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Folk & World Music

#84 ~ October/November '99

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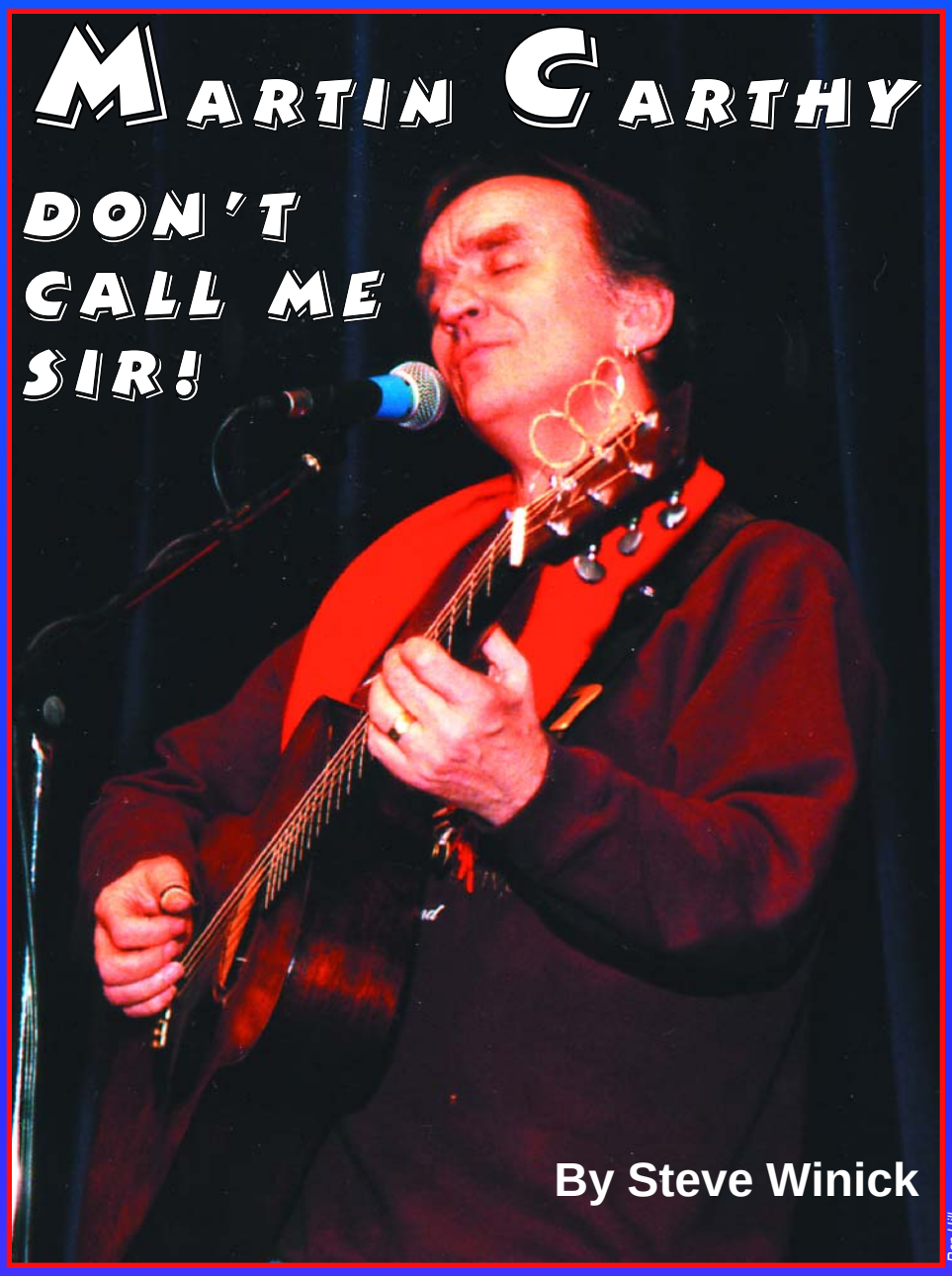
Dirty Linen Issue #84 ~ October/November 1999

Chapel is on the left, car wash is on the right

Martin Carthy

Don't Call Me Sir!



