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Accessing Folk Singing - Editorial

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Let union be in all our hearts,
Let all our hearts be joined as one.
We'll end the day as we began,
We'll end it all in pleasure.[2]

On a weekly basis in pubs, community halls, and clubs across England, singers gather to sing folk songs, together and for each other. For many it is a social event as well as a musical one. The chorus for the popular folk song 'Come me Lads', quoted above, in many ways exemplifies the idealised notion of participatory folk singing in England as a space where all are welcome to take part and enjoy the pleasures of singing together. Although such sentiments run deep among participants in the folk scene, the reality of this 'union' of hearts is more complex, with many unwritten rules, cultural expectations and physical access issues to negotiate for those looking to join in (Hield & Mansfield, 2019). In fact, research suggests that the contemporary folk singing scene in England has a distinctly narrow and aging demographic with little overall diversity, mostly white British men and women over retirement age (Kay, 2025; MacKinnon, 1993). The Access Folk research project (2022-2027), the team behind this special edition, critically engages with the conventions of participatory folk singing in England by using participatory and action research methods to explore strategies for increased access, inclusion and participation in the folk singing scene. Access Folk addresses how people, and in particular those who are marginalised within English society, gain access to the skills, repertoire, physical spaces and social environments that constitute participatory folk singing activities in contemporary England. This special issue of the International Journal of Traditional Arts critically examines issues associated with accessing participatory folk singing activities in England, drawing on academic and participant perspectives.

Although the terms *access* and *accessibility* are used to address barriers in a wide range of situations, researchers' attempts to define or theorise these terms are often in relation to the practicalities of accessing public services, transport and the built environment (e.g. Batty, 2009; Penchansky and Thomas 1981; Ingram, 1971). Since the early 2000s, issues around digital access as well as disability and the socio-cultural barriers have come increasingly into focus (e.g. Harrington et al., 2023; Iwarsson & Ståhl, 2009; Cass et al. 2005; Imrie & Kumar, 1998). Ribot and Peluso argues for a theory of access around property and resources that takes into account a range of legal, social, economic, cultural aspects connected through 'webs and

[1] The Access Folk project explores ways of increasing and diversifying participation in folk singing in England. It is funded through UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship (MR/V023837/1) running 2022-2027 at the University of Sheffield. Fay Hield leads the project. She is Professor of Music combining audience research, ethnomusicology and artistic research as an academic, a practising performer and as director of Soundpost, a community music organisation. Esbjörn Wettermark is a Research Associate on the project. He has researched and worked with folk and traditional music in the UK, Sweden and Vietnam. With a background in music education and arts management, he has a particular interest in issues around cultural policy and intangible cultural heritage. Kirsty Kay is a researcher and editor. was a research associate on the project 2022–2024. She is co-founder of The Editing Cooperative, which seeks to provide equitable writing support in academic publishing.
[2] Chorus from the folk song 'Come me Lads', no. 1238 in the Roud folk song index.

bundles of powers', which in turn defines an individual or groups ability to influence issues related to the property or resource in question (2003: 159). In considering how different strands of power interact, they come to a definition of access which is less dependent on 'rights' to property or resources but instead considers access as 'the ability to derive benefits from things'" (ibid.: 153). Whether or not we can consider 'folk singing' as property, Ribot and Peluso's notion of how multiple strands of power (and conversely, the lack of power) affects access, and their definition of access as the 'ability' to benefit, resonates with Access Folk's research. By connecting access with *ability*, we also position our approach to critically addressing access issues to the Social Model of Disability, which argues that inability to participate is not the fault of the individual but due to 'disabling environments, barriers and cultures' (Oliver, 2004: 21). As such, Access Folk's approach is to work together with participants in the folk singing scene, and those who feel marginalised or excluded from it, to consider how changes to current conventions and contexts in the scene could make more people able to take part. This is relevant because although the English folk scene has continued to develop and find new audiences, it has been noted that the folk club format and participatory folk singing is in decline (Hield & Mansfield, 2019). The relatively high status and central role of folk singing within the English folk scene sets it apart from other folk scenes in the UK where instrumental music has had more attention, for example in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Songs, as opposed to tunes, were the focus of some of England's most well-known collectors in the first folk revival from the late 1800s, notably Cecil Sharp (1907). A more formal folk scene developed in England from the 1950s and 60s with the "folk club" as its core venue and framework for participation (Bean, 2014; MacKinnon, 1993). Although folk singers perform on stage in many different contexts, professionally or for community enjoyment, the sharing of songs in folk clubs (often in a pub's function room), and other social contexts in the English folk scene, is generally regarded less as a performance opportunity and more as a form of participation. Singers take turns to sing songs and anyone joins in choruses or verses as appropriate. Singing in the contemporary folk scene draws on conventions established in the 1960s folk revival, but similar participatory song practices have a long history in England and have been closely connected with pubs and other drinking establishments for centuries (Roud, 2017; Dunn, 2015; Hailwood, 2014).

