

# Britain: Bob Copper, foremost traditional singer dies

By Paul Bond  
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Bob Copper, who has died at age 89, was the most important English traditional folksinger of the twentieth century. He was a hugely accomplished musical performer of the songs that had been passed down through his family. Just as importantly, his love and enthusiasm for these songs (at a time when the environment in which they had been sung was changing rapidly) became a key factor in their transmission to subsequent generations of singers.

He was born in 1915 in the south-coast village of Rottingdean, near Brighton. Documentary evidence exists of the family presence there as far back as 1593. Rottingdean in the late-nineteenth century was predominantly an agricultural village dominated by two large landowners, although there was also a developing seasonal tourist trade, as well as an influx of affluent families seeking a rural residency.

Although not belonging to the upper echelons of village society, the Copper family was a step up from the agricultural labourers. Bob's grandfather James "Brasser" Copper (1845-1927) was a farm bailiff. Brasser's brother Tom, who sang with him, was a pub landlord. It was from Brasser and his sons that Bob first heard the songs he was to champion.

On the death of his wife, Brasser moved in with his son Jim (Bob's father). Bob spoke in an interview last year of his early memories of singing around the fire to while away the winter evenings. "Not a lot of talking went on...you didn't make idle conversation.... But Grandad might say, 'Let's have a song, isn't us?'... So they'd decide on a song and off we'd go."

Brasser and his sons Jim and John (a shepherd) led the singing of each song, but the family (including the young Bob and his sister) would join in with their own contribution.

What marks the Copper family tradition as distinctive is that this collective singing was not simply unison singing. Instead, the family evolved a notable mixture of two-part harmony singing, unison and octave singing. Their aurally-developed harmonic style owed a great deal to both Church of England hymnody and the amateur part-songs of the Victorian "glee clubs."

The style is deceptively simple, and owes a great deal to the subtleties of the performer. Hearing early recordings of Jim, John and their respective sons Bob and Ron, the listener is aware of the massive flexibilities of tempo and phrasing they employ in each song, as well as their delight in exploring every corner of every song. The best introduction to their style is to listen to recordings, but Vic Gammon has written a useful analysis in the booklet accompanying the 2001 CD "Come Write Me Down," released by Topic Records.

Even though theirs is largely an English rural repertoire, Bob was a man of wide and sophisticated musical tastes. He described coming to

London in 1933 to see Louis Armstrong, and he remained a passionate fan of blues records all his life. There is an extraordinary recording of him singing "Going Down to Brownsville," accompanying himself on the concertina. It isn't, in his hands, a blues record: it is, though, a respectful recognition of something intense and musical to which he responded as a listener.

Bob often commented that performing to audiences led them to sing songs relatively quickly. When singing within the family, however, they would slow songs down, lingering over every opportunity for harmonising. This is perhaps one of the reasons why their style proved so influential within the folksong revival of the 1960s and 1970s, and why it remains so attractive today. It is about participation and contribution.

It remains, though, an unusual style within collected folksong in England, although a few family groups with similar styles are known of in the south of England. The artistry of the Copper family would mark them out as pre-eminent in a much more crowded field, but it may be that their "uniqueness" is related to the failure of earlier generations of collectors to record widely enough.

Brasser and Tom were, in fact, recorded by the first wave of the folksong revivalists. In 1898, collector Kate Lee came down to Rottingdean. She recorded several songs by them, including "Claudy Banks," the first song published by the English Folk Song Society on its inauguration that year.

Whilst the meeting did not acquire any significance within the family until much later, they were interested in preserving as many of their songs as possible. In about 1922, Brasser began filling a notebook with the words of all the songs he could remember, work enthusiastically continued by Jim. The family still uses this notebook today. Bob, in turn, tried to learn by ear as many of the tunes as he could. He also made abortive efforts to get those tunes notated, so that they would not solely depend on his memory. In later years, going through the notebook, he would sometimes point to songs that "got away"—the ones for which he had not been able to learn tunes in time.

Bob and Ron still loved to sing the old family songs whenever they could, but circumstances were changing, and they did not sing together as often as they would have liked. Bob had spent two years in the army before becoming a policeman. Ron, meanwhile, had worked in the naval dockyards as an engineer. After the war, they both ran pubs—Ron in Rottingdean and Bob in Peacehaven. When they did meet up, the company often did not want to hear their grandfathers' songs, but popular contemporary pieces instead.

