

Frankie Armstrong

VOICE WORKSHOPS

"But people know nothing about putting words together into songs, they know nothing of how to sing a song, nor do they understand beating a drum and dancing for joy . . . human beings are lonely and they live alone because they know nothing of the gift of festival . . . and I have promised the eagle mother to teach them how to feast . . . and behold the decrepit eagles become young again; for when people feast all old eagles become young. For which reason the eagle is the sacred bird of song and dance festival".

(From an Eskimo myth called "The Sacred Gift of Song, Dance and Festivity Comes to the People").

Probably my earliest memory, from when I was about three, is of dancing up and down on the old deal kitchen table wearing my viyella nightie, the windows draped in wartime blackout, singing "Lulla, lulla, lulla bye bye, do you want the stars to play with, the moon to run away with . . ." While as a child and adolescent I became mostly interested in drawing and painting, that sense of the magic and mystery of music, song and dance and its ability to take us out of the everyday world, out beyond our limited selves stayed with me.

I always sang to the radio, the songs from the Complete Home Entertainer with my parents round the piano, on coach outings, in the school choir.

I first sang in public at the age of sixteen, when I joined a Skiffle group. When I first heard the blues and some of the folk music of the south of the United States, it was as if the earthy excitement, the physicality, was a true outpouring of the soul. Singers such as Bessie Smith, Leadbelly and Woodie Guthrie seemed to have something direct and powerful to say through their songs without the overlay that commercial music imposed on the experience.

I felt flattered and rewarded when people said they were moved by my singing, but I date any ability I have to communicate through song to 1963 when I was twenty two and, I and my voice underwent a strange transformation. A friend, who had listened to a great deal of traditional folk music, said that if I wanted to do the songs justice and interpret them in a more authentic way, then "I needed to take my voice up and harden it, or down and harden it". In fact the up or down bit didn't matter, but the "harden it" certainly did.

While I knew what he meant, I had no idea how to go about doing this. I could hear that the quality of the voice of any of the finest traditional singers was different from the way I'd been using mine. There was a vibrant earthy sinewy tone that I lacked. The only way I could think of finding out how they produced this was to imitate their sound. So for the best part of a weekend I locked myself away with a record player and tape recorder and simply listened and imitated, over and over again until I found a way of producing my voice that was more like the (mostly Scots and Irish) women I was using as models. By the end of this weekend I found I was in touch with a new and quite different voice quality: one that in some inexplicable way seemed to come from deeper inside me, while not actually being a deeper voice. What I eventually found for myself, was the voice used all around the world by people who still sing and chant as accompaniment to their everyday activities. This voice has survived down thousands of years before the very recent formal ideas of "correct" singing were formulated or the microphone changed people's ideas in the west along with the sound most of us produce.

It was a long time before I was able to find words to describe the change, both as a person and as a singer, that this difference in the way I used my voice heralded. It lies somewhere in the paradox that it makes me, at one and the same time, feel most fully myself, and also a vehicle for the collective voice to speak/sing through. It is the egoless quality of the finest folk music that I now realise was what attracted me to it back in my teens. And I'm still being constantly surprised by the new awarenesses and avenues that this voice opens up for me and others.

I first met Ethel Raim in the States in 1973 and heard her group of six women, 'The Penny Whistlers', singing Balkan Russian and Yiddish songs with power and authenticity.

I discovered that Ethel ran Balkan singing classes and I was lucky enough to attend three of these while I was there. Though I was already using my voice in the way Ethel was teaching, and much as I loved

learning the songs, it was the 'warm up' exercises that I enjoyed most. They allowed for improvisation, for exploring areas of the voice that even as a singer I hadn't explored before. They also created a lot of spontaneous fun and laughter.

The most striking thing about these workshops was seeing how some of the women grew in confidence and a sense of their own authority over so short a period as they let their voices out freely and fully. What was also very clear was that we all left feeling a great sense of well being - energised and animated by the evening. As a social worker at the time, I was awakened to the therapeutic as well as creative side to these workshops: something which was to become much clearer when I started to run them myself.

