

## Consulting/Focus Groups on Race and Ethnicity - 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 Esbjorn 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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## ACCESS FOLK FOCUS GROUP: 'RACE' AND ACCESS TO FOLK SINGING / FOLK MUSIC IN ENGLAND Thursday 8th September, 7pm

### Summary:

This conversation on 'Race' and access to folk singing and folk music in England took place via Zoom on the above date. There were four participants in total. The following 5 discussion prompts were used:

1. General thoughts on Race & Folk Singing / Folk Music in England.
2. Specific thoughts: What are some of the problems for access and participation in folk singing / music for people of colour?
3. If you would like to share some relevant experiences, please do so on this page.
4. Please use this page to share ideas about what might be done to improve access / encourage participation for Black people, other people of colour, and racialised groups?
5. Last page: for any further observations.

The key themes are in capitals below, with some of the relating discussions summarised in bullet points.

### EXISTING DEMOGRAPHIC OF THE FOLK SCENE:

- \* The UK folk scene is one of the whitest genres in music. Even classical music is more diverse than folk music in England. Most folk sessions around the UK are predominantly white, as are folk club audiences, folk performers and folk festivals. This affects people of colour wishing to attend. If you don't ever see anyone like you, it can be very difficult to continue to be involved.
- \* The age demographic of the folk scene makes a difference. Younger people tend to be more attuned to a lack of diversity. They will notice it, comment on it and call attention to it.
- \* Underlying preconceptions exist about the demographic that is synonymous with folk music in England. It is widely considered to be the music of white people. This contrasts with ideas around folk music in America, where it is hard to divorce the music of Appalachia, for example, from the Black mountain folk.

### REPRESENTATION:

- \* This feeds into the above point, but is worth a point of its own. People of colour are not adequately represented amongst the people in control of the folk scene, or amongst the key artists who perform in the scene, or in the audiences.
- \* On the issue of representation, one participant said, 'growing up, my ambition was never to be a folk singer'. Another believed as a child that being a folk singer was not going to be possible. Representation is powerful, and its effects can be long lasting.
- \* On the rare occasion when you do see a person of colour playing folk music in this country, they are usually from another country and playing that country's folk music. This further distances English / British people of colour from this music. It also says something about existing assumptions in the UK folk scene. It shows how it can be hard for people of colour to key into what English folk music means, and to be invited into these spaces to play.

### BEING WELCOMED, VS. FEELING WELCOME:

- \* The UK folk scene is very welcoming. All participants felt personally very welcomed in folk clubs, sessions, etc, without exception. However as one participant pointed out, “there is a difference between being welcomed, and feeling welcome”.
- \* There can be a feeling of ‘we have allowed you to be here’. You are welcomed, and definitely not excluded. But there is also a sense that this isn’t ‘your space’, and there’s an unspoken code you have to follow.

### OWNERSHIP & GATEKEEPING IN THE FOLK SCENE

- \* The gatekeeping of the folk scene in this country is identified as part of the problem.
- \* The group felt that the exclusively white gatekeepers of the folk scene do not have sufficient personal interest in this issue to take it as far as it needs to be taken. In the words of one participant, “there isn’t enough skin in the game”. In other words, if an issue does not affect someone personally on a daily basis, they are likely to have less passion and drive to change things for the better.
- \* Change is not going to be instant. There can be no quick fix for a situation that took almost 500 years to create. The problems that we see in the folk scene today, are due to centuries of systemic inequality and oppression that was sanctioned from the very highest places. It can’t be put right by holding a folk workshop in a predominantly Black school, for instance. Such events alone won’t create lasting change, though they are very important and should be done.
- \* Ownership is identified as a problem. The focus group discussed ownership, how it is used and what it looks like. When it comes to cultures of music associated with white people, the music is often used as a way to exclude those who are not white (this can be seen in action in classical music). Even folk music had its complicated relationship to ownership and class - it excluded the very people (ie, the working class) who provided the songs and tunes in the first place.
- \* People of colour are sometimes invited to contribute opinions, ideas, experience and expertise. But we are never in a position to actually implement these ideas - that’s always out of our hands, as there are no people of colour in positions of power within the scene.

