Shelley Posen was born in Toronto, and became interested in folksongs in the late 1950's. He plays a number of instruments, and has sung, in his own words, "in summer camps, coffee-houses, bars, living rooms and kitchens, street corners, and classrooms in Canada, the U.S., and Europe." Since 1968 he has worked behind the scenes and on stage at the Mariposa Folk Festival, and was the director of the "Mariposa in the Schools" programme in 1974. He holds an MA in Folklore from Memorial University of Newfoundland, and is currently working on a PHD in Folklore at the University of Pennsylvania. His thesis will be a study of the singing traditions of a small village in the Ottawa Valley.

ON FOLK FESTIVALS & KITCHENS?

QUESTIONS OF AUTHENTICITY IN THE FOLKSONG REVIVAL

It was a call from Mariposa Folk Festival in Toronto several years ago for contributions to a book about the festival that got me thinking about my involvement with Mariposa over the years. I had come to think about my relationship with the festival as a singer, organizer, and researcher as a relatively pleasant and on the whole uncomplicated one. On reflection, though, I realized that there was a point in 1970, just as I finished my first year of formal studies in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland, when I decided that the Mariposa Festival in particular, the folksong revival in general, and my participation in both, were a sham and a farce, and that I should sever my ties with both permanently. Because there may be other "folkies" who have suffered or who will suffer similar crises of purpose or identity, and because I think that my particular struggles with questions of "authenticity" in the folksong revival shed light on larger issues of context and the general notion of folklore, I offer this account of my problems and of how I reached an understanding of them, at least with myself.

When I began working for Mariposa in 1968, I was what I would now call an "urban folkie." To me a
folksong was any song that hadn’t patently come off the pop charts or the Broadway stage, and that had an acoustic guitar or banjo accompaniment or could be given one. Sing Out! Magazine, my bible at the time, told me that there were issues at stake which should govern my choice of songs: they talked about “authenticity” and “the people’s songs,” but I found that kind of polemicizing boring, and largely ignored it. If I liked the tune and/or the words (especially the “message”), I sang it. By 1968, most of the songs I was singing were ones composed by my contemporaries: Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Leonard Cohen, Phil Ochs, Mike Settle, Mark Spoelstra, and the like. What I couldn’t learn from the pages of Sing Out! I learned from record by such as The Weavers, The Kingston Trio, Theodore Bikel, and Tom Rush. Many of the songs they sang actually met Sing Out!’s criteria for authenticity, but mostly, I learned them because I liked their melody or their message. I sang the old union and Spanish Civil War songs I’d learned at summer camp, as well as those which treated of the issues of the day (American) civil rights and the peace movement. But I guess my preference was for “personal” songs about wandering and male-female relations.

All this changed with the appearance at Mariposa in 1968 of a young American singer named Michael Cooney, and an exciting British group called The Young Tradition. Cooney, at the time, was a fresh, charming “singer of old songs” (as he billed himself), with a shy, boyish manner which belied and helped him put across the huge store of historical information he had amassed about the songs he sang. These songs were by and large “traditional,” which to me came to mean that they were anonymously written and had been passed from one person to another, over time and space, till they had got to Michael Cooney. What hadn’t come of its own accord Michael had got by dint of his researches into collections of those songs compiled by people called “folklorists,” and through contact with folklorists themselves like Joe Hickerson of the Library of Congress Folksong Archive. Cooney called what he sang “neat songs,” and he presented them to his audiences in a carefully casual, immensely entertaining program, ordering them brilliantly to show family resemblances among them or to point up their different approaches to larger issues. I was fascinated by the materials Michael had turned up (many of the songs were quite beautiful, others simply very funny or just fun.) More important for me, though, was that I had always had a difficult time on stage trying to think of interesting things to say in between songs: Cooney’s easy-going scholarship, tracing song travels and transformations, and his accounts of his researches and delvings, gave me a performance model which would save me from doing comedy routines I was no good at, or being bored and boring talking about my personal life.

The Young Tradition cast a spell quite different from Cooney’s, but no less powerful. They too gave historical background for their songs, most of which they had found in the record, tape, cylinder, and book library of Cecil Sharp House in London; and their patter was also probably the sharpest and driest of any of their peers. But the YT’s magic lay in the musical setting they devised for the songs: a crystal hard harmony whose outlines were carved by Peter
HOW TO BE A FOLKIE (TRADITIONAL)
STEP 1: DRESS

HAIR: GENERALLY SHORT FOR BOTH MEN & WOMEN. A MOVEMENT AWAY FROM THE DUBIOUS "HIPPIE" CATEGORY.

BEARD: NOT RECOMMENDED FOR FEMALE FOLKIES. A DEFINITE ASSET FOR THE MEN. FURRIER AS ACCORDING TO TASTE: SAFER IF NEATLY TRIMMED.

