FILKSongs AS MODERN FOLK SONGS

by

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Filksongs are songs sung by science-fiction fans at the numerous science-fiction conventions - or "cons", as they are termed. Usually their texts are inspired by SF or fan-related activities and are set to borrowed tunes. The origin of the term "filk" is obscure: one explanation attributes it to a typographical error adopted as a form of esoteric humour; another postulates an unknown punster who said "A filksong is a fannish song in the ilk of a folksong." However the term originated, it is now a familiar part of SF fandom's vocabulary.

Sung by an enormous body of fans, filksongs are much closer to folk songs than the compositions of professional singers like Gordon Lightfoot and Joni Mitchell which are commonly referred to as "folk". SF fans are a definite folk group with their own special language, and filksinging is a folk activity that has developed definite patterns.

Most fans learn the filksongs orally from hearing them at cons, and many copy the songs in notebooks as some traditional singers did. Others record them on cassettes and learn them that way. The texts acquire variations, lose stanzas, and have new ones added. The singers who pick up the songs from hearing them sung often do not know who wrote them.

Filksinging had its start back in the 1950s but did not become prominent until the 1970s. Then various filksong authors and groups of fans began to publish the songs. The authors started to circulate them through private mimeographed magazines (always referred to as "zines"). This may be compared to the spreading of ballads by broadsides, except that the broadsides were published for commercial reasons and most of the filksong publications are not. The Amateur Press Association - the APA - includes various non-profit cooperative periodicals, one of which is APA-Filk. It consists of some eight to ten sections ranging from two to ten pages, contributed by different fan composers. These present not only newly-composed songs but comments on previous issues, questions, suggestions, arguments and reports on the filksinging at various cons. Another small magazine called Kantele reproduces songs that are already popular, along with news, reports, and articles about filksinging. The little magazines have small mailing lists - APA-Filk normally ran off only 50 copies - and the price was little more than the cost of paper and postage. No one is paid for the work that goes into them: they are clearly labours of love.

Some of the cons produce their own filksong books, and the New England Science Fiction Association (NESFA) published a more ambitious NESFA Hymnal. The largest compilation is The Hopsia Hymnal, which contains over 300 songs.

Gradually the filksong publications are becoming more professional. Where APA-Filk and Kantele were mimeographed, the two hymnals were reproduced from typescript. More recently a California group has begun publishing better-quality songbooks, the latest of which are in regular type.

While most songs originally had a single author, some have multiple authors and innumerable verses, a situation that would have gladdened the hearts of the proponents of communal composition. The most voluminous of the widely-sung numbers is "Real Old Time Religion" with over 250 verses by more than 50 authors. More interesting is the one known as "Young Man Mulligan", which combines the pattern of two familiar songs: "I Was Born About Ten Thousand Years Ago", and Woody Guthrie's "The Biggest Thing That Man Has Ever Done". One compiled version runs to 68 verses by 29 authors, and it's still growing. The verses alternate between the two patterns, as Odetta and Larry sang the originals on an old record, only this time the references are to science fiction rather than to Biblical and historical tales. The song incorporates so many SF and fantasy references that a condensed key of 150 items is needed to explain them. Another lengthy communally-composed production is "The Orcs' Marching Song", based on the Tolkien books; it has some 40 verses by at least 15 authors.

Many fans use the term "filksong" very loosely, apparently meaning any modern set of words with a familiar tune. For example, Juanita Coulson, a well-
known singer-composer, referred to The Bosses’ Songbook, a small typescript pamphlet produced by Richard Ellington in the 1950s, as the earliest filksong collection. It contained satirical verses parodying familiar labour songs but had nothing to do with science fiction.