### DIVERSITY AS A BOX-TICKING EXERCISE

- \* Concern was expressed that since funding bodies such as Arts Council England now have requirements for showing that diversity is being actively addressed, diversity itself may be used as a ‘box-ticking exercise’. So even if those ticking the boxes really do want to diversify, they will be driven by the requirements of a funding application (immediate), rather than a desire for change (long term).

### THE LEGACY OF HISTORY, FOLK REVIVALS & ASSOCIATIONS OF THE GENRE:

- \* The group noted the fact that Black people generally just don’t think this music is ‘for them’, and this perception can be perpetuated by the folk community. It is likely that this feeling has its roots in the nationalistic atmosphere in which the first folk revival took place. Nobody outside of EFDSS and English Folk Expo is really doing anything about this problem. This should be a visible narrative in folk right now, there should be conversations about this issue.

### REGIONALITY & EXCLUSIVITY:

- \* The tradition within folk music of prioritising /fetishising regional songs can have a very excluding effect.

## RESISTANCE TO CHANGE:

- \* Resistance to change is identified as a problem in the folk scene in England.
- \* Jazz and blues have changed over the years, incorporated different styles, been progressive, etc... can the same be said of folk music?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVING DIVERSITY:

- \* What can we learn from other genres of music that do not have diversity problems? For example, jazz and blues are both musics of black origin. Yet they are extremely accessible to white people. It is felt that this accessibility in jazz and blues is in large part due to the absence of gatekeepers in these genres.
- \* Maybe the personalities and values of the people running the folk clubs at grass-roots level make a difference. eg a more open-minded person running a club, who really cares about diversity, will attract a more diverse crowd, performers, etc.
- \* More artists of colour need to be booked at clubs, festivals, etc. This will make a massive difference.
- \* If festivals book artists who have a huge following in non-white communities, this would increase audience diversity instantly. However, a problem is that the existing white audiences are receiving all the communications & marketing. If the marketing materials are sent to the same people, you'll keep getting the same audiences regardless of who you book.
- \* Lasting, meaningful change will take a lot of work, and it will take a lot of time. The group queries whether those in charge in the folk scene have the necessary passion for change in this area that will sustain them in the years that it will take to create this change.
- \* It is not enough to say that you want change. Action must be taken. Change in the area of diversity in the folk scene will require a mechanism. And it will need to be robust. It will need to have a short term, medium term and long term strategy, each with measurable outcomes. Currently, nobody seems to be measuring any outcomes, and there doesn't seem to be any sort of long-term plan to increase the diversity in the folk scene in terms of race.
- \* The changes we desire in the folk scene are part of a bigger social change that needs to happen. Those in charge of the folk scene know they must work from the ground up, and acknowledge that this could be a really slow, painful process, and that the things you want to change need to be present in every strand of your work. Those working for change must be prepared to see this through, and to not be swayed from the long-term goal. Change management is massive - you have to tackle it head on.
- \* The focus group is worried that organisations may not be willing to start at the beginning and take the slow, difficult steps that they need to take to make changes here. However, the overall feeling is one of hopefulness that we are in a time of change, even if those changes don't show up for a few years (or even in the next generation).

## REFLECTIONS ON THIS MEETING:

Everyone in the focus group felt personally very welcomed into all the folk environments they had visited. The group agreed on the fact that the overwhelming whiteness of the folk scene can cause feelings of discomfort or of being unwelcome, in spite of personal welcomes from the people in the venues and at the events. The issue of race and folk singing / folk music in this country is multi-faceted, complicated, and has its roots in a wider context of historical and systemic inequalities that are so much bigger than the folk scene itself. This issue of the wider context of systemic inequality, coupled with the fact that people of colour are not represented amongst the gatekeepers of the folk world, concerns the group. It can feel as though positive change is less likely, or will be a very long time coming. However, all group members feel positive and agree that we do seem to be in a time where change really is beginning to take place, or at least can be seen as a possibility. NB: The group acknowledges that racialised people can be white. Discussion here focussed on issues for people of colour in the folk scene, as all group members identify in this way.