By Steve Winick

Ron Hill

Ever since the Queen of England awarded folksinger Martin Carthy the MBE last year, well-meaning fans who don't know any better (and wisecracking cutups who do) have been adding the honorific "Sir" to Carthy's first name. So let's clear this up at the outset. Is a Member of the Order of the British Empire entitled to be called "Sir"?

"No, no, no, no!" Carthy answered in an April 1999 interview. The award, he explained, does not make you a knight. "I think there's four levels. There's the Member of the Order, there's the Officer of the Order, which is an OBE, which is what Aly Bain has, then there's a Commander, then there's a Knight-Commander."

Just how did Carthy get picked for this elite group? "It was actually something that was lobbied for," he answered. "Because these days, the awards don't come from above. Theoretically, they come from below. People actually put you up for it and they lobby, and they write letters, and they say why it should happen, and 'Why hasn't it happened yet?' This guy in Scotland had been lobbying for it for about three years. And [my wife] Norma knew, and I knew nothing. And she came in with this big Cheshire-cat grin on her face one night with this large parchment envelope — I couldn't believe the quality of the envelope! And there it was."

Carthy admits that he thought twice about accepting the award; he's not a supporter of imperialism in any form, and the name "British Empire" in the award's title rankled at first. In fact, he's still a little uncomfortable with it now. "Don't imagine that I've suddenly become establishment," he hastened to clarify. "I wish it were called the Legion of Honour, but it's not." Still in all, he thinks it's good for governments to give cultural awards and is suitably honored by this one, which has previously gone to such outstanding folk performers as Jeannie Robertson. To decline under such circumstances, he said, would have been "snotty."

More importantly, he conceives of his MBE as recognition he shares with the whole folk scene. "I've been put at the front of a very, very long queue of people who work hard to make a folk revival and a folk scene," he said. "All those people who organized clubs for nothing and paid you out of their own pocket, and fed you and put you on the train the next morning, and put you to bed when you were drunk! What [the government is] doing, is taking notice of the fact that something's going on for the last more than 40 years. It's called the folk revival. They've ignored it for that long. And someone has suddenly taken notice, and that's okay. A bit of profile isn't gonna hurt us — and I say us, the plural, for the folk scene — isn't gonna hurt us at all."

In the same year as Carthy's moment of recognition, something happened that did hurt the folk scene. Lal Waterson, Carthy's sister-in-law, bandmate, near neighbor and close friend, died of cancer. While that was obviously painful, Carthy cast it in a positive light. "It was a fabulous death, if you can have such a thing," he said. "From the diagnosis to her dying was only 10 days. And she was very funny about it. She was absolutely realistic, and occasionally very, very funny. She was an amazing woman, she was a lovely woman, and she had no room for any kind of sentiment that was phony at all. She was about as dignified as a person can be."

In the midst of this period of personal ups and downs, Carthy is as happy and productive a musician as he has ever been. In the last few years, his family group, Waterson:Carthy, his genre-bending band, Brass Monkey, and his trio project with Chris Wood and Roger Wilson have all toured and recorded, some of them several times. And somewhere along the way, Carthy found time to locate, arrange, learn and record material for his first solo album in a decade.

Why did it take so long for Carthy to record alone? "I never got 'round to it, is the short answer, or the glib answer really," he answered. Then he expanded: "I like to think about it, very hard. I like to use solo stuff to spread out, to broaden out, to find out where things are going, and all the other collaborations are sort of the fruit of that.

"If you're working with other people, your contribution can only be decent if you yourself as a soloist are in fairly decent shape," he continued. "And when I'm doing that, I tend to put all my eggs into one basket. Like when I was working with Dave [Swarbrick], when we did those two albums *Skin & Bone* and *Life &*

Limb, all my recording eggs were in one basket. I started doing lots with Waterson:Carthy, and all my creative eggs were in one basket. But it came upon me last year that it was time, I'm getting on, and I really ought to think about this again and do another album. I rang Tony [Engle] up at Topic and said initially, 'I'll do a song album and an instrumental album.' "

Carthy has since put the instrumental album on his back burner, but the song album went ahead as planned, despite initial difficulties. A collection of songs that have affected Carthy over the years, *Signs of Life* is the most diverse record he's ever done. "What we think of as folk music is not the only thing that's affected me through my life, and I'm more and more reluctant to exclude a whole lot of other things," he explained. "It's very hard to exclude 'Heartbreak Hotel.' It's hard to exclude rock 'n' roll!"

