

Roger Watson - Gold Badge Citation  
November 2022

## **INTRODUCTION**

“Renaissance Man” is a description often used loosely, but in Roger Watson’s case appears totally appropriate. His influence and work as a professional folk musician has been immense and definitive: a bandleader, solo singer, instrumentalist, dance caller, songwriter, vocal arranger, inter-cultural activist, linguist, keynote speaker, dancer, writer, thinker and folk animateur.

We have just a few minutes to reflect and celebrate Rogers 60 years of involvement with English Folk Music. Born in 1946 in Mansfield, his career was suddenly cut short by a debilitating stroke in 2010.

We are delighted to be part of Roger’s deserved recognition by the awarding of the Gold Badge and although I have been asked to write and prepare this citation, the information in it rests on the shoulders of many contributors who I will thank in their respective sections.

## **BANDLEADER AND PERFORMER**

I first met Roger as a performing musician in the Summer of 1972, when both our bands were guests at The Newton Abbot Folk Festival in Devon. Roger in Muckram Wakes with Helen Watson and John Tams and myself with Staverton Bridge. Previously, Roger had performed as a duo with **Colin Cater** from 1967.

In 1973 John Tams left Muckram Wakes and John and Suzie Adams joined. Roger’s drive and energy is shown by the fact that Muckram Wakes were soon a full-time touring outfit. Muckram Wakes then provided the foundation for The New Victory Band. These ensembles were part of a new movement to vernacularise country dance music and focus on regional repertoire and styles and their influence is still apparent, through their recordings and followers.

Roger’s instrumental skills were recognised by Hohner who commissioned three handbooks on English and Anglo Concertinas and Melodeon with both treble clef and tab notation.

## **INTER-CULTURAL WORK AND ‘TAPS’**

His inter-cultural projects reveal a huge appetite for musical adventure and a fearlessness to tackle any idea, instrument, musical or social challenge he saw relevant. In 1989, he formed the Folk Development Agency **Traditional Arts Projects (TAPS)** based in Bracknell. He directed the project for the whole of its 19-year life and Arts Council funding gave Roger and **TAPS** the freedom to develop work which has a strong legacy today.

**TAPS** first ensemble project was **Roots Progress** which offered traditional tunes in improvisation workshops to musicians with other stylistic backgrounds. Ensembles from this scheme played many community events and the musicians became gradually more closely involved with each other. The first instrumentalist from another culture Roger played with was Indian percussionist **Iqbal Khan Pathan** who is still a friend.

This activity led to the formation of **The One World Band** in 1994: one of the first really successful initiatives to use the skills of musicians from around the world that were living in the UK. **Mauricio Venegas Astorga** had arrived here as a refugee from the Pinochet regime in Chile and he and Roger became good friends and close colleagues. Together they founded **The One World Band**.

**My Village -Your Village** was a song writing project started in 1995 creating a cultural link between children in Wherwell, UK and Mauricio's home village of Maule in Chile. The project involved the children in each place creating song lyrics about their life and environment, set to traditional melodies from their respective cultures.

Video and audio recordings were made and exchanged between the two communities, well before such things became commonplace thanks to the internet. **My Village-Your Village** also gave rise to the song **Beneath Our Changing Sky** which was subsequently arranged for, and recorded by, local folk choirs.

**Alianza** 1991-93, was a unique and very successful collaboration between English and Chilean musicians. Roger instigated the project but did not play in it himself, taking a supportive and developmental role.

The energy and influence of **TAPS** is apparent in the work of **Musiko Musika**, founded by **Mauricio**, together with **Rachel Pantin**. The two of them met while working on a TAPS project.

In 1998 the group **Boka Halat** was co-founded by Roger and Gambian percussionist **Musa Mboob** and used similar principles to the **One World Band**. **Boka Halat** career highlights included top spots at Sidmouth International and Towersey Festivals, the BBC stage at WOMAD Festival, national touring, and live appearances on BBC Radio 3. **Boka Halat** had a particularly strong impact through their ceilidh sets in which Roger would put his dance calling skills to most effective use. English Folk music always had a fundamental role underpinning **Boka Halat** repertoire and project activities.

Roger describes this work in general terms as INTER-cultural, rather than CROSS- or MULTI- cultural. This is because it involves finding common musical ground to start with and then adding elements from all the cultures involved, to produce something that none of them could make on their own.

Roger used his deep language skills to broaden international understanding through folk music working with **The European Network for Traditional Music and Dance** (ENTMD). This was an EU funded initiative which took folk development workers from different countries and asked them to collaborate.

Through a project called "**Public Domain**", **TAPS** introduced the idea that lyrics of traditional songs, having gone through generational and regional changes in the past, could and should be made contemporary. The theme might remain but might be updated and the setting changed to be relevant to contemporary experiences.

## **SONGWRITING**

Roger is a powerful and significant songwriter: both re-working lyrics or making meaning through new songs with strong regional themes. From 18 years old he was writing songs

about the Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire mining area where he grew up. Songs he has written are still sung by a wide spectrum of performers including **Keith Kendrick and Sylvia Needham**.

Roger's song **Watercress-O** was recorded by **The Young Tradition** in 1966 and included on the LP **A Map Of Derbyshire** in 1973. The lyrics were published as traditional and discovered by **Issy Emeny**, who wrote a new tune and arranged it for her Somerset Folk Choir. In contrast to some other songwriters, Roger is delighted and says that the song has started its journey to becoming a folk song. This is surely an accolade for any songsmith aiming to write relevant and popular songs in the folk idiom. It also reveals Roger's open and generous attitude to sharing his own work.

### **CHOIR LEADING**

Roger's work as a choir leader and vocal arranger deserve mention here. **The Alton Choir, The Broughton Village Choir and the Andover Museum Loft Singers** are all groups which Roger had a strong hand in developing from scratch. **The Loft Singers** in particular continue Roger's work in performing his vocal arrangements. The late **Paul Sartin** was a close and valued colleague of Roger's in arranging for and leading this choir. With others I share an enormous sense of loss at Paul's untimely death this Autumn.

It was central to Roger's philosophy that anyone who wanted to, could join his choirs. There was no requirement to read music and there was a non-auditioned approach, and these features have now become standard practice for folk choirs across the country. Roger encouraged everyone to listen and learn, and to move from part to part. Roger's concept for these community choirs was to borrow from West Gallery and other harmony singing traditions. Many thanks to **Carolyn Robson** and **Sheena Smith** for providing information on Roger's choir work and Carolyn for stepping in at short notice to direct the Loft Singers for the Gold Badge event.

### **CODA**

The energy and vision provided by Roger's work has brought English traditional tunes and songs to a completely new and vibrant existence: in inter-cultural contexts, in the formation of ground-breaking projects, in the creation of new songs and dances by and for our young people.

I'm prompted to finish with a Roger Watson quote, which my Wren Music co-founder **Marilyn Tucker** often uses. It reminds us of the resonance and validity of folk music as a people's music, a voice heard where before there was silence, a voice for the young people of tomorrow when we say . . . "I am folk too".

**Written by  
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