Of course at filksings one hears many other types of song besides those composed on SF themes. Most fan collections include some traditional folksongs, with the emphasis on the bawdy ones. “The Bastard King of England”, “The Ball of Kerriemuir”, “Roll Me Over”, “Eskimo Nell”, and “Gang Bang Lulu” are all popular. So are some pop songs that turn up in folk circles, usually somewhat unusual items like “Woad”, “Rum, By Gum”, “Completely Round”, and the Tom Lehrer compositions. Kipling’s songs also rank high, along with some contemporary songs like “Barrett’s Privateers” and “The Band Played Waltzing Matilda”. This broad repertoire should be kept in mind, but such standards are not termed filksongs even by those who term all parodies filksongs. There is, however, a tendency to narrow the category. As Margaret Middleton, editor of Kantele, put it:

“Defining filk is nearly as hard as defining SF. I’ve always assumed that a filksong was a song written roughly in the present and referring to anything non-mundane, be it historical or futuristic, or just strange. Things written in the distant past are folk or straight ballads, things written in the present but referring to mundane, while they may be thoroughly entertaining, are not really filksongs — parodies, perhaps, but not filk. Used as a verb, however, ‘to filk’ means to mangle an existing mundane song into a filksong, as in ‘Paul Anderson filked “Waltzing Matilda” and got ‘Bouncing Potatoes.’ As such it usually involves frivolous songs. Serious songs are rarely filked; they are usually written from scratch, perhaps to an extant tune.”

When we start to classify the more specific filksongs we find that they illustrate nicely the folk pattern of threes. Most of them are inspired by one of three groups of imaginative literature: straight science fiction, fantasy, or the medieval themes celebrated in the Society for Creative Anachronism. There are three types of filksong: parodies of familiar songs, songs with original texts set to familiar tunes, and songs with original tunes as well as texts. In subject matter they include songs expressing general concepts about science-fiction, fantasy, or the Middle Ages, and fannish songs about concepts, writers, or zines. (It’s remarkable how the threefold pattern persists!)

The filksongs will be interpreted more narrowly here and the concentration will be on those dealing with some aspect of science-fiction rather than with fantasy or medieval themes.

As with traditional folksongs, some tunes are used for various sets of words, the most popular being “Greensleeves” and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”, each used for more than 20 songs. There are over a dozen parodies of “The Twelve Days of Christmas”, and several laments in “The Unfortunate Rake” pattern. Also, as with folksongs, particular texts are sometimes sung to different tunes.

Typical of the parodies is “The Asteroid Light” by John Boardman:

My father was the keeper of the asteroid light.  
He slept with a Martian one fine night.  
Out of this match came children three:  
Two were mutants and the other was me.

Also close to the original pattern in John Brunner’s “Lullaby for Mad Scientist’s Daughter”:

Hush little baby, button your lip.  
Papa’s gonna build you a rocket ship.  
If that rocket ship abort,  
Papa’s gonna build you an aquanaut.

Equally obvious is “The Spacewreck of the Old 97”:  
They gave him his orders at the satellite station  
Saying “Steve, here’s the course that you must use.  
The asteroids are tricky and the solar storms are sticky.  
But we’ve other volunteers if you refuse.”

And there’s also “Spacey Jones”:

Come all ye spacemen if you want to hear  
The story of a great planeteer.  
Spacey Jones was the pilot’s name;  
On a fuel-burning rocket, boys, he won his fame.

I particularly like “Centauri Fair”, patterned on “Scarbrough Fair”:

Oh, are you going to Centauri Fair?  
Starship flight and travel in time.  
Remember me to one who lives there.  
For once she was a true love of mine.  
Tell her to take from a comet its tail . . .  
And sail the stars on a great silver sail . . .  
Tell her to find me a planet of gold . . .  
A world where men need never grow old . . .  
Tell her to follow the second’s swift way . . .  
And change the pattern of yesterday . . .
And when it is grown then my own little clone
Will be of the opposite sex.

