

CDSS Sings—In Accents Clear?

by Deborah Robins and Larry Hanks

Because so many of us enjoy opportunities to honor our collective ethnic heritage through traditional song, we are often faced with a dilemma: to sing or not to sing with “accent.” (Let’s, of course, give leeway to our foreign-born comrades: fine singers such as John Roberts and Tony Barrand, Heather Wood, and Allan Carr, ex-pat Brits and a Scot, respectively.)

If we place “accent” and “dialect” in song text side by side, we can see that one is NOT written in the music; while the other, in fact, is. (Example: “Auld Lang Syne,” “Comin’ Through the Rye,” and Gilbert and Sullivan’s “When a Felon’s Not Engaged in His Employment,” et al.) Above, all are fairly familiar examples of a dialect written into song, as in the text of many a Stephen Foster work: (Ex.: “Gwine to run...,” “Massa...,” “Wellumscope...,” “Long time I trabbled...”.)

For the sake of this conversation, we see that the above song examples have specifics “written in,” as opposed to song lyrics in “plain” English, with no information as to how the words should be pronounced: “The Three Ravens,” “Lord Randall,” and “Barbara Allen.” (“There were three ravens sat on a tree...,” “In Scarlet Town, where I was born...,” etc.)

Which gives us interesting choices: to sing in one’s American own accent, using an accent from the British Isles, or even employing an American Appalachian (read: Southern) accent to “fit” the feel of the text. In American songster Larry Hanks’ experience, there is more concern with more than just subtle pronunciation of various words: “When I sing a Harry Jackson song (a song from the American “cowboy” tradition), I’ve taken in all that stuff about his singing (his accent, lyrics’ jargon, time and place the song came from...) and I give a conscious deliberation, whether or not to repeat (the accent) exactly, or to temper it.” He continues, “I try always to deliver a song in my OWN speech... ALWAYS, if coloring it with something added from my source singer can be done without being presumptuous or distracting, that’s where I have to be careful!”

We sing songs to remember and to move them forward to generations ahead. It is our responsibility, as custodians of these cultural touchstones, as to how much or how little, we insert of ourselves, therein. Although singers help to draw audiences to a song, and bring a song up through the march of time, Hanks advises, it’s often necessary to bring a dash

of urgency where there might be none inherent in the localized accent. “Any inflection to manipulate the tune or rhythm to emphasize some thing that the song is saying, may be useful in making older songs more accessible to modern audiences,” he adds.

In this conversation, we can also consider the music of Brooklyn-born Elliot Charles Adnopoz (a.k.a. Ramblin’ Jack Elliot), who has made a career from (according to Okie Woody Guthrie) of “Sounding more like me than I do!”

Theo Bikel talked to us about singing in accent/dialect thusly: “When I sing in Yiddish, or Hebrew, or Russian, then I’m a folksinger. When I sing in any other languages or dialects, then I’m a performer.”

As singers, let’s concern ourselves with the integrity of a song—it’s time, place, context, and original intent. Let’s give it air to breathe and live (even through our various “interpretations”), without giving it too much of ourSELVES. Whether this means refraining from the temptations of leaning on a cockney accent (unless, of course, you happen to be Stanley Holloway), or a rollicking Texas drawl. Uphold our responsibility to honor the song, as ourselves.

In considering whether to use a regional accent or written dialect, a judicious rule of thumb comes from our friend and colleague, folksinger Michael Cooney, “Just stay out of the way of the songs!”

Larry Hanks and Deborah Robins sing old songs. Known as a “folksinger’s folksinger,” Larry has been performing to delighted festival and club audiences for over fifty years. Now touring together, Larry’s mellow bass-baritone voice combines with the eclectic close harmonies of Deborah’s resonant alto, bringing back to life a large repertoire of songs describing trials and traditions of American life. For snippets of or to order their recording, “The Wheel of Time,” go to <http://www.cdbaby.com/cd/larryhanksdeborahrobins>.

Web extras! Listen to the authors sing: Kisses Sweeter Than Wine (Roots Fest, San Diego, CA, 2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3Td9rxWm_8, and Cotton Mill Girls (Brick Wall, Fresno, CA, 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnPxRCJBF08>.