TRADITIONAL SONG.

SEAN O'BOYLE.

TRANSMISSION: Saturday, 16th November, 1974 2215 - 2245

PRE-RECORDED: Sunday, 3rd November, 1974 1400 - 1700

RECORDING NO: TBE45/UM1614U

S.O.B: What is a traditional song? I can best answer that question, I'm sure, with a story and an example.

One summer evening about twenty years ago when I was collecting songs in the mountains of Tyrone, I happened to call into a house in Derrynanaugh, near Altmore. It was early in the evening and I should have known that most of the family would be down in the fields at the hay. They were. But there was one little girl about fourteen years of age, in charge of the place (Margaret McLoughlin was her name) and, cheerfully enough she told me she would sing for me - a wee bit of a song she had learned from her granny.

Margaret McLoughlin "The Jug of Punch" R.P.L. 18532

That was all there was to it. But it was quite clear from Margaret's accent and style of singing and even from the content of the song itself that the song was part of her own environment. She had learned it at home - I should say rather that she had assimilated it. Any song of that kind that has grown out of the environment of the person who sings it, is a traditional song, sung by a traditional singer.

In Ireland such songs are sung in two languages, Irish and English, the older tradition being in Irish. We find in both languages the universal themes of folksong, - love and courtship and marriage; emigration, murder and ship-wreck, and, of course, the theme of Margaret's little song - conviviality. Here's a verse in Irish in praise of Whiskey, beginning with the confident assertion that

"No seed ever went into the ground
As good as the grain of barley".

Hugh Devaney "An Bhanaltra" R.P.L. 19969

S.O.B: The flow of the words and the lilt of the music in that song form such a corporate entity that one can understand the reluctance of some singers to sing English translations of Irish words. William Carleton, the great nineteenth century novelist from Tyrone, tells us of this feeling among singers in his time. Speaking of his mother, who had a beautiful voice and sang generally in her native Gaelic, he writes:

"She had a prejudice against singing the Irish airs to English words; an old custom of the country was thereby invaded, and an association disturbed which habit had rendered dear to her. I remembered on one occasion, when she was asked to sing the English version of that touching melody, 'The Red-haired Man's Wife' she replied, 'I'll sing it for you, but the English words and the air are like a quarrelling man and wife; the Irish melts into the tune, but the English doesn't - "an expression," says Carleton "scarcely less remarkable for its beauty than its truth".

by that time

English had however become the medium of the country poet just as for years it had been the language of the ballad-singer in the towns. There was not such a great alteration in the singing style of the people - especially in the matter of pitch, mode, and intonation. Women traditional singers still sing at a very high pitch - a fact necessitated originally, I suppose, by the desire of Gaelic singers to ornament their melodic lines. Just listen to these few verses, one sung in Irish by a native speaker from Donegal and the other by a Fermanagh woman in English - notice the high pitch of the voice and the use of decoration in the melody. Here's the Gaelic singer, Kitty Gallagher from Gweedore:

Kitty Gallagher "Fiach O'Domhnaill" R.P.L: 18540

And now, singing English words that are not even of Irish origin Mrs. Brigid Tunney from Garvery, Fermanagh

Mrs. B. Tunney "The Lowlands of Holland" R.P.L. 20026

S.O.B.

Well, so much for pitch and ornamentation in our traditional songs, but these songs have other characteristics not easily demonstrable in short extracts - musical characteristics like melodic and rhythmic variation in different verses and what I might call linguistic characteristics like singing on consonants - especially l and m and n. Most of these features can be noted in the singing of Paddy Tunney. He has absorbed the style of his mother Brigid whom you have just heard but has added his own individual powers of interpretation to the songs he has learned from her. Here he is singing "The Mountain Streams where the Moorcocks crow".