The second classification related to subject matter
covers those inspired by particular novels, short stories,
or films. This is probably the largest group: there are
literally dozens of songs about Gordon R. Dickson’s
Dorsai series, some of which he wrote himself and
many written by fans. The best known are “The Ballad
of Jacques Chretien”, “The Ballad of the Shoshonu”,
and “The Lament of the Dorsai Warrior”. Several are
based on the Fafherd and the Grey Mouser series by
Fritz Leiber, and others were inspired by Frank
Herbert’s Dune series, E.E. Smith’s Lensman series,
Poul Anderson’s World Without Stars, and Ursula
LeGuin’s The Left Hand of Darkness. There are also
several inspired by the television series “Star Trek”, and
some about such movies as “Darkstar”, “Star Wars”,
“The Empire Strikes Back”, and “Silent Running”.

Other typical parodies include “What Shall We Do with
the Drunken Spaceman?”, “This Planet’s My Land”,
“The Space Opera Goes Rolling Along”, “The Man
Who Never Returned”, “The Lament of the Dorsai
Warrior” to “The Streets of Laredo”, “Where Can the
Matter Be?” to “Johnny’s So Long at the Fair”, “Star
Dance” to “Lord of the Dance”, and “The Talking
Science Fiction Blues”.

Those are all adaptations of well-known songs. In the
second group the words are not direct parodies, but they
are set to familiar tunes. They include “The Green Hills
of Harmony” to the tune of “The Banks of Sicily”,
“Jacques Chretien” to “Roddy McCorley”, “The Sands
of Arrakis” to “The Streets of Laredo”, “Stranger in a
Strange Land” to “Bring Back My Bonnie to Me”, “The
Dying Robot” to “The Red River Valley”, and “Time,
Boys, Time” to “The Oak and the Ash”. Others use the
tunes of “Home on the Range”, “The Irish Washer-
woman”, “Waltzing Matilda”, “When Johnny Comes
Marching Home”, “John Peel”, “The Titanic”, and
“Clementine”. One nice Canadian touch is “The Star
Wars Round” to “Frère Jacques”:18

R2D2, R2D2
C3PO, C3PO
Obiwan Kenobe, Obiwan Kenobe,
Han Solo, Han Solo.

There is a third group, in which both tunes and texts
are original. Some of these are song texts that appear in
science-fiction stories which some filksinger-composer
has set to music. Particularly popular are verses that
appeared in stories by Robert Heinlein and Poul Ander-
son. Then there are those for which some filksinger
composed both text and tune. Among the best-known of
these singer-composers are Anne Passovy, Juanita Coul-
sion, Leslie Fish and Clif Flint. Some science-fiction
authors also write songs apart from those incorporated
in their stories.

When we look at the classification by subject matter,
we find a number of songs based on general concepts
associated with science or science-fiction: space ships,
robots, bug-eyed monsters, time travel, and the like.
These are not related to specific stories, but to motifs
that occur in many stories: for example, “The Dying
Robot”, “Radiation Blues”, “Where Can the Matter
Be?” and “Clone, Clone of My Own” (to the tune of
“Home on the Range”):19

Oh give me a clone of my own flesh and bone
With its Y chromosome changed to X,

We pray for one last landing
On the globe that gave us birth.
Let us rest our eyes on the floeey skies
Of the cool green hills of earth.

Less inspiring but closer to the folk idiom is “The
Skipper Is a Father to His Crew” which retells a well-
known hillbilly joke in a space context: the girl who
can’t find a husband because her father claims all the
men she meets are her mother’s — but then her mother
tells her.21

Well tidy your antenna, girl, and comb your hair so blue.
I’ve taught you that a skipper is a father of his crew.
He may have made each female in the galaxy, but still,
He’s not the critter that fathered you, so marry whom you will.

