

News



ALAN COLE

CECIL SHARP PROJECT

The prolific English folk song collector Cecil Sharp is the focus of a new live project and album by eight hand-picked musicians. Jo Frost gets an insight into the creative process

It's hardly the tense scene of feverish creativity that I was expecting. I'm in deepest Shropshire in the folk equivalent of the *Big Brother* house, although this particular experiment has a more artistic mission. The brief, as devised by Neil Pearson of the Shrewsbury Folk Festival, is to 'create new works that have a resonance and relevance to Cecil Sharp and his collection, with particular attention to his Appalachian travels between 1915-1918'.

With only seven days to come up with enough material for the first of three concerts, one expects the eight artists involved to be frantically at work. Instead the atmosphere within the rambling old farmhouse is one of relaxed conviviality: singer Jackie Oates is baking biscuits; Devon-based songwriter Steve Knightley is mulling over some tunes on his guitar and musicians Andy Cutting and Leonard Podolak are in the garden, sharing a joke and having a sneaky fag. Ensconced in various corners around the rest of the house – littered with instruments and Cecil Sharp's diaries – are the remaining four musicians: Patsy Reid, Caroline Herring, Jim Moray and Kathryn Roberts.

The blueprint for this venture came about following the success of the Darwin Song Project, performed at Shrewsbury Folk Festival two years ago to coincide with the bicentenary of Darwin's birth [see CD and live review in #64].

"Darwin was harder because we had no track record," says Pearson. "I think this is an easier brief – because there are books of songs and diaries." The singer-songwriters don't seem so convinced: "The thing about the Darwin project was that there was no music to



Top: the group's premiere at the Theatre Severn, Shrewsbury on March 24. Sharp kept a diary while in Appalachia which is now available to read online: www.efdss.org

get in the way, but this great epic, world-changing story," says Moray. "Here you have tons of music but no story."

Sharp is often portrayed as an eccentric English Edwardian gentleman who cycled around the countryside befriending old ladies for their folk songs. A music teacher and composer, he collected almost 5,000 folk tunes during his lifetime across England and North America. What tends to divide opinion is his motive for doing so – was he merely appropriating these tunes for his own glory or did he have a greater anthropological intent to save and revive these tunes to preserve English heritage?

"Sharp can best be described as blank canvas," says Knightley. "This is a problem for me as a songwriter. I thought there would be some meaty stuff to find out about the man, but there doesn't seem to be."

What we do know is that aged 56, Sharp headed to Appalachia in the southern US to see what English tunes he could find there. "He had a great love of England and he was looking for the purest expression over there that that he could find of these songs," says Herring, the sole American within the group. What sparks her interest is that Sharp completely ignored the African-American population in Appalachia, which at the time was almost 14%. "It is a myth that there were no African American songs in Appalachia – they just weren't collected. Sharp resisted because he thought they weren't pure. He wanted the most unadulterated English," Herring acknowledges. This contentious topic does elicit a great, bluesy number by Herring and Knightley they call 'Aunt Maria.' It's sung from the viewpoint of a former slave named Maria Tomes who was one of just two African Americans Sharp interviewed.

The Appalachian connection in the group – albeit via his banjo – is Leonard Podolak. Described by Knightley as being "the battery

in the house," Podolak introduces an irreverent tone and also a dance element to the project: "I'm this Polish Ukrainian Canadian Jew teaching five English people, an American and a Scot how to flat foot!" he laughs. He also writes one of the funniest songs: 'Veggie in the Holler,' Sharp had a tough time travelling around Appalachia as a vegetarian, especially when the locals thought that chicken was a vegetable!

Within just two days the group have already come up with an impressive 17 songs. "Certain people in the group can just churn out songs," says Moray somewhat ruefully. "On the first night all the girls went to bed and Steve, myself, Leonard and Andy were sitting in the kitchen and Steve wrote three songs, one after another."

One week later at Cecil Sharp House in London, the 90-minute concert gets a highly enthusiastic reception from the audience. The group's collaboration time in the house seems to have worked its alchemy on another winning subject matter, much to the delight of Pearson.

"It's something the festival feels it's good to be doing," he says. "If the festival remains static, then you're almost taking a step back, so to be moving constantly, doing interesting things, it almost comes round in a bit of a virtuous circle back on the festival because the artists like it and that reputation gets passed around"

For those lucky enough to already have a ticket to this year's sold-out festival, the Cecil Sharp Project will no doubt be one of the highlights of the weekend. Failing that, there's always the excellent CD – a fitting reminder of Sharp's legacy, plus the wealth of singing talent and musicianship behind this project. ●

DATE *The Cecil Sharp Project will perform at the Shrewsbury Folk Festival on August 28*
REVIEW *The album is a Top of the World in this issue – track 2 on the CD (release date September 5)*

ONLINE www.cecilsharpproject.com



We have 5 copies of the CD to give away. Just answer the following question: What is the name of the society Sharp founded which is now based at Cecil Sharp House in London?

See p7 for Songlines competition rules and address details. Closing date September 16 2011