I got the idea of adopting and adapting Ethel's approach when in 1975 Brian Pearson and I were in California at a Folk Life Festival. Ethel was running classes for sixty or more people, most of whom did not want to be "singers". Indeed, many would have said "Oh, I can't sing a note" - "I'm tone deaf", "I was always told to go to the back and mouthe". I watched Ethel turn this motley group into something that sounded like a Yugoslav village chorus, in the space of three hours. It dawned on me that, when listening to village or tribal music from around the world there seemed to be no such thing as "singing out of tune" or "incorrectly", and that this open-throated, open air style of singing is inherently natural. It's something we are often taught not to do by music or choir teachers who wish to mould our voices into a particular, much sweeter, rounder vocal tone. My guess is that once someone has been told that their natural voice is undesirable it often creates so much anxiety and tension that it then becomes difficult to be still enough inside to hear and reproduce notes freely and accurately. I came back to London bubbling with excitement at what I'd experienced with Ethel and with my new found conviction we are all capable of enjoying using our voices melodically. Of course this isn't to say that everyone can be a great interpreter of song. That is a gift of a different order. But because there are some who have very special gifts it doesn't mean that the rest 'can't' sing. Primitive societies may have their Shaman epic and narrative balled singers, but everyone else doesn't feel they have to compare themselves. They take part in the communal festivities.

So back to London 1975, some friends I'd been enthusing to invited me to run a workshop for them. By word of mouth some twenty of us gathered and, with the help of my tape recordings of Ethel's exercises, we held the first Frankie Armstrong/Ethel Raim-style workshop. We all had such a good time that there was a request to meet again

the following week. And for every Thursday evening for the next three years workshops ran in pub or rehearsal rooms. By the end of that time, I'd given up full-time work and so was off on tour for longish periods, but was also getting invitations to run workshops in settings as varied as folk festivals, community centres, youth clubs, conferences, psychiatric units, growth centres, theatre companies, woman's centres etc., here and abroad.

I've run workshops with as few as five or as many as a hundred and five, ranging from an hour to a week in duration. Of course these create different experiences - the larger and shorter the group the more it is a "celebration in sound", while smaller groups and longer sessions mean individuals can explore and extend themselves, as well as collectively improvising and celebrating. The need of the group will dictate how much time is spent on technique and how much freely experimenting and simply having fun with the voice. But whatever the circumstances I'll usually begin the same way. In a circle, we begin by imagining ourselves working together hoeing a field say, - helping the rhythm and movement along with a very simple call and response chant. It's amazing how quickly a group of strangers, in some wooden floored community hall, begin to sound like villagers from Eastern Europe or Africa, or anywhere else where people work and sing together. I accompany many of the vocal exercises with simple movement, as for most people the voice seems to flow and free up when the whole body is also involved. I try and find settings and situations that help us imagine ourselves naturally using this sound. In many ways I feel the key to what I do is to free up the imagination: then the voice will follow.

I see my task as giving permission and encouragement and attempting to find the key that will unlock any tightened throats or inhibited sounds. We'll go on to imagine ourselves calling from mountain tops, scything corn fields, pounding maize, calling good news to the end of the garden bringing the cattle from across the valley. To begin with I structure and lead the exercises, but gradually others feel free to invent simple calls and soon it's possible to get everyone round the circle to improvise their own call for the group to respond back to. In case that sounds too petrifying, let me reassure you that I always say that anyone is free to "pass", but despite most people's nerves and fears this happens very rarely (and is fine if it does). I'll certainly offer hints and help with relaxing the throat, with posture and breathing, "placing" the voice etc, but, I hope in a way that frees rather than inhibits. At first it was an act of faith that each person had this strong powerful natural voice inside, but after seven and half years I now know it to be true. Participants constantly surprise themselves by the sounds they find themselves able to make.

You would think that after more than seven years, I would have reached the limit of what it's possible to improvise and create with just the vocal chords and silence, but the permutations and possibilities seem endless, and it's rare for a workshop not to add to this in some way. Sometimes I teach an Eastern European part song, occasionally an English song though it's more difficult to maintain.

At the end of a workshop it's almost always true to say in the words of one participant that "I feel more connected up". This seems to be so both "vertically" - inside myself - and "horizontally" - with the whole group and the individuals in it. It's as if we have tapped some area of the collective unconscious that makes us more fully ourselves and also connects us to our history and to the group.

These sound rather grandiose claims for something that is in essence as simple and accessible as the workshops - they are more like a shedding process rather than learning to do something "correctly". After early childhood we put so much of our voices "on ice" and limit ourselves both in speaking and melodic sounds. Our voice is the bit of ourselves that connects up the inner and outer world. The voice is the "muscle of the soul": it is through our voice that we make a bridge between the inner and the outer world, it may be through our eyes that we go from the outer to the inner and the eyes are called the "mirror to the soul". But mirrors can distort and shatter. Muscles may be strong or flabby, flexible or taut, but they cannot lie, they cannot distort. I increasingly feel that our voice tells more of the truth of us than we know and so can be one road back to lost individual and shared truths.

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