

# Consulting Group and Reflections on Class and Socio-Economic Status - Research data document pack

This document pack contains a number of summaries and reflections treated as data for the Consulting Groups project (2022). The Consulting Groups project was part of UKRI-funded Future Leaders Fellowship (FLF) project Access Folk and developed by the FLF lead Prof. Fay Hield and Dr Esbjörn Wettermark at the University of Sheffield with project management from Dr Helen Grindley. This themed document pack is one of several related to the Consulting Groups project, all of which can be viewed and downloaded from The University of Sheffield's Online Research Data repository (ORDA).

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# What are the issues to tackle around socio-economic status and class and folk singing? Main Themes Emerging

## Class

- What is class?
- How do we define this? Is it self identification?
- Is there a disconnect between socio economic groups and class
- Maybe we assume Folk audiences are middle class or not
- How do we know – ARE we making assumptions How can we find out?

## Accessing Folk Music

- How do people get introduced to folk music?
- Do people “grow into Folk Music?
- Opportunity or more importantly lack thereof, unequal access
- If schools are an obvious opportunity is there equity across the board? Probably not! Schools, individuals need to be able to fund this.
- Good projects in some areas teaching music, also in more deprived areas for free where +there is funding. Can tie in be made here?
- Community open mics / sharing sessions as intro to folk music. A lot of these projects focus on instruments but what about unaccompanied singing? No cost involved with that of instruments etc.
- Would say that in areas where there is a strong tradition of folk / trad music in schools (eg Western Isles of Scotland) better knowledge of folk music due to choirs / singing in competitions. More thoroughly embedded in education.
- Otherwise just luck. Prob through other types of music encompassing elements.

## The Standing of Folk Music in today's society

- Is folk music relevant to todays' audiences ?
- No reason it can't be but perhaps presentation is key?
- Is there a meeting point between Folk and “Popular” music?
- There is a sense that traditional folk music isn't the music of todays' working class. “It's being carried, recorded and developed by an entirely different class.” How do Working class people get a foothold into the music/singing.
- How can we open the “scene” to others. Giving an entry point.
- New generations not identifying with genre 'Assumptions' about what folk music is.
- Is it relevant? How can people connect with themes , content?
- Are “Middle class “ backgrounds more at ease

- Is Folk Music seen as weird, being different? Is this a barrier? Conversely, more experimental and could provide a valuable way in to the genre)

## Where and how does it happen?

- Is there a concentration of key events in “traditions areas /Heritage areas??
- Folk can be expensive, few free gigs in pubs. Cost of tickets for events - including travel/ drinks / food etc – Festivals of all kinds can be very expensive. Cost of tickets can be a limiting factor for those events that are paid. (Could pay what you can be a way forward?)
- on other hand £3 gigs mean performers don’t get paid enough to even cover travel, needs to be a balance or more funding available, which in turn makes it harder for those with non-academic backgrounds to put gigs on due to lack of knowledge of funding available / language required to be successful
- Some Pub Sessions –open to all, but can be a tension between listeners and those there for different reasons. Would argue this is not always inclusive and just as intimidating as closed sessions. Would someone turn up to this alone? Particularly if lone woman?
- Closed session- just for singers/performers not necessarily inclusive or open to those newly interested.
- “Festivals” Why do people go. Some to listen, for some it may be more a social thing, especially “free” smaller festivals. Again there can be conflicting views around this. Are people “respecting” the music/performers?
- Do attitudes need to change?
- Perception that appropriate venues harder to find (pubs closing)
- Promoters, booking agents go to the same venues – reluctant to take a chance?
- Promotion of events can be problematic. Usually, via social media or word of mouth/ friends playing.

## Performances

- Subject of Folk songs often has a working class, industrial theme, but singers not from those backgrounds.
- What does “Folk” mean?
- The label 'folk' may be off-putting - 'acoustic sessions', 'open mics' may allow a wider appeal - and may allow mixing more trad stuff in with other kinds of music, and appear more open and inclusive for everyone?
- I think overall from limited experience young people more open to different types of music and have more curiosity generally, another reason why moving into non-licensed premises can be beneficial. Other ideas - open mic / sessions that encourage sharing of songs from other cultures, this would work better in cities where more diversity of cultures.
- The repertoire from the First Folk Revival at the turn of 20th century was centred on the concerns of the "common people" - poaching, highwaymen, poverty, being recruited to the Navy. There may be modern equivalents but these are historical artefacts and not so many will identify with the topics now.