## REFLECTIVE SUMMARY ON THE NOTES FROM THE PREVIOUS 2 MEETINGS OF THE 'RACE & ETHNICITY' FOCUS GROUP:

The term 'Englishness' was examined and unpicked, and its positive and negative qualities discussed. The group agreed that there are underlying associations between 'Englishness' and 'whiteness' that are problematic. The effects of Brexit were discussed and many different views expressed on this. A difference was acknowledged between the terminology 'English' and 'English mindset'. It was agreed that it's extremely important that the folk music of 'White Other' groups in England, such as Gypsy, Traveller and Roma people, should be more heavily featured. Surely it can't be too difficult to organise this? Questions were raised about whether 'English Folk Music' and 'Folk Music in England' are the same thing. There is a need for the folk scene to acknowledge folk music that was created and played here in England from non-English groups - eg Polish folk songs, Calypso, steel pan music, songs from the Windrush generation, Romani songs, and so on. Is a Hebrew paraliturgical folk song from a Jewish community that's been in England for over 300 years, English folk? For many members of this group, absolutely it is.

The 60s folk revival in England is often misrepresented as an exclusively white scene. The truth is that many performers of colour played a key role, eg Cy Grant, Davy Graham, Nadia Cattouse, Dorris Henderson, Cliff Hall. Agents need to find a way to represent under-represented racial or ethnic groups without overburdening them, or misrepresenting their experience.

Distinction vs fusion were discussed using the metaphors of a 'melting pot' vs a 'fruit salad', with conversation around finding similarities as well as exploring differences in various folk musics. Also discussed was the history of the use of folk music in political resistance.

The group asked whether EFDSS is doing enough to address these issues - and also asked what the Society can reasonably be expected to do.

The group concludes that in moving forward with decolonisation, we have to accept that we will make mistakes. It is better to do something wrong, and learn from the mistake, than to do nothing.

## **Analysis of Focus group on Ethnicity and Folk Singing in England 29 September 2022**

### **Introduction**

The first issue we came across in our conversation was what we actually meant with “ethnicity” or “ethnic identity” and also to the connection with “race” and when and how it was useful to make distinctions. We talked about how perception of ethnicity in everyday life can relate to culture and traditions, as well as language and appearance. People may also have several ethnic identities that are not exclusionary. Ethnicity can be tied up with genetics and national belonging in ways that are not always helpful and which can play into far right tropes. In most of our discussions, we took the common language approach of thinking about ethnicity and ethnic identity as connected to familial ties, culture and perception of you and others as being of a certain ethnicity.

Our focus group included people born in the UK as well as people who migrated here as adults. We noticed that two of us were born in England and speak perfect English but look somewhat non-English, and two were born outside of England but could pass as English until their accents give them away. Regardless of our various ethnic identities, we could all “pass” as English in one way but not another. We acknowledge that this would not necessarily be the case for all people with a non-English ethnic identity and their experiences in the folk scene could therefore be more pronounced.

### **General points and thoughts about Ethnicity and Folk Singing in England**

- Folk songs are generally associated with an ethnicity and/or nation,  
*However...*
- The themes and narratives in folk songs transcend ethnicity and national boundaries as many songs explore the 'human condition' and emotions or situations that are more universal than specific to ethnic groups.  
*Even so....*
- English ethnic origins are often assumed in both folk singers and folk songs - historical as well as current ethnic diversity is forgotten as well as the fact that a large part of the 'English' folk song repertoire is shared with the other UK nations and Ireland, as well as with many other countries and the song repertoires of long established national minorities within England, such as Gypsy and Traveller groups.  
*Surprisingly (and thankfully)...*
- Considering the perceived connections between folk song, ethnicity and national boundaries, there are seemingly very few people involved in the folk song scene that are committed to an excluding far-right ethno-nationalistic Englishness.

### **Problems for access & participation in folk singing & music for people with a non-English ethnic identity**

- There are few non-English role models, which contribute to internalised ideas of not 'belonging' in the folk singing scene even if the scene itself is generally inviting.  
*Therefore....*
- The “join in and sing along” ethos of the folk song scene sometimes jars with the very non-diverse (in multiple ways) make up of many folk singing contexts in England.

*There can be pressure...*

- When recognised as non-English to sing something "ethnic" rather than singing a song in the English folk song repertoire.

*And....*

- On a professional level, essentialised ideas about your ethnicity can have an impact on what kind of opportunities you have access to in the folk scene, including suggestions that you should be doing something "from your own culture", this can be rather tiring and frustrating. However, sometimes you are also offered opportunities because of your non-Englishness (and not only focus group vouchers).

