Julie Felix stepped into that role for Joan Baez when Annie Briggs was approached but she refused and that was it. Then, much later everything picked up again when I was playing with Barbara Dickson and Rab Noakes and there was a little spate of recording them. One Edinburgh Festival, Transatlantic sent an engineer up to a recording studio down near Leith and all the folk singers lined up, you had to sing one song and you got £10 and that was you out the door. Rae and I sang two songs, they liked us so much – they gave us another £10 but that was the kind of commercial – no royalties, nothing and they were called folk festival one and two I think, there still collectors items.

Interviewer (ST): In terms of gigging, was it just Scotland or were you able to play internationally?

Interviewee (AF): Not internationally unless you include England, I went down to London for a couple of months just to have a look at the scene and there was a very intense thing down there, there was an awful lot of competition and there were clubs starting up in and around about England especially Yorkshire and Cheshire at the time and there was very little in the middle. So luckily, I was one of those people that had some wheels. We were able to you could hardly call it touring if you call 3 gigs in a fortnight a tour but we sorta camped (*inaudible*).. we made a lot of friends and picked up an album here and there to add to the repertoire but it wasn't really a professional circuit yet. Of course, based I was in Edinburgh at the time and prior to that I'd been running the Crown folk club which was a kinda weekly thing and just flown round the corner from here is the Waverly bar which was another residency and also the Howff in Dunfermline and we used to do that every second or third week for a fiver.

Interviewer (ST): And were you able to earn a living?

Interviewee (AF): Well I can't remember how I survived! I didn't rob any banks or anything but I can't remember how I managed to run a car, buy guitar strings or wear reasonably clean clothes, it was just a kind of it was that Sixties thing that we just sort of floated along and everything was very benign and audiences were really enthusiastic because it was the first wave of that music uh there weren't probably as knowledgeable, some audiences are pretty reticent nowadays they know more than a lot of singers do and it was really a pleasure to perform and very simple PA set ups. Rae and I, the first time we played in the Edinburgh Howff, we'd worked out six songs together, we did a six song set and they liked it – they asked us to come back on in the 2nd half so we sang the same six songs again and nobody seemed to realize.

Interviewer (ST): And who was on the scene with you?

Interviewee (AF): Well in Edinburgh based, Edinburgh basics were Ownie Han was around, there was people like Dolina, Robin Gray from the university was a university folk club which

has been going much longer and they had a dozen singers and Hamish Anderson was the sort of background man there, that was the Edinburgh set. The Glasgow set, there was people like Nigel Denver, Josh Mcrae and Enith Kenton, they used to come and play in Edinburgh and then we used to go up and play in Glasgow. AH as it was in those days used to be quite busy with folk singers but apart from that until after Arthur started a club in Aberdeen that was it , It was Edinburgh and Glasgow , there was nothing else on the go.

Interviewer (ST): And when did you meet Hamish Imlach ?

Interviewee (AF): We were in school together, I came in one morning and the playground was divided by railing it was boys on one side of the railing and girls on the other side. It was a horseshoe building and standing gazing into the gable was this slightly returned fellow with a black leather jacket and a red fez. He'd come through Australia through the Suez canal and bought a fez! He'd never been at a mixed school before so he was gazing longingly into the girls playground so I thought he looks interesting, I went up and said "Hello" and he took his hand in his pocket and said "Do you want to buy a lighter?". He'd come through the Suez canal and they had these lighters that had a pin up girl and a bit with sand and you turned it upside down and all the sand ran away. So that was my introduction to Hamish. We hit it off straight away!

Interviewer (ST): So then you get into the 70s , was there a difference in the scene then?

Interviewee (AF): Yeah, there was quite a lot of television exposure then, Robin Hall and Jimmie MacGregor started off strongly on the Tonight series , Robin Hall and Jimmie MacGregor had started off well with massive viewing figures on the Tonight programme and they were the Scottish couple. Jig Time or STV had a thing called Here and Now, Rae and I did the sort of Robin and Jimmie thing on that for a while and then Gordon Smith , W Gordon Smith , bless him started a series of programmes for television called *Hootenanny* which were recorded in various venues in Scotland so people got exposure and credibility from that. There were very few subsequent venues or gigs you could get from that work, from that publicity , there was very- there were just no clubs , no really a lot of clubs and people presumed because you were on TV , you were very expensive - which we weren't. That was a good time as well because we met a lot of other singers, we met a lot of singers in from Australia, America and of course , England. Then, it seemed to stop after that for a while. Television dropped it completely for a long time, it got saturation but there were still some things going on in London. I did a really nice programme with Mary of Peter, Paul and Mary and Willie Scott , the border shepherd ,that was a strange combination! So I did a few things like that and then Julie Felix had her own show, I worked with Julie on a couple of shows as well.

Interviewer (ST): When did you first go to America?

Interviewee (AF): 1970 as a singer- 1975. We went to the Philadelphia Folk Festival , there was a Scottish friend of mine who had been over there , just visiting and he said "You put in a word for me" and they asked me over, more just paid my own way , it wasn't a big profit making exercise but a real experience and that kinda opened up all kinds of doors because that's when I ran into Tommy Makem and Liam Clancy in New York and they asked me to

play background guitar on one of their albums. The first album that they had as a united couple , reunited couple and they flew me out to Calgary and I did some backing tracks there with them , produced the album and also taught Liam and Eric Bogle , the band played Waltzing Matilda which two or three months later when the album was released , I got a ticket to New York , an airline ticket to New York return and I said that Matilda was top of the Irish Youth Parade and this was going to be my bonus and I flew out to New York and played a couple of gigs with them and after that they said “Right , we’ll hire you as backline, keep you as a retainer. I was working with Allan Barty then, the fiddler and mandolin so Allan and I became the backline and ended up producing an album with him because they couldn’t say what was good and what was bad so they had to arbitrate. Ended up producing that album and doing some live work, live albums with them in Dublin.