The third classification by subject matter includes
fannish songs about writers, fans, cons, and zines. There
is “The Ballad of Gordy Dickson”,22 which emphasizes
his renowned drinking capacity; “Bowl Me Over, Mr.
Bova”,23 about the difficulties of getting the said editor
to accept a manuscript; and “The Bradbury Hate
Song”,24 which condemns that pessimistic writer as the “Poe of modern times”. Then there are the songs inspired
by certain cons which were notable for their de-
ficiencies. Particularly popular is the aforementioned
“Bouncing Potatoes”, to the tune of “Waltzing
"Don't hog the time. Take turns. Vary the materials. (If you get into a run of we're stranded in space and we're all going to die filksongs for example, half the audience will get so depressed you may never get them in an upbeat mood again.) And be willing to try something new. If you come to a filksing and you don't sing, OK - but don't talk. Between songs is okay, but not during them, I beg of you."

And then John Hall gives "Tips for the Neo-Filker" on "How to Become a Big-Time Filksinger". These include:

"If a fellow singer screws up a song (doesn't sing it the way you do), always correct him loudly. He should appreciate constructive criticism. On the other hand, if someone tries this on you, a superior look and a knowing reference to the folk process will cow all but the most obstinate heckler."

With the increasing popularity of filking, most cons now assign rooms for the singers - sometimes two, one for individual singers and one for group singing - and unscheduled sings also flourish. One filker wrote:

"The filk movement has become so strong that special filkcons are being held in addition to the numerous sessions at the regular cons. When the first filkcon was held in Chicago in July 1979, a Filk Foundation was organized as a non-profit "educational, cultural, and scientific organization dedicated to the furtherance, encouragement and preservation of filksinging as an art form and a form of oral history peculiar to the science fiction field"."

There is intense interest in the various space flights, with pride in the successes and sorrow for the failures. At Bayfilk III, held in the spring of 1986, there was a memorial service for the lost space shuttle Challenger and her crew of seven. A dozen of the best filksingers each sang a song expressing their feelings, and at the end Leslie Fish led the members in singing her "Hope Eyrie", which has become the unofficial anthem of the filkers:

"Words grow old and suns grow cold
And death we never can doubt.
Time's cold wind wailing down the past
Reminds us that all flesh is grass
And history's lamps blow out.
But the Eagle has landed! Tell your children when.
Time won't drive us down to dust again."
With the passage of time, there is a shift from the songs patterned on folk songs or set to traditional tunes. At recent cons more original songs are being heard. Also, the very amateurish publications of the '70s are being replaced by more professional products. Foremost in this field is Off Centaur Productions in California, which now has a substantial catalogue listing numerous songbooks, cassettes and records.

The folk element in the filksong movement may be decreasing somewhat, but the enthusiasm for filksinging is increasing. As Juanita Coulson wrote:

"Like science fiction fandom and fans, filksinging is a very eclectic field. If it's funny, if it's outrageous, if it's beautiful, if it's strange ... if it's in any way out of the ordinary and listenable, it's welcome at a filksing."

That is a very good description of one of the most prolific types of modern folksong.

NOTES

1 “I Had One Filksong, but the Guitar Played Over There . . .”, Kantele 1 (1978), 3.
2 Woodmere, NY, Robert Bryan Lipton, 197-.
3 Ann Arbor, MI, Upset, 1978-1979; Little Rock, AR, Filk Foundation, 1979-.
9 The Tin Angel Presents Odetta and Larry, Fantasy 3-15 [c. 1954].
10 NESFA, 126-33.
13 Sing Out! 8:11 (1959), 24; NESFA, 44; Hopsia, 179.
15 Brunner, 119.
16 Sing Out! 8:3 (1959), 23; Hopsia, 162.
17 Kantele 6 (1980), 18; Westerfilk, 5.
18 Hopsia, 170.
19 Hopsia, 161.
20 Kantele 3 (1979), 15; Hopsia, 152.
21 Kantele 2 (1979), 20.
22 Hopsia, 22; NESFA, 10.
24 NESFA, 51; Hopsia, 18.
25 Hopsia, 106; NESFA, 74.
28 Mark Bernstein, “All of the Filkers Are Singing”, Kantele 2 (1979), 21; Westerfilk, 45.
34 Kantele 6 (1980), 14; Westerfilk, 40.