Paddy Tunney: "The Mountain Streams" R.P.L. 18539

S.O.B: Paddy's the boy that can"rowl" it, as the fiddlers say. And yet there is nothing specifically Irish in the versification of the song he has just sung. To illistrate what I mean by that, I'd like you to listen to a song which in its verse structure belongs to an ancient Gaelic measure. It has a shape or form which Tom Moore in all his adaptations of English words to Irish airs never once hit upon. In Irish it is called Ochtfhoclach and in French I am told it is known as Rime Couée. Here's a stanza in Irish:

Is iomdha slí sin
A bíos ag daoine
Ag cruinniu piosaí
sa' deanamh stóir
Sa laghad a smaoineas
Ar ghiorra an tsaoil seo
Go mbéimid sínte
Faoin leac go foíll

And a few lines in imitative English from a folk-poet:

From sweet Dungannon
To Ballyshannon
From Cullyhanna
to ould Arboe
I've roved and rambled
Coroused and gambled
Where songs did thunder
And whiskey flour.

Now listen to Robert Cinnamond sigging just that :

Robert Cinnamond "Ah from sweet Dungannon" R.P.L. LP 24851

ALTERNATIVE

This recording is not on the list I asked for but it should be available in R.P.L. If it cannot be got I can substitute (with a little manipulation of the script) "Moorlough Mary" R.P.L. 19587 by John Doherty. But I'd prefer Robert Cinnamond's song, as it fits the script perfectly - S.O.B)

S.O.B: And now from Tyrone to the Mourne Country for another type of song which is distinct by Irish in words and manner and music. Though you'll hear none of the ring of Irish metrics in it, you'll hear echoes of the Gaelic Aisling or Vision Poetry - in which, you may remember, the poet confronted with a most beautiful maiden inquires in admiration of her, if she is a goddess like Venus or Aurora or even if she is Helen of Troy.

The song is called "The Maid of Balladoo" and when I first asked Joe Brannigan to sing it for me he asked me if I'd want it sung to piano accompaniment. When I told him I wasn't looking for anything of the sort he said "Oh, I see! You just want the Ras Bar - as good a description of unaccompanied traditional singing as ever I heard. And when I asked him where Balladoo was I got this answer, full of the local pride which underlies so many of our folksongs:

Speech Band R.P.L. 19352

Balladoo.....best people in the world.

Joe Brannigan "The Maid of Balladoo" R.P.L. 19352

S.O.B. That weaver's shuttle may have flown as nimbly as his poetry, but both were fated to be swallowed up in the whirring machines of The Industrial Revolution. The small towns of Ulster at that period offered much needed employment to countryfolk with experience in home-weaving. Into the towns they flocked among people with different ideas and ideals and many of them lost touch with their cultural roots. But among them were some who brought into their new environment the social habits of the countryside - their evening ceilí, with fiddling piping and singing.

To such a group in Keady, Co. Armagh the Makem family still belongs. Baturally enough by now their tradition is a mixture of English Irish and Scottish strains. Sarah Makem is a world famous exponent of it. You may remember that it was her version of the English "Seventeen Come Sunday" that gave its name and its theme-song to the BBC's first Folk Music Series twenty years ago-"As I Roved Out".

Now I should like you to hear what I consider to be her greatest song. Her enunciation is clear, her melodic lines undecorated, and her intonation as free as the air that blows around the hills of Keady. She heard this song first of all she told me "at a dance, away out in Derrynoose.

Sarah Makem: "The Month of January" R.P.L. 18535

S.O.B: I'm certain that's an Irish tune and I'm nearly as sure that the words are of English origin. Among my reasons for so thinking is this, that the last verse is a warning to all pretty fair maidens No Irish song that I know, whether in Gaelic or in English contains such a warning. The Irish girl left lamenting in song, invariably protests her undying love for her "false young man," The song has come over from England, and like many another of its kind has been adapted to an Irish air. But let me hasten to add that sometimes Irish songs - even songs in the Irish language - have been written to English and Scottish airs.

Then of course there are songs like Frank McPeake's top-hit "Will ye go, lassie go?" Though he first sang it for me in the shadow of a Belfast linen-mill he had learned it years before in his native place, Ballymacpeake in Derry. You might be excused for thinking that a song learned traditionally by Frank McPeake in Ballymacpeake must be Irish in origin - but only if you have never heard of the Plantation of Ulster.

As a matter of fact Frank's song is a naturalised fragment of a song by the Scots poet Tannahill called The Brael of Ballquihidder, Frank, being no believer in The Raw Bar sang it for me to his own accompaniment on the Uilleann Pipes.

Frank McPeake "Will ye go lassie go?" R.P.L. 18290

S.O.B. Beannacht agaibh. Goodnight now.