Interviewer (ST): Was it just after that then, you started Travelling Folk?

Interviewee (AF): That was almost fortuitous, I was doing some freelance broadcasting in BBC radio Tweed – Community station in the borders and they had an OB of the afternoon show and they asked me to sing a borders song sort of on occasion. Robin Hall was going to be working on another series of programmes with the International BBC bandmove so we ended up doing alternate weeks – then after that Robin moved out completely Kenny Mutch was producing and I did alternate weeks and Kenny eventually handed over to me.

Interviewer (ST): How long did you do Travelling Folk for?

Interviewee (AF): Well somebody added it up as 27 years, I think that’s about it all in all. One of the last things , I managed to pull out of the BBC files when I left that show when I was moving to Aberdeen was my audition card , Rae and I did in 1963 and it said “the duet became alive when the boy played the guitar” so I’m gonna frame that sometime.

Interviewer (ST): And what would you say your time on Travelling Folk, how did you see the change?

Interviewee (AF): Well apart from the technical side of it , the fact that we were moving from LPs to CDs and also we had quite a good travel budget then – Travelling Folk lived up to it’s name, we did a lot of outside broadcasting and as resource increased , you know the source of the music increased , the first boom was definitely the Irish work instrumentally – as that increased so the spin off started to effect what was happening in Scotland. The programme ended up getting a repeat which was good, got more exposure. The people became aware that the music was very special , it wasn’t commercialized and you know we took on quite a responsible role in many ways because we decided not to just be a DJ programme , we wanted to be a magazine programme in all aspects and did diarys and did in depth interviews with performers and I was mainly involved in documentary anyway so that came easily to me.

Interviewer (ST): And you must have witnessed a massive increase in musicians?

Interviewee (AF): Oh yeah, as you say , 27 years can go actually very quickly! It’s different to sorta and it’s difficult to sort of calibrate how it actually increased but there was one show

at the end of it when we went off the air, I just went how the blues did we get here ? This is wonderful, there were some great musicians in the studio and Danny had a list of about 20 folk clubs to talk about, It had just seemed to have mushroomed completely and it's still holding well I think.

Interviewer (ST): It is, now when people talk about when they talk about you, they talk about your singing but they also talk about your fabulous guitar playing.

Interviewee (AF): It's not fabulous, somebody once described it as they said, "Archie Fisher's guitar playing is deceptively simple", I dunno if that was an insult or not!

Interviewer (ST): That's a massive compliment because actually your voice, your guitar works so well together.

Interviewee (AF): A lot of that was done to the fact that Allan Barty and I – he played some lovely bridges and links on fiddle and mandolin and when Allan moved off to play Bluegrass basically – Country and Western music , all these gaps were left and I had to do things that on the guitar that replaced Allan essentially and I had to work more on bridges and had to work more on arrangement and that's when I moved mainly into open guitar tunings after that time , I would play in conventional tuning up unto that time but when Allan went away , I needed more depth in the guitar more fullness rather than sort of just picking the three chords in standard tuning so I had been influenced by Davy Graham's open guitar tuning and of course by Martin Carthy's and also Nic Jones and we swapped tunings here and there so from there I hadn't really put guitar into conventional tuning for forty years , forty five years.

Interviewer (ST): Do you still practice a lot?

Interviewee (AF): Yeah I do , in fact to keep the fingers supple , I play mandolin more than guitar because it's much more demanding, I'm a born again mandolin player and luckily I was playing in California in last October and November and Rod Cameron who's a Scot out there , he's a very fine flute maker said "Do you play mandolin?" and I said "Now and again" and he said "I've got this one that I'm not gonna play I'll give it to you" and it was a Gibson A mandolin 1918 so it's down in the workshop being restored now. That is a bucket list thing that had been on mine for years, it's a beautiful thing- I've still got a photograph of it on my phone and I look at it all the time! It's gonna be ready fairly soon.

Interviewer (ST): Out of all your albums that you've made and there are that many, do you have a favorite?

Interviewee (AF): I think the "Sunset I've galloped into" is an important album because I'd just come off the road with Garnet Rogers who I'd been touring with in Canada and we literally went into the studio and I laid down the whole album in the sequence that it actually came out, that's just the way it seemed to develop and I had laryngitis and it seems to me , I think I should have it more when I record! So I had a different quality in my voice when I listen back to it but that again had come after quite a long, the songs that were

accumulated after that time sit together quite well now. Jimmie MacGregor reviewed it once and he said “Lovely album, terrible grammar.”

Interviewer (ST): So what's next?

Interviewee (AF): Well I've got one more album to do, I've finished recording with Red House records for an album that came out last year. Garnet has booked me into a studio next year to do an album with him which I'm putting songs together for at the moment and it's probably going to be my final sessions I think as I'm not really a studio animal, it becomes a very severe mirror after a while when I listen back, I think god I've been singing like that all these years and that's what it sounds like! And getting away with it! So that's going to be the next project.

Interviewer (ST): Well that's very exciting, thank you very much Archie!

Interviewee (AF): You're very welcome Simon!

***Interview END**