*Be aware that....*

- Some non-English people can "pass" as English more easily than others and this will have an impact on their experience too. There is a crossover with issues pertaining to race here.

### **Improving access and encouraging participation for people with non-English ethnic identities.**

- Seeing more people who are visually and audibly non-English that are engaging with folk singing and the English folk song repertoire would make it easier for people with non-English ethnic identities to feel like they can join and and take part without having to either downplay their own ethnicity or play along with others ideas about what they ought to be singing/doing.

*Remember that ideas about ethnic identity affect us all....*

- The folk scene's imaginations of English ethnic identity need an update. We are still stuck in either dreams of rural heartlands or working class origin stories which can give rise to a somewhat pure and confined idea about English ethnicity. The big looming (still very recent) history of the British Empire and the global spread of English culture and people is almost universally excluded from the prevalent idea of an Englishness as local to these isles and connected solely to green southern meadows or smoky northern cities.

*With this in mind...*

- As we need to speak about race, we also need to talk about how we relate to ethnic identities within the folk scene - there are many different ways we can engage with our Englishness/non-Englishness. Conversations need to be had not only in "closed" "lived experience only" spaces but also more openly with people who embrace different ethnic identities, including English, in the folk scene. Keeping conversations constructive and avoiding shaming and blaming is crucial but also challenging as many people who are not affected by issues relating to their ethnicity (and race) on an everyday basis are not used to reflecting on this subject.

*But don't forget that....*

- Difficult conversations are important - silence is the problem.

### **Reflections**

The people in the focus group had quite different experiences of negotiating ethnicity in the folk song scene. In general we found the scene inviting but this in itself didn't always result in a sense of belonging. There are some particularities in folk singing and music which can help people get involved but which can also serve as barriers. The focus on regionality and

local traditions is one such particularity. It can allow you to connect to the place you are currently in, regardless of your background, and without having to engage with the whole of England or “Englishness”, but it might also depend more on local gatekeepers allowing you to partake than being part of a more generalised English folk scene.

We only very briefly touched on xenophobia and racism but I think it is important to remember that political events and media representation of ethnicity also affects behaviour in the folk song scene. One of the participants felt that perceptions of their non-Englishness became more pronounced directly in the aftermath of the 2016 vote to leave the EU.

“People who never commented on my attendance at folk clubs or sessions previously now felt like they needed to make some form of statement that everyone was welcome (understood by me as “even non-English/British people”); had that not always been the case?! That said, I never came across any explicitly anti-european sentiments in the folk contexts I attended in London, just the sudden need to “include” me after the vote, regardless of the fact that I had already participated for years. Ironically, the attempt at inclusion made me feel excluded for the first time”.

The folk song scene is not an island of nostalgic cosiness cut off from the rest of society, it will be influenced by current political discourse. Vilification of Eastern Europeans in the run up to the 2016 vote, attacks on Gypsy and Travellers in “documentary” television shows and other news media or whatever other ethnic or social groups the Home Office and the press has it into at any one time, will impact on how the folk scene behaves, either as a reaction against vilification or by implicitly going along with such discourses.

Esbjorn Wettermark, 5 October 2022



### **Comment from reader re. Romani Gypsy experiences.**

I suppose the only thing that came to my mind, re Romani Gypsies, supporting what you've already noted in the ethnicity report, is awareness that others will have expectations around your repertoire if they know your ethnic heritage (even for me, first generation 'settled'). The songs passed down to me from my father/grandfather are mainly old music hall songs/Bing Crosby/Frank Sinatra etc. When I used to go to folk clubs in pubs and participate in singing/playing 20 years ago, I would never have wanted to mention to anyone there that I'm of Romani heritage. Not because I feared I'd be unwelcome, but because I thought this would influence people's perception of my 'performance' and expectations around what I should sing/play, and I'd have felt a fake because I can't sing/play in the ways they would probably have expected, or so I imagined.

In relation to English or non-English identities, not all people understand that Romani Gypsies are also English. I was once referred to as an immigrant in a document at work due to my heritage, I laughed it off and corrected the author, but I can imagine younger people with less confidence, moving in 'Gorger' circles [non-Romani], would be deeply offended to be seen as non-English (just an example of assumptions people make).