SHOULDER BAG: PREFERABLY CANVAS, OFTEN FOUND ON FOLKIES OF EITHER SEX.

INSTRUMENT CASE: AN ESSENTIAL ITEM IN CONJUNCTION WITH OTHER INDICATIONS. ACOUSTIC CASES ARE EXCELLENT; TRY THOSE OF GUITARS, BANJOES, FIDDLERS, CONCERTINAS, ETC. INSTRUMENTS UNNECESSARY IF YOU'VE GOT THE CASE, ALTHOUGH A TINWHISTLE IN THE HIP POCKET CAN BE USEFUL.

SHOES ARE SUREFIRE AND SHOULD BE CARRIED IN ANY PROMINENT AND ACCESSIBLE POCKET.

SOFT VISOR CAP: HIGHLY RECOMMENDED. IN FACT, YOU CAN GET AWAY WITH JUST ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE IF YOU'VE GOT THIS.

T-SHIRT: PRETTY STANDARD, BUT NOT BY ITSELF A CLEAR INDICATION. CHECK FOR PRINTED MESSAGES ABOUT OBSCURE GROUPS/ FESTIVALS/STORES/ COFFEEHOUSES. ALSO CHECK FOR SIMILAR BUTTONS. FOLKIES TEND TO BE WALKING ADVERTISERS.

JEANS: STANDARD, ALTHOUGH SOME FEMALE FOLKIES MAY WEAR LONG SKIRTS (GENUS FUNKY). SHOULD BE WELL-WORN & SLIGHTLY FADED. AVOID EMBROIDERY OR YOU MIGHT SLIP INTO "HIPPIE" CATEGORY BY MISTAKE. DO NOT IRON YOUR JEANS OR YOU WILL BE MISSTaken FOR AN ART DIRECTOR.

FOLK THINGS: SUMMER ONLY. MAY BE CONTEMPORARY OR TRADITIONAL. WINTER WEAR CONSISTS OF SENSIBLE THINGS, BOOTS, WALLABEES, ETC. OCCASIONAL ADIDAS MAY SLIP BY.

JOHNSTON
Bellamy’s brittle tenor, filled out by Heather Wood’s surprisingly indomitable alto, and given a Gibraltarian solidity by Royston Wood’s bass. When the YT sang in the night concert at Mariposa that year, to me the stage seemed populated with mediaeval characters from their ballads; the trees on the island rang with hunting horns and the baying of hounds after foxes; and mundane pleasure-boated and betanked Toronto Harbour was transformed into the docks of the port of London a century ago, the air filled with the creakings and groanings of sails being hoist aloft miles of masts by sweating, shanty-singing deck hands. This was my entrance into the world of British traditional song and unaccompanied harmony singing, and I was enthralled. While travelling in the British Isles during the next year, I haunted folk clubs and Cecil Sharp House, discovered for myself and idolized singers on the English scene such as Lou Killen, The Watersons, and most of all, Martin Carthy.

When I returned to Toronto in the fall of 1969, my whole repertoire had changed, and with it my attitudes towards what I should sing and how. And I wasn’t alone: there was a whole traditional folksong revival scene going on in both Canada and the U.S. This is not the place to chronicle what exactly was going on where or why at the time. But I will say that one of the central issues then was the “authenticity” of song and performance style. As far as I was concerned now, a song had to be traditional for me even to consider it for my repertoire. Bob Dylan was out, Francis James Child was in. And the old standards for performance style were tightened and expanded at the same time: there was still what I would call a scale of “folkness” against which performance was measured, but it was modified to accommodate the new British repertoire and accompaniment instruments. For instance, singing an English song to concertina accompaniment was more “authentic” than singing the same song with a guitar; singing it a cappella was more “valid” than either of those. Never mind that we were singing English sea chanteys while doing no work, too fast and with too much harmony—we were singing them unaccompanied, affecting English accents, and our harmonies were in fifths; and that was folkier than some clowns in a male glee club singing them to orchestra accompaniment and harmonizing in thirds. The traditional folksong revival, then, was an environment in which performers vied with one another in being “folkier than thou,” and audiences judged them on the same terms. [If you are interested in pursuing just how seriously these matters were taken at the time, take a look at some old Sing Out!s, especially the letters from the editor to Bob Dylan during the mid 60’s, or Michael Cooney’s advice-to-folksingers “General Delivery” column in the early 70’s.]

As a member of the traditional folksong revival, I felt it was my duty to learn as many traditional songs as I could, and as much about them as possible. Being from the sort of middle class background that holds that if you want to learn about it, you take a course in it, I enrolled in the MA program in Folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland in the fall of 1970. Here I suffered a series of shocks. First of all, I discovered that there was more to folksong than pretty melodies and recondite histories, just as there was more to folklore than
folksong. Folklore students and scholars at the university were examining cultural issues and problems, people and the way they lived, by looking at traditional ways of life including what and how they sang. My own desire simply to learn “neat songs” for performance began to look very trivial indeed.

