

DAD'S TRAD

Back in the '60s in the UK, Gerry Rafferty and Billy Connolly were a folk duo, the Humblebums. Barbara Dickson (Carr) (the pop singer) sang folk. And two sons of Ian Campbell — of the famous Ian Campbell group — have surfaced in UB-40. Though not all of the British invasion band members started out in folk, many of them used traditional folksongs or tunes that have become as popular here as Traffic's version of "John Barleycorn." And so, at first tentatively and now with regularity, traditional folk music from Britain, Ireland and Scotland travels to New York. Ensemble instrumentalists from Ireland (the Chieftains, De Danaan, Planxty) and Scotland (the Boys of the Lough, Silly Wizard, Barde) perform regularly to SRO crowds at the Bottom Line and sometimes at Carnegie Hall. Less widely known but equally important individual instrumentalists and singers can be found in smaller clubs and concert halls throughout the year. Among these are those national treasures, the a capella singers.

A capella singing is what you're doing when you're mimicking your favorite group in the shower, or tapping on the steering wheel and harmonizing along with the hits. Just you and your voice (without jeopardizing its definition, singing along in the privacy of your room or car against a background of records or radio can be called a capella). Whether it's gospel choirs, momma's lullabies or an all-Ireland singing champ in concert, there's something special about music that, with a bit of forethought, anyone with the proper enthusiasm can participate in. Out of this "anyone can" ethic, pub singing and local singing families were born. "Most British Isles traditional singing is done solo," Heather Wood said in a recent interview. "There are only a few families with a tradition of close harmony singing — there's the Copper family from Sussex, on the southeast seacoast of Britain, and they've been the local singers forever. And the Cantwells. And actually, that's about it. Most of the pub singers are unaccompanied soloists. That's true of the musicians as well. In fact, instrumentals are often played by several different instruments in unison. They all play the melody. But harmonizing, except of course in church, is unusual in traditional British Isles music.

Heather Wood, one-third of the now-defunct traditional folksinging group The Young Tradition, and one-half (with former YT member Royston Wood) of No Relation, credits the Copper family with "starting it all." "When Royston and Pete Bellamy (the other YT-er and currently a solo singer) and I began as the YT," Wood went on, "we sang songs learned from other performers that were attributed to the Copper family, and then we learned more songs of theirs from records. Eventually we learned songs directly from them. Even so, we'd really pick the songs up later from records. It's too difficult to learn a song after a first hearing, unless you get all the words written out, then



Joe Stevens

Heather Wood

have the tune sung to you over and over until you've memorized it. And when it's the Copper family, you don't ask them to do that for you."

The Young Tradition first performed in the U.S. in 1967 at the Newport Folk Festival and "took the place by storm. They had never heard anything like us before," Heather recalled. "Louie Killen (an ex-skiffle player and folksinger from Northumbria) had already been here, but we were really the first group." The YT were followed closely by many soloists and groups, and that other phenomenon, the rock/folk bands like Pentangle, Steeleye Span, Fairport Convention, and the indescribable Incredible String Band.

New York has become a center of activity for traditional British Isles folk performers in recent years, with programs by folksong societies, in local bars and in the summer at the South Street Seaport. "The scene in England was never big enough to support more than a handful of professionals," Heather told me. She and others have moved here, most to the East Coast, and often pass through New York on tours of folksong societies across the U.S. Joe Heaney, whose faithful recreation of old-style Gaelic and English songs ranks him in the forefront of Irish traditional singers, and Jean Redpath, a Scottish ballad singer with one of the purest sopranos this side of the Met, are two such expatriates. They are frequent guests at Pinewoods Folksong Club monthly concerts (during the summer these are weekly) and Heaney is also a contributor to the Traditional Music From the Isles series at the Eagle Tavern on Wednesday nights. John Roberts and Tony Barrand, two British psychology professors who met while studying at Cornell, and David Jones, another Brit, are known for chanteys (sailing songs), sweet and ribald ballads and music hall songs. John and Tony, Louie Killen, Cyril Tawney (making his first New York, in fact first U.S. appearance) and others will be singing at

the Eagle in the coming months. (For regular up-to-date info about who's playing where, call Folk-Fone, a service of Pinewoods, 594-6876. The tape changes weekly.)

While Heather Wood can be seen (and heard) in traditional settings such as at the Eagle and in folksong concerts, she's been illuminating the secrets of unaccompanied singing to rock 'n' roll audiences as opening act for a band called High Roller (who often play clubs in New York) when they are playing in Hoboken at a small bar-club named the Beat'n Path. On weekends in summer, there will be group chantey singing aboard the Peking, a four-masted barque resting at South Street Seaport. And folk festivals, too numerous to mention, often feature at least one a capella performance.

And there are the records. Vanguard still carries a Young Tradition album, released in 1967, that can be ordered directly from them, or found in local record stores. Folkways, the largest folk music label, is also located in New York and has never gone out of print with any of their thousands of albums, which they will gladly sell you by mail. If you are looking for individual guidance, try Music Inn, a record and instrument shop on West Fourth Street crammed with new and used albums of all sorts, divided (in the folk category) by instrumental, English, Scottish and Irish, as well as chantey singing classifications. New releases are issued monthly by small labels like Innisfree/Green Linnet, Shanachie, Philo and others, all of whom are available by mail, if not currently in stock at Music Inn or elsewhere.

And finally, if you prefer to try new things in the comfort and privacy of your own home, various radio stations including WBAI, WNYC and local college stations feature regular folk music programs. Of special interest is Ed Haber's WBAI interview and music show. Ed often records the Eagle Tavern concerts for nearly-instant replay. One bite you'll be hooked. •

Leslie Berman