With its focus on contemporary folk singing and access as forms of practice, this special issue expands a body of scholarship which has long been devoted to historical, musicological and textual analysis of folk song in England. Represented here are writers from diverse settings and with different perspectives: including event organisers, singers and songwriters, students, academics, and educators. Through these case studies, the special issue illuminates some of the complex and sometimes surprising relationships between academic and practitioner experiences of accessing folk singing — relationships that scholars have perhaps long recognised, it seems, but only interrogated in a fragmentary way.

This collection grew out of a Singposium (Hield & Grindley, 2025) hosted at the University of Sheffield in February 2023. This event brought together academics, practitioners and organisers of folk singing to share their ideas and expertise. The discussions and insights gained from this collaboration across approaches to the same topic was exhilarating, and we were inspired to attempt to capture it in published form. What follows is a mixture of academic research and reflective discussion pieces building on contributions at the Singposium. The process of transferring reflections and discussions to written form, for publication in an academic journal, has been complex. While the editors of this specific edition are committed to participatory research, participatory approaches to publishing is a rather new field and we have had to navigate many previously untrodden paths full of obstacles.

The notion that voices from affected groups should be heard in academic journals is gaining increasing traction in ethnomusicology but the ways that we can effectively provide such spaces within the remit of academic journals is not straightforward (see for example,

Smith, 2022). In their review of approaches to participatory research, Scher et al note that with regards to dissemination 'researchers must seek ways to balance their academic objectives with the desired outputs from community members and other various target audiences' (2023, p.19). The interest and engagement we had for our Singposium from within the folk scene told us that they wanted to present their reflections, their research and their knowledge from within the scene together with and alongside the work of university-based academics. Therefore, the idea that we should bring a similar joined-up approach to publishing was a natural, albeit complicated, conclusion.

While many journals have the capacity to accept formats such as thought pieces which are typically shorter and do not undergo the same peer review process, we took a more open approach to submissions. We accepted a range of pieces and then worked with editors and reviewers to determine how these could be framed and either be taken forward to a double-blind review process or supported by the special edition editors to be adapted as reflective contributions. While it is important to the reputation of the journal and for future users of these contributions to know what is conventional academic research and what is not, drawing that distinction has, at times, been difficult. All our contributors are conducting some form of research and are a mix of singer, scholar and organiser. Most are singers or organisers in the area they are discussing and many have undergone academic training in some discipline (though not all in ethnomusicology or related areas), and are familiar with linking ideas to existing theory; all have used some form of input (or data) from 'the field' to draw conclusions from, and all are critical thinkers. As such, the distinction between reflective discussions and academic research findings can seem blurred. We want to be clear which contributions have passed the requirements of a double-blind academic peer review process, and which have not. The contributions labelled as 'academic' by Hield, Wettermark & Kay, and Mansfield have passed double blind peer review. The other contributions, labelled as 'reflective', are offered as contextualised discussion, though we want to emphasise that this in no way diminishes their authors' expertise in exploring the contexts they are discussing, or the value of their conclusions.

Diverse author groups is an issue for participatory research publishing, where contributors are typically unaffiliated. Most of the contributors are independent scholars and practitioners with no academic institutional affiliation. To ensure consistency with regards to ethics in particular, the editors of this special edition discussed industry standard ethical requirements and processes with the authors, offering guidance on how to gain informed consent, and the authors confirmed they had followed such practices. The work included in this volume follows guidance on responsible research publications endorsed by the Committee Of Publication Ethics (COPE) where possible (Wager & Kleinert, 2011). In some cases it was appropriate to retrospectively visit people for permission to use their data, or insights gained for reflection, for this publication. We are satisfied that all material, identifiable or otherwise, contained in this volume is presented ethically, though not always having obtained prior approval through an institutional ethical review procedure.

Participatory research, by definition, will include different voices and styles of engagement. This is also true for outputs produced through such approaches. Although edited for clarity, the work presented in this issue includes a variety of styles and voices, each one representative of the authors' backgrounds and preferences. For a reader accustomed to academic journals and thorough editing for style and consistency, this could seem unusual or even suggest a lack of quality. On the contrary, retaining this plurality of style is a conscious approach by the editors. By inviting researchers from different backgrounds to engage with texts in the same journal issue, and move between the personal, the reflective, the critical and the opinionated we hope to capture the same energy and continue the lively discussions from our 2023 Singposium.