Many of the finest traditional singers in England sang for their own amusement when they could no longer find a local response. The lucky ones—like the Copper family—met up with people interested in

retrieving their music for a wider audience. The collecting of folksongs in England had waned since the heyday of the Edwardian collectors like Cecil Sharp. The First World War had shattered many facets of an earlier agricultural way of life that had enshrined singing. It had also decimated a generation of singers and collectors.

The next major wave of collection did not begin until after the Second World War, fuelled in part by the American experiences of John and Alan Lomax. The BBC radio programme *Country Magazine* played sanitised arrangements of traditional songs. Jim heard here a song the family sang. He was not much impressed with the arrangement and told Bob so. Bob advised his father to write to the BBC (“but don’t criticise”) to let them know that this was one of the songs they still sang regularly as a family. Within a week, the collector and producer Francis Collinson was in Rottingdean collecting their songs.

Bob agreed that he and Jim would take part in a live broadcast for *Country Magazine*. Jim was angry at being imposed upon, but participated to honour his son’s promise. The broadcast was a great success, and Jim warmed to the idea of performing to a wider audience.

It was only after this first broadcast (in 1950) that Collinson asked Jim if he might be related to the two Coppers from whom Kate Lee had collected songs in 1898. Jim then told Bob about the meeting. The English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS), as it had now become, was active in recording the Copper family, as well as in bringing them to a wider audience. John, Jim, Bob and Ron appeared at an EFDSS festival at the Royal Albert Hall in 1952, and Bob and Ron were guests of honour at EFDSS’s diamond jubilee in 1958.

Encouraged by the success of *Country Magazine*’s limited presentation of arranged folksongs, and spurred on by the arrival of Alan Lomax, the BBC set about a new programme of traditional song. *As I Roved Out* was groundbreaking in many ways, not least because of its active involvement in collecting. Lomax, Peter Kennedy, Brian George and Seamus Ennis recorded traditional singers across the British Isles. Bob, still running his bar, also took part-time contracts as a BBC researcher.

He was a persistent and sympathetic interviewer, and he recorded many fine singers around the south coast. Many of the singers trusted him precisely because he was like them. He also proved, when he wrote up his experiences as *Songs and Southern Breezes*, to be an entertaining writer.

The BBC axed *As I Roved Out* and ended its field-recording programme. However, various individuals (notably Kennedy) continued their recordings, and there was a renewed impetus for the music. Bob’s son John started singing with Bob and Ron. The EFDSS issued a limited-edition album by Bob and Ron, while in the US, Caedmon Records released the *Folk Music of Britain* series.

The existence of such records created an interest amongst a younger generation of performers. When the folk revival took off in the mid-1960s, younger professional acts (most notably “The Young Tradition”) were already performing the Copper family’s songs and employing its harmonising style. They beat a path to Bob’s door and stressed the importance of the Copper family in their music. (Bob’s daughter Jill made her first impromptu appearance on stage at farewell performance of “The Young Tradition.”)

What cemented the family’s reputation was the publication of Bob’s first book *A Song for Every Season* (1971)—a nostalgic look at the social background to the songs. There was also a four-album boxed set of the same name (currently unavailable), which featured

the songs contained in the book and Bob’s narration. The Copper family became, at this point, regulars on the folk club and festival circuit.

After the death of Ron in 1978, Bob sang with his son John, daughter Jill and her husband Jon Dudley. What pleased him most about the family performances was when his grandchildren started singing. He had become the patriarch of the family, and of a traditional style of singing as well.

What strikes on as odd about such a fine singer are the limitations to his repertoire. It has been noted, for example, that there are no songs about seductions or illegitimate births. Apparently, his grandmother refused to allow these songs to be sung in the house.

Where other singers had songs that (even tangentially) referred to the hardships of life, the Copper family’s songs are mostly paeans of praise to a farming life that is hard work, but rewarding. (One exception stands out—the extraordinary “Hard Times of Old England.”) In a radio broadcast with the veteran American protest singer Pete Seeger, Bob said explicitly that the difference between them was that “you have put your talents and your repertoire to a good social purpose. We, I’m afraid, have been a bit dilatory, we just sing for the sheer joy of singing.”

For many people, the world is not, as it was for Bob, “a lovely place to be in,” and no one would deny the nostalgic conservatism running through his preservation of the family songs. He recognised, though, the artistic merits of what he was preserving and passing on. His tenacious defence of this musical heritage allows other listeners to experience it, other musicians to use it.

He knew the effect music can have on the listener: “I love poetry, but I think music is the most violent reaction. It physically buggers me up, or lifts me up.... But I can be sent by Beethoven’s piano concertos and things, I can turn myself inside out.”

Thanks to his tenacity in preserving these songs, and his artistry in performing them, they also can have that effect on their audience.

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