Besides Elvis, *Signs of Life* covers the Bee Gees and Hoagy Carmichael, as well as some of Carthy's favorite traditional songs. What ties it all together, he said, is that "they're all in one way or another signposts" that taught him something over the years. As a single example, Carthy brought up the Bee Gees, whose song "New York Mine Disaster, 1941" taught him "that pop singers in 1965 or 66 could write about stuff like that, and it could be effective. I heard them doing it more recently, in a much more stripped-down arrangement, in which you can actually hear them do the song. And it's done beautifully, and Robin Gibb is actually a great singer.

"To hear them do it now, and to realize what a tremendous song it is, is to realize that it shares something with traditional songs," he continued. "Traditional music can deal with a two-line verse, a three-line verse, or a four-line verse. Or a five-line verse. To be more relevant, it can deal with a three- or a four-line verse in one song and just be seamless. And that's exactly what they do in that song; the first verse is three lines, and the second verse is four lines. And you hardly notice that. It's a very clever piece of writing."

Carthy's admiration for the song doesn't stop there. "I saw them being interviewed about it," he said, "and the way they wrote it just took the imagination by storm. Because what they did, apparently, was to lock themselves in a theater, in the fire escape system, in a European theater where there was no lighting at all. So they went, and they shut themselves in there, and they played let's pretend. They played a game with each other and came up with that song. And what an opening line! 'In the event of something happening to me...' It's wonderful stuff!"

For Carthy's core fans, the traditional songs are probably the most exciting things on the disc. As far as the traditional music is concerned, Carthy said, "I wanted to put a few things down that I'd been thinking about for a while. I wanted to do 'Sir Patrick Spens,' 'cause I've been busting to sing it for years. And I finally decided that really and truly I ought to do the very best tune of the lot, which is the tune that Nic Jones did. I'd always avoided it, because Nic and I worked on sort of parallel furrows for a long time. And it's nice to have a kind of diversity, different looks at songs. But, having said that, it's the best tune for God's sake, so stop messing about and go do it!"

Not all of his settings were taken from other revivalists, however. His version of "Bonny Hind" for example, sets words learned from June Tabor to a new tune. "I didn't have any qualms about putting another tune to it," he said, "because it's a way of having another look at the song. Different tunes reveal different things in sets of verses. I must have messed around with around half a dozen tunes and then lit on that one."

The tune Carthy picked is normally associated with the ballad "The Duke of Marlborough," which Carthy reckons he'll never sing again. "I'm not really interested in singing a song in praise of the Churchill family," he explained. "Bugger 'em! He had his five years between 1940 and 1945, and he did a great job. Before that he did things like turning the army onto miners and stuff like that. Stuff 'im, and his descendants, as well." Carthy *has* sung the song, however, for the tape that accompanies an exhibit at an armaments museum. "I thought three or four times about doing that," he recalled. "But then I thought, no, that's a pretty good thing. The best place for armaments is in a museum! So let's sing a song which deserves to be in a museum, too. So I sang that. But it was definitely sung as a museum piece. The

Topic Records

Brass Monkey - Martin Brinsford, Richard Cheetham, John Kirkpatrick, Martin Carthy, and Howard Evans

Lahri Bond

Waterson:Carthy - Martin Carthy, Norma Waterson, and Eliza Carthy

Ron Hill

Wood, Carthy & Wilson - Chris, Martin & Roger

kind of traditional music I want to do is not, as far as I'm concerned, a museum piece."

In fact, Carthy feels no particular allegiance to any individual version of a song, unless he happens to like it. If he doesn't, he's apt to either change it or look for a version he likes better. Of "The Deserter," he writes the following in his sleeve notes: "I had, eventually, to stop singing it because of the last verse, which is dumb…. Wiggy Smith to the rescue! Another of Mike Yates's recordings of English Gypsies reveals a singer (Wiggy himself) of real wit and passion, with a last verse to the song which lifts it way out of the ordinary." And, as to changing songs, which might be more controversial among folkies, Carthy is equally determined. "I think that people always have done that. I think there's been a couple of generations of collectors and revivalists who've treated the thing as though it was holy writ, as though it had never moved in its life. But people have always made decisions about song and about music. I refuse to believe they haven't. And I'm a people! So why the hell shouldn't I make a bloody decision?"