- Unsure I would agree with that. I think the presentation of songs is perhaps key as young people from poorer communities are more likely to join the army so there are parallels. Also think of bothy ballads and songs about being treated badly by your employer - definitely parallels today. Lots of folk songs deal with more universal themes too - love, betrayal. Personally, I find simple explanations of songs really useful . if I know what the general themes are I'm more likely to be engaged inquisitive and wanting to learn more.
- \*\*From an early age, children being aware that Folk Music is part of our narrative /history and has something to say and inform. If not available in schools then this already presents a barrier \*\* Totally agree. So how do we broaden its appeal? Folk Music can cross genres very effectively.
- What are the modern equivalents? Do folk clubs embrace them?
- Music at community events is subtly different to other folk events - Dire Straits, Brothers in Arms, amplified. Edge of the expected repertoire.
- Worry of losing core audience if bringing in entirely different kind of people!!!! Not the promoter's area of knowledge.
- Even performances across the folk idiom inc theatre that focus on working class issues eg "Three acres and a cow" draw a predominantly middle class audience.

## Dance

- A feeling that where villages have sides embedded , historically are more Working class and are a valuable part of their communities.
- Revival "sides" are appearing but attract familiar faces.
- Singing, dance and music playing seem to come together/cross over a lot Morris dance seems to be a common thread, crossover with singing and playing

## Personal Experience of AF Project

I was able to attend two of the meetings with a class socio economic focus.

The range of participants was perhaps somewhat symptomatic of the issues facing the access to FM of other classes. I think, and I know this is a bit of an assumption, that most would have identified as being Middle Class. In the meetings I was able to attend the participants seemed exclusively White British, and predominantly male.

Conversations were "open" and I felt that all participants were able to voice opinions. Some were challenged politely and appropriately.

Unsurprisingly, all participants were involved in folk performances in several ways, performing, facilitating /staging and attending live performances. This gave a range of experiences across a variety of contexts and participants were able to articulate both positive and negative personal experiences when engaging with folk music. There seemed to be a consensus that Folk music has an issue in regeneration of the form across class divides. That the Folk experience is now mainly in the domain of the "Middle Classes" – whatever that means.

Personally, I still identify as working class, with a curiosity and appetite for wider experiences.

## **Analysis: Class and Socio-economic Status Consulting Group**

I see four main themes in the notes:

### **Repertoire**

- Persistent notion that there is some form of folk song origin with working or working class people.
- New repertoire since the 1960s poss. more about working class communities and or industry. - although the performers possibly as likely not to come from the communities they sang about then as now..
- The folk song repertoire is not talking to contemporary people in working and lower class areas/communities.
- A notion that football songs and other participatory songs with broader popular appeal outside of the folkie scene could be considered a folk tradition less burned by ideas of being a middle-class pastime.

### **Venues**

- Contemporary folk venues can be intimidating due to their connection with heritage buildings, established folk clubs with unwritten rules, or expensive pubs far from areas where people actually live.
- Local social clubs or open mic events are more likely to attract a mixed audience.
- Digital marketing might only attract those already involved due to the way algorithms on social media work. Traditional advertising with flyers and posters could potentially have another kind of reach but is (often) more costly.

### **Identity**

- Engaging in a small and distinct musical subculture such as folk music, can be difficult if you are living in a close knit community with few cultural influences and choices available to you.
- The notion of "Folk" could be off putting if connected too heavily with certain stereotypes
- Open mics and events with broader remit might allow people to engage with folk music in a less divisive manner and allow people to "visit" or "cross over" without committing to being a "folkie".

### **Class**

- Although not really expressed directly, the comments suggest that people are in more or less agreement that the folk scene is pretty homogenous middle class. This connects to research by MacKinnon and Finnegan in the 1980s, who both remarked on this already 30-40 years ago. Not much has changed and the question might be, was it ever different within the organised folkscene even since the days of Sharp?
- The perceived historical connection between "folk music" and working industrial classes remains strong but isn't engaged with in any really critical manner.
- The notes also demonstrate an uncertainty about what is class today and notions of class journeys.
- Certain authenticity issues implied with regards to who is considered working class.