My second discovery was that there was yet another set of criteria for gauging the “authenticity” of folklore. Folklore, I learned, is defined by many academics by the context of which it (any item, say, a song) is a part. Neither the style of performance nor the origin of the item alone serves to define it as folklore. Meaning lies not in the item itself, but in its function in the performing situation. For instance, so-called “ethnic jokes” take on widely variable meanings in different surrounds: “newfie”/“polack”/“Rastus”/priest-minister-rabbi jokes told by (respectively) a Newfoundlander/Pole/Black/Jew to members of his own group, have different information flowing into them than do the same jokes told by non-members to other nonmembers of those groups; or even that member telling the joke to nonmembers. A U.S. government official some years ago told an “improper” joke about the Pope as part of one context (as if “among friends”), but its being reported publicly brought information from other contexts (as a nonmember of American Catholics) to bear, and the official was forced to resign.

What I began to recognize during my first year in Newfoundland—and it was as much a result simply of living there as being in the Folklore program at MUN—is that the context within which I sang folksongs, and within which Newfoundlanders sang folksongs, were worlds apart. This came home to me in an exhilarating and yet painful way on my first collecting trip. Wilf Wareham, a Newfoundland and fellow student in the Folklore department, took me to the house of an old outport fisherman he had known as a boy, to record some of the man’s songs. We sat at the table in the kitchen, and we talked and he sang for us while his children came and went, first hushed and awed, then smiling and bold, and his wife kneaded bread in a huge tin basin and baked it in her blackened oil stove. The air was warm and redolent with the smells of baking bread and stove oil, cigarette smoke and the sweet dark rum that we had brought to drink. As the afternoon wore on, neighbours stopped in and had a drop of rum or tea, and asked for songs or gave us one themselves.
When the old man sang it was to neighbours and friends (excepting us, of course, and really it was only I who was an outsider), songs that they all knew and which seemed in subject matter and style to be of a piece with, logical extensions of, their own lives. The singers were physically close enough to their listeners to touch them [and, I found out later, it sometimes happens that a Newfoundland singer and listener will hold hands and swing them gently in time to the singing] and continuously throughout the singing, singers and listeners could catch the expressions registered in each other’s faces and bodies. Through this visual contact, as well as through comments made by listeners during the singing, all the participants were always aware of how the singer was doing and of how the song was going over. The whole event that afternoon was one of the most intensely involving I have ever been a part of, and I came away thinking, “This is the real thing; this is how it should be done.”

As you can imagine, this played hell with my attitude towards my own singing, and towards my own or anyone else’s singing at Mariposa. First of all, I wondered how I, a middle class, urban boy from Toronto, was warranted singing songs so removed from my own life, about 19th century English sailors and 17th century “lords and ladies fair,” or of American cowboys and hill people, or even closer to home, of north Ontario shantyermen and Newfoundland fishermen. [This dilemma is the subject of a heavily ironic song written during the 60’s by Shel Silverstein called “Folksinger’s Lament,” in which the singer agonizes over questions such as how can you sing about loading cotton on the levee, when you are “young and white and Jewish...and the only levee you know is the Levi who lives down the block?”] And I wondered how I could reconcile singing them for other middle class people like myself in coffeehouses and living rooms. And just how did Mariposa justify its scene, where hundreds of strangers sat outside on the grass listening to other strangers thousands of feet away, whom they couldn’t see and who couldn’t see them, whose only means of interaction was, on the one hand, talking and singing through a microphone, and on the other, applauding at the end of each song—how could this be remotely related to the scene in the Newfoundland kitchen? How could questions of “authenticity” obtain in such a situation? How could the festival boast of being more “traditional” than others? Who was being folkier than whom? The whole situation struck me as ludicrous. As a result, I all but stopped singing in public for almost a year, and did not accept an invitation to sing at Mariposa in the summer of 1970. In the words of Calvin Trillin, I had “authenticized” myself out of business.

It took another year of thinking and studying before I was able to work some of this out. One of the first events that started my mind shifting

![Black Swan Records Ad](image-url)
was hearing Neil Rosenberg, a professor of mine at MUN with whom I had begun to sing and play in a bluegrass band, explain to a radio interviewer why it was that our band did not perform traditional Newfoundland material. His answer hinged on “surround”; he said that bluegrass music was a folk form which had originated on stage, involving the use of microphones and singing to relatively large audiences, and that he therefore felt no compunction in performing the same music under the same conditions—it was the way the music was meant to be performed. Newfoundland traditional music, on the other hand, was “kitchen music,” and could not be done justice to, even if we were able to sing it right, in the bluegrass kind of situation. So I had this concept to work with: contexts do not mix, whatever the surround and however appropriate the singing; items do not give meaning to contexts; rather, the reverse is true. [It turns out that our band later did perform certain kinds of traditional Newfoundland songs in bars and on concert stages, simply because we began to see that Newfoundland bands were doing it and that Newfoundlanders expected it of them. It was, in short, a popular traditional form, and we were violating no proprieties, theoretical or otherwise. But we had to be shown this first by members: we, as nonmembers, could not take the initiative.]