As an example, Carthy cites his version of "Prince Heathen," which he originally recorded with Dave Swarbrick in 1969, and which is revisited on *Signs of Life*. In the song, an evil prince beats, imprisons, rapes, and impregnates a strong-willed young woman, periodically demanding that she love him. She refuses to submit time and again. But in the printed versions of the ballad, she relents at the very end, when her resolve mysteriously melts away. Carthy explained, "What happens is that they all fall in love and live happily ever after. The baby cries, and the prince says, 'Oh, it's my baby, it's my widdle boy!' And she disappears in this sort of morass of glue. And it just struck me as nonsense, absolute nonsense. So I just basically ditched that verse, and sang the refrain, 'Never yet, you heathen dog, and never shall for you!' Because it seems to make sense. The answer is *NO*, sweetie, and no shit will change it. Gandhi talked about this notion of firmness in the truth, and there it is in that song, absolutely pure and simple. Just remove that stupid last verse, and there it is."

Perhaps the most striking development on *Signs of Life* is in Carthy's guitar playing; gone is the rhythmic and exciting, if somewhat four-square, playing he's been known for. It's replaced by a looser style that seems to inhabit songs rather than contain them. "I've been trying to loosen it up for a long time," he confirmed. "That's another reason for leaving it 10 years. On the last album, I'd managed to loosen up a little bit. But there's still a sort of stiffness there, and I still just wanted to loosen it and let the thing play itself."

Carthy's learning process restarted itself when he and Dave Swarbrick, old partners from the 1960s, teamed up again in 1989. Carthy found he had to practice a lot to adjust to the duo and keep up with his partner. When he began to play with his daughter Eliza in the 1990s, he was pushed into even more practicing. "When we were playing together at the beginning," he explained, "I was okay, I was fine. But a 20-year-old moves at such a rate of knots, that very quickly I was having to run to catch up. Then I started to practice a lot more. When you're upping your level of confidence so that you're always playing within yourself, you're actually able to get more control, and it's the control that I've been after all these years, I realized."

Another ingredient in Carthy's new guitar style is his increasing appreciation of English Gypsy singers. "English Gypsy singing is the last weirdness," he claimed. "It's really very odd indeed. It's been dismissed for years. I've tried to look at it on its own terms, instead of trying to impose what I thought. When I understood that singing and decided that's the sort of thing that's really interesting musically, it was really new, it opened doors that I didn't even know existed, and suddenly the guitar playing had its proper place."

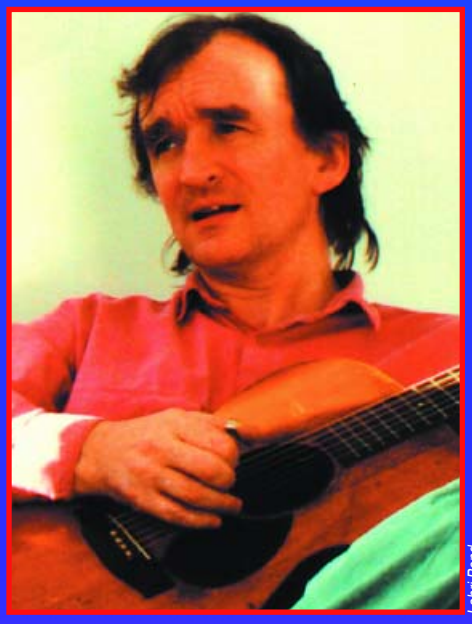
One thing that helped Carthy in the recording is that his nephew, Ollie Knight, is a producer who owns a studio 50 yards from Carthy's house. "He charged by the hour," Carthy said, "so I'd go in, and I'd either work all day or I'd work a couple of hours. And he's fabulously attentive, as well. So he'd say, 'You've changed so-and-so, and that's to the good,' or, 'You've changed so-and-so, and that's not,' and he was usually right."

Even with Knight's help, starting the record was not easy. But after he re-learned the process of solo recording, he was able to put together a recording he liked. "I feel happy about a lot of that record in a way that I haven't felt about records before," he continued, and then added: "I think I'll listen to it in a year's time and groan!"