The two academic articles address issues around barriers and access through singers' experiences and repertoire choices respectively. Fay Hield, Esbjörn Wettermark and Kirsty Kay present the core findings of the first two years of the Access Folk research project's findings. They use a mixed-methods approach, including a large survey, focus groups and peer-interviews, to gather information from a large number of people involved in and outside of the folk singing scene. This covers the different kinds of experiences across the demographic makeup of the folk singing scene in England, and the efforts organisers have made to make their activities more accessible to people with marginalised lived experience. They argue that some of the changes needed to make the scene more accessible, at times directly contradict current performance norms, and they discuss the impacts of implementing such changes, for both potential and existing singers. Paul Mansfield explores English folk singers' considerations of the environments they are performing in, and how this affects their repertoire choice and delivery. He notes that the generic folk club model established in the 1960s remains a core element of the folk scene but that new formats and communities are developing around folk song and music. Outside of the rule bound confines of the folk club, the ambivalence around what songs and styles constitute folk singing allows for strategic decisions for singers negotiating new audience's preconceptions of the genre. This in turn, argues Mansfield, has potential to develop a bottom-up cultural movement that can "reconstitute folk music for contemporary contexts and community purposes, unconstrained by the conventions established by previous generations". These academic contributions lay the foundation for the reflective pieces which draw more directly on the lived experience of the writers, many of whom have lifelong engagement with folk singing and the folk scene in England.

The reflective pieces cover a wide range of experiences and contexts. Laura Midgley reflects on her dual heritage in relation to an Irish Music Festival in Athens, Greece. The festival is a melting pot of languages, and positionalities in relation to Diaspora. Midgley highlights the emotional tensions surrounding musical experimentation in such a context, relating to a deeper sense of the musician's identity and the psychological accessibility of integrating different musical styles. Hugh Miller examines the repertoire lists over multiple events from two folk clubs in the East Midlands, UK to better understand the nature of material that is currently practiced as 'folk song'. He finds a good representation of 'traditional' material, but highlights how this sits within a far wider reaching set of materials spanning long time periods and diverse geographies as well as types of authorship. Jessie Thompson draws on a roundtable discussion at the 2023 Access Folk Singposium to reflect on how singing style and vocal choices in folk singing affects accessibility. The piece quotes exchanges between panelists Frankie Armstrong, Kate Thompson and Paul Wilson as well as anonymous audience members. Thompson argues that the vocal preferences and expectations within the English folk scene create a somewhat contradictory context where considerable acceptance of individual voice style on the one hand is tempered by unwritten rules and expectations which are difficult to negotiate for new singers. Tony Phillips chronicles the first five years of the Rolling On project, where he and a number of other folk song enthusiasts have travelled the UK to visit hundreds of folk clubs and talked to participants and organisers about their activities. He argues that there is a wealth of volunteer-led participatory singing contexts included under the umbrella of 'folk' and much for newcomers to explore. And finally, Christopher and Morag Butler present their experience of managing folk singing activities through the process of setting up their community folk venue in a deprived coastal area of Kent, UK. They describe their conscious focus on inclusivity for people who have been marginalised and the impacts of particular approaches.

This collection of academic and reflective pieces by no means traverses all the facets of accessing folk singing in England. Yet, the special issue offers a glimpse into some important practical, ethical, and methodological implications of addressing accessibility in folk singing,

ranging from the personal engagement with voice and repertoire (Thompson and Miller), the social event (Phillips and Butler & Butler) and place (Midgley) to barriers (Hield, Kay and Wettermark) and expectations (Mansfield). The editors hope this body of work can contribute to further critical participatory and action research scholarship that will help practitioners, communities, non-government organisations, researchers, policymakers, and other stakeholders to design and implement more effective initiatives to support access to cultural heritage activities.

As the values of participatory approaches are becoming increasingly recognised across academia, the question of how we engage with such approaches to also produce effective and ethical publications remains. We hope that this special issue in particular, and Access Folk's wider open access publications (Hield, 2025), will encourage audiences from within the folk scene as well as academics to dip their toes into different forms of research and knowledge creation. By publishing side by side, we want to continue our Singposium style of engagement through speaking with, together and alongside one another, and inviting new interlocutors to engage with the discussion.

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