A second experience which enabled me to reconsider my thoughts was the researching and writing of my M.A. thesis, a study of the singing traditions of children’s summer camps. I had selected the site for study because camp was the situation with which I was familiar from my own urban background that most resembled the Newfoundland outport community—my idea, at the time, of the ideal “folk society.” One of the cases I made in my thesis was that any songs sung in such a close little group, whether it was rural or peasant or neither, had to be folksongs; that items were not intrinsically “folk”; rather, their “folkness” lay in the functions and processes and ultimately contexts of which they were a part. I was helped along in this by an article by University of Pennsylvania folklorist Dan Ben Amos, in which he defined folklore as “artistic communication in small groups.” While I do not believe this any longer in a strict sense, nonetheless, writing my thesis along these lines got me away from thinking about folklore as old exotica which “belonged” to a “folk” whom I had until then (unconsciously) defined as uneducated, rural, peasant people. Since “folklore” was the result of a process taking place within a certain order of context, then middle class, urban people like myself “had” “folk-lore” too, which we performed in appropriate surrounds involving interaction with peers and reflecting norms and values of our group. I had met the folk, and they were us. Furthermore, I reasoned, if we had done fifty years ago what we were doing today, folklorists would be studying us, and folkies singing our songs, right now.

With insights provided by these and similar experiences, I was able gradually to resolve my doubts about Mariposa’s “validity” and about my participation in the festival and in the folksong revival generally. The resolution may be stated in this way: given that folklore is defined according to how it functions within a certain order of context; and that folklore is therefore not the “property” of any one group of people however defined; it follows that “authenti-
ty” is relative, and that the singing of a Newfoundlander in his kitchen to his neighbours, with all the norms, rules, and functions operating in that situation, is relatively the same as the performer on a coffeehouse or festival stage and his audience, with all the norms, rules, and functions operating in that situation. In other words, each takes place within a valid context which has to be taken on its own terms, with the singing seen as a different order of the same kind of event. “Festival singing” and “kitchen singing” are equivalent behaviours, though they are not identical. They occur within different contexts which give different meanings to the activities taking place within them. But each is as “valid” as the other.

This leads me to questions concerning how the two contexts, festival and kitchen, relate to and cross over into each other, especially when they share participants. Obviously, in bringing kitchen singers to the festival, Mariposa is trying to bring the meanings of their context to bear on the festival context. My own opinion is that this happens in only a limited way. Just as I, singing in a Newfoundlander’s kitchen, is not the same as I, singing on stage at Mariposa; so a Newfoundlander, singing on a stage at Mariposa, is not the same as that Newfoundlander singing in the kitchen at home. Each context gives its own meaning to the behaviour occurring within it, even if the behaviours are “the same.” As a folklore researcher, I would not go to Mariposa to find out about Newfoundland kitchen singing, though I might go there to see how Newfoundland kitchen singers fare at a large folk festival. I would also be more likely to go to see what kind of singers Mariposa was bringing in and why: in other words, to find out about Mariposa and the festival context, not about the context the singers come from or are asked to invoke.

But this in no way “invalidates” Mariposa, or the folksong revival, as “authentic” contexts for singing. It just requires that one be aware of precisely what those contexts comprise and how they shape the meaning of the activities within them. As far as my participation in the Toronto folksinging scene, I was now in a position to see that there, I too was functioning within a group and adhering to that group’s norms whenever I got up on a coffeehouse stage and sang English ballads. What I was doing was “authentic” not because I sang traditional songs unaccompanied or affected an English accent, but rather because I was doing those things in accordance with a norm which stated that those things were expected and made me “authentic.” I was doing what an urban folkie was supposed to be doing as a properly functioning member of the folksong revival. What I had thought was making me more or less “authentic” was, in fact, doing so, but as a matter of my own and of my group’s taste, which itself was an aspect of our contextual norm. Looking back on it, I can see that I had confused the accurate recreation of the style of an original with the creation of that original, thinking in effect that my recreation was part of the same phenomenon and shared the same context which defined and gave meaning to the original. But that was just not the case. What gave my recreation its meaning was the context within which it was held that my recreation had to be as close stylistically to the original as possible, and that then it would be of a part with it. That context was the traditional folksong revival of the late 60’s and early 70’s.

Shelley Posen