Carthy is equally enthusiastic about the album he recorded with the re-convened Brass Monkey. Carthy still speaks about the whole Brass Monkey experience with a certain degree of awe. The folk-brass hybrid, he explained, "grew out of the fact that when Steeleye Span packed up in '78, John Kirkpatrick and I decided that this was the second time we'd been in a band together which had fallen apart and that we'd like to do more together. So we


Ron Hill

Norma Waterson


Lahri Bond


Ron Hill

Eliza Carthy

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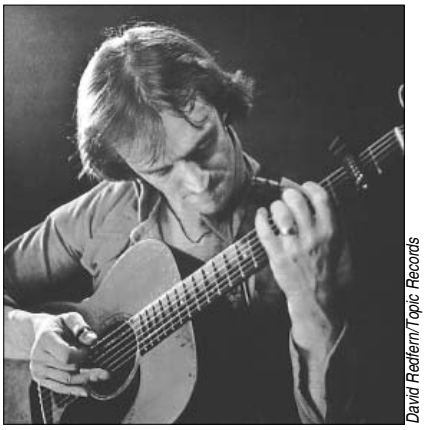
Dave Swarbrick and Carthy, 1968



David Redfern/Topic Records

Martin Carthy, 1967

Topic Records

The Watersons - Carthy; Norma, Lal, and Mike Waterson, 1979

did, we started working things out as a duo. And John recorded some tracks with me for my album called *Because It's There*. At the same time I was working in *Lark Rise to Candleford* at the National Theatre, and one of the musicians was Howard Evans, a brass player. I got quite matey with Howard, and he was sort of intrigued by traditional English music, and was asking all sorts of questions about it all the time. I asked him if he fancied playing on this record that I'd made, doing some overdubs. And he said, 'Oh, yeah!' So John and he actually played together on that album without ever meeting."

Soon, Kirkpatrick, Carthy, and Evans began rehearsing as a trio. Brass Monkey mushroomed from there until there were five members. "We actually didn't manage to get a complete rehearsal with all five of us. So when we did our first gig, which was down at this pub called the Black Horse in Telham, near Hastings, we had no idea what we were gonna sound like. After about half a minute, John and I just started to laugh, because it sounded so amazing! Because brass can really thrill you to the marrow, I think."

Despite everybody's enthusiasm, Brass Monkey broke up in 1987. "It became harder and harder and harder to coordinate everybody's diaries," Carthy explained. And then, tempers get short, and all sorts of things start getting in the way of the music."

In 1995, the band was revived for what was to be a one-off performance at the Sidmouth festival in the south of England. "It took all the next year to organize for us to do a tour, which demonstrated the truth of why we broke up. And we did the tour in '97 and made the album."

Steeleye Span - Peter Knight, Tim Hart, Maddy Prior, Martin Carthy, and Ashley Hutchings, 1971

Sound & Rumour, the third Brass Monkey album, got mixed reviews. "I think it got mixed reviews because people had got used to a world without Brass Monkey," Carthy speculated. "So, suddenly, there were these old farts sticking their noses round the door again. I think if we'd done a lot of gigs, people would have accepted it, and the album would have gotten better reviews because I think it's a bloody good album. And it personally made me so happy, I felt sort of vindicated. I always felt that there was some disappointment, like we broke up before our time had come. We had a lot more to do, and that tour and that album demonstrated that we had a lot more to do."

For the moment, Brass Monkey is destined to be an occasional band at best. Howard Evans has a desk job with the Musicians' Union, which limits his opportunity for touring. Meanwhile, Richard Cheetham, the band's trombone player, has become a leader of his own projects, and people depend on him for jobs, so he too must limit his time with the group. Still, Carthy reckons there should be a little time for Brass Monkey. "I think we'll almost certainly do more," Carthy said. "We're doing a couple of festivals." Carthy also avowed that another Brass Monkey album would be a welcome project. "We all know in our heart of hearts that there's another album in there," he said.

Wood Wilson Carthy, another occasional project that includes the busy Carthy, was the brainchild of Chris Wood. "He contacted Roger

Steeleye Span - Tim Hart, John Kirkpatrick, Carthy, Nigel Pegrum, Rick Kemp and Maddy Prior, 1974