## **Reflections**

It was interesting to read through the notes without having attended the meetings. Focus was very much on the lower stratas of socio economic background and class, it would have been interesting to also hear views on the upper classes in relation to folk song and the scene (stately homes being used for festivals, fundraisers for cultural organisations etc.). Intersectionality wasn't discussed much, for example, what about the intersection between gender and socio-economic background? The notion of industry and working class themes tend to be heavily gendered towards men, similarly club and pub venues tend to also be male dominated places.

I believe the persistent notion that the folk and the working class are historically connected can be a bit damaging when it comes to finding solutions. Maybe look at interventions in Western art music and jazz as inspiration rather than the dream of a working class "returning" to folk music.

One possible angle to engage with marginalised communities with lower socio economic status is to look at place and connections/ One such example would be Stick in the Wheel whose connection to London is probably as strong (or stronger) as their commitment to folk music.

I think the notion that folk music is supposedly connected to the working class muddying the water with regards to finding solutions to diversity and participation. Thinking about folk as a contemporary (un)popular music genre can be more helpful when thinking about how and why people engage or not.

Esbjorn Wettermark, 7 Sep 2022

**Here are my thoughts about class and folk music. They have been written in isolation and probably if I'd been in a room talking to people about it, I would have revised and changed some thoughts as the discussion went on. These are my thoughts though and I wish I'd been to the discussions because I think this is a fascinating topic!**

## **Class**

What is class? I think it is the sociological context in which you are brought up. It depends a lot on income but family history has a bearing, I think for me it's mainly the environment in which you were brought up and then the environment in which you live as an adult perhaps?

For example, my parents are from working class backgrounds. My father from significant poverty and my mother from an aspiring upper working class background. Her parents from poor means but trying very hard to better themselves and to move into blue collar work rather than the Irish labouring background they came from.

Education (post war) moved my parents from their working class childhood into a more middle class bracket of income and culture as adults. But their outlook and understanding was always very much rooted in their working class culture.

I am the first generation of both my parent's families to have been brought up in a middle class environment in terms of parental income and education. My understanding of and engagement with the world has always been very influenced by my parents working class roots.

My parents think/thought of themselves as working class whilst recognising their income bracket and lifestyle was very middle class for the majority of their adult lives.

I think of myself as middle-class but having been brought up in a very working class way, even within my actual experience of middle class education and family income.

I think there is a bit of a disconnect between socio economic groups and class but not a huge one. Class can be fluid and change through time but the influence of class is always there.

I believe that access to education after the war moved a lot of working class people into the middle classes but their history stayed with them.

My northern experience of folk music and audiences was always very working class but not exclusively.

I assumed most of my life that Folk audiences were working class. I think this has changed but I think it is still very mixed.

My experience of audiences at folk events is very mixed. Local audiences are still very much made up of the older, more originally working class audience members. By originally working class, I mean those that were able to access education and move themselves into more blue collar or white collar employment and income bracket.

Festival audiences are more mixed with younger people being more middle class in background. I think this is absolutely economically driven – even when festivals try and programme someone from a different background (musically), their working class or

younger, less affluent fans will not pay a huge festival ticket fee just to see their one favourite artist amongst a whole lot of music they don't know.

### **Accessing Folk Music**

Parental influence, exposure at school, exposure through the media, mainstream artists highlighting folk music sometimes.

Folk Music was the punk of its time in the 60s. It was counter culture, accessible, not classical and highbrow. Ironically, I think punk may have replaced it as the cool rebellion music and folk became boring and for old people, inevitably. I think this has the chance to change but I don't think 'trad' folk will resonate with the middle or working classes as much as the singer songwriter style of folk. Maybe trad folk songs will resonate with working class people more as we head further into the austerity bollocks enforced by the Tories and traditional songs of having no rights, being kicked off your land and out of your homes etc etc, will strike a chord with the working classes more? But the urban working class are much more influenced by other cultures and music styles now than they ever were when folk songs were first passed down through the generations in Britain. The working class experience is very different to the pre-industrial age.

Singing is the key! The voice as main instrument is massively important in working class culture – rap, spoken word poetry over music etc, feels more accessible to working class kids with all the influences of today. It's the way stories are passed around still and reflects exactly how folk SONG grew up as the passing on of news and stories hundreds of years ago.

In Scotland and Ireland etc it is more embedded in the culture but I don't think this necessarily means it reaches more working class kids. It may even be the opposite.

### **The Standing of Folk Music In Today's society**

I think we're back to the old 'what is folk music?' argument here when we talk about whether it's relevant or not!

I think we need to be a bit more inclusive in our terminology and definitions – somehow showing the link between what kids are writing now, the stories they are telling now in their music, and how they resonate with folk songs of old, is the key BUT there will be very few working class kids connecting with the rural folk music songs because it's so far from their experience I think. It's finding the links between experience that may help perhaps.

As folk music became more 'professionalised', the idea of whether something was good or played well or not, became important and that perfectionism can be elitist and off putting in itself as much as classical music can.

Open mics, where people have a go at something are really important. But it has to encourage rap, spoken word performance and a folk song or two maybe?

Festivals and venues will need to invite more music styles in to appeal to the working class. Will need to embrace more modern music as 'folk' and mix and match and hopefully expose



new audiences to 'old' folk music. Get funding to put on these cultural exchanges and have free entry or subsidised so you can pay as you feel.

Or very brave folk musicians / singers going to where working class kids are putting on music nights and ask to play or sing as part of their events? Maybe for free for the exposure to a new audience – maybe we need funding for that? Take the music to where the people are rather than trying to get them to where 'we' are currently.

I think if Folk Music continues being seen as weird or different then it may well go full circle and become the realm of the working class again.

You mention working class people being more likely to join the army and perhaps the implication is that they will identify with some folk songs – I think that's true to an extent but maybe not at the point of going. When you're going into the army you're a mixture of proud and scared and maybe hyped up. You don't want to hear things that challenge whether it was a good idea and lots of folk songs about war are about regret and pain and death. Maybe after you leave the army, folk songs will speak to you more?

I think the way to reach working class people is to take the music to where working class people are and give them a chance to like it or not.

Schools are the safe and first place to start but kids are very influenced by social media and what is cool and until KPop bands or Billie Eilish start singing folk ballads, it's going to be hard to grab kids attention from any background.

Maybe we're back to what is folk music and perhaps we as the folk world need to be more open and flexible in order to be more accessible, rather than trying to encourage others to be more open and flexible to what they might pay to listen to?

This is all a bit waffle-y but I hope it's of some interest – feel free to ignore every word though! xxx

## Class and Accessing Folk Music

Class: Really important to have a flexibility of language around this and promote simpler routes to help self-identify and reduce anxiety around it - such as life experience / education / family and current income.

Accessing folk music:

- There's often a lot of assumed knowledge / vocabulary which can be alienating and it can feel like there are unwritten rules about the format of events, sessions, singarounds which can make trying to participate a bit impenetrable and then deepen the sense of barriers and perceptions of it 'not being for me' if you make a mistake or misunderstand things that it seems like everyone else already knows.
- We can be told repeatedly how friendly and welcoming the folk community is but sometimes when your only route into a festival etc is by volunteering to receive a free place, this can reinforce the imbalance of power as you are providing a service to people who are in the position financially / socially to afford a ticket. I have been treated / spoken to by longtime festival attendees in a way that has been dismissive or rude at times which has undermined the steps I have taken to try to break through into being part of events in ways that I have probably not experienced so much in other music genres (but this is certainly not exclusive to folk!) There can be a tendency to write people off sometimes if they see a volunteer lanyard, being behind a ticket desk etc or a perceived lack of knowledge / right to be somewhere, through younger age etc or newness. NB I've also experienced the opposite of this but thought should document anyway! This has been my experience working in other areas within arts / culture too or venues that predominantly draw a middle class audience - making assumptions that you're just working at a place because you need a job vs because you are already a part of that particular culture, have specific interest etc. and people can then be surprised when you share knowledge etc.

Me: I am from a single income family and was a carer growing up. I was fortunate to be given financial assistance by Sheffield Music Service to participate in trips etc with bands / orchestras that I wouldn't have been able to participate in otherwise. This transformed my life and gave me opportunities which have definitely changed my outcomes but also reinforced a sense that I wasn't from the same place as everyone else, as well as the sense of imposter phenomenon and the limits this can bring. I have sometimes found it hard historically to cross certain thresholds which I found intimidating as well as often needing to access these kinds of things by myself as not already part of 'the community.'

[Signed]