Miles Evans

Oliver (Ollie) Knight - with his mom, Lal Waterson, 1998

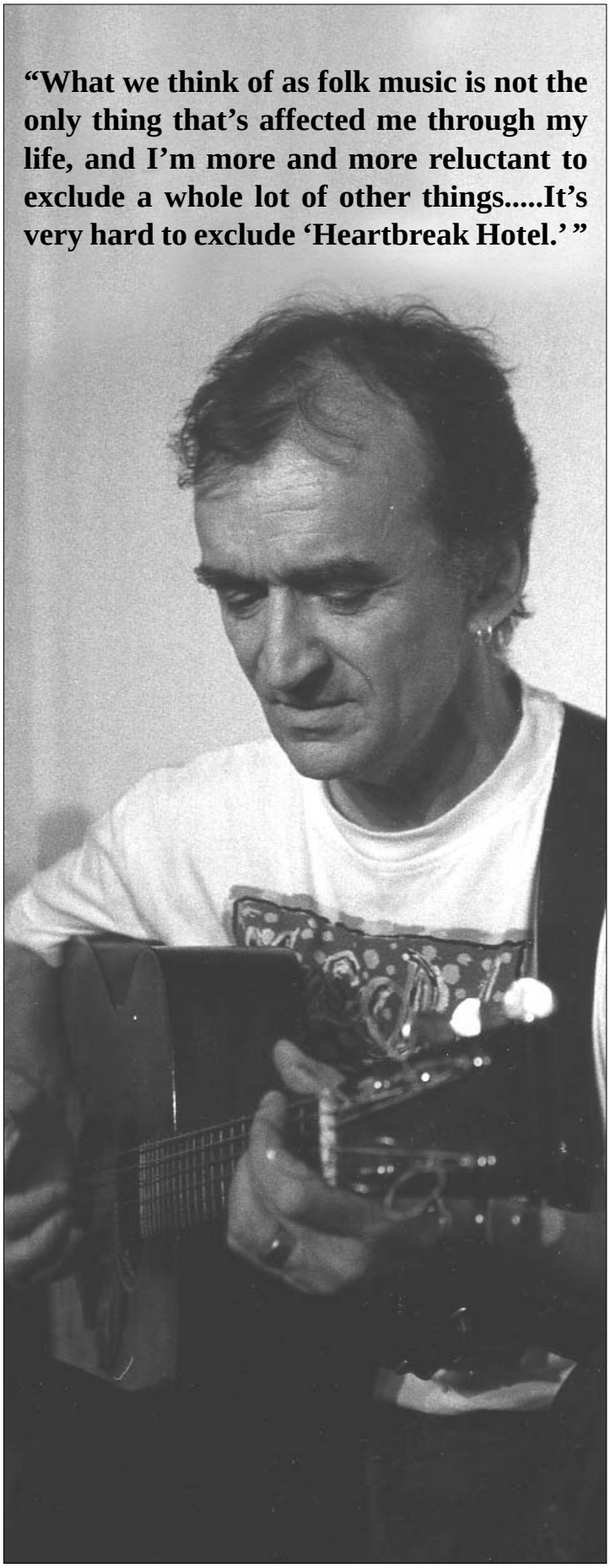
and contacted me and said, 'Come on, how about it, let's see what can be done,' Carthy recalled. "There's a lot of diversity in it, because each of us has a very individual idea about how to do these songs, and it's about seeing how the others, either both or one, can add to what that person does."

By way of example, Carthy points out that the group recorded a couple of songs written by Wilson among their mostly traditional repertoire. "He wrote a really lovely little song about seeing the scan of his baby at 12 weeks, a little dot inside his wife's womb. It's a very risky sort of song to write, it could become mawkish in about three seconds flat. But he just did it! It's slightly romantic, very touching, and in parts very funny." Carthy also loves Wilson's approach to traditional songs. "There's a very slight country edge to it," he said.

"Chris has his own way with songs," Carthy continued. "Chris did an absolutely storming version of 'Lord Bateman,' one of the best I've ever heard. He found it in one of my books and just went away and sat on it and worked on it and looked at it, and turned it upside-down and climbed inside it and all around it for about three years, and then on this record he decided to give it a go. He and I played it on two guitars. I can't abide two guitars, the most boring sound in the world, I think. But he makes it work. We made it work. It's that sort of chance that we take between the three of us.

"Speaking personally," Carthy confided, "I do the sort of things that I would never do outside the trio. And that's very interesting and very exciting." As an example, he cites the moment when, during the recording of their album (also called *Wood Wilson Carthy*), Wood and Wilson came back from the pub with a demand: "You've got to sing 'Scarborough Fair.'" The song is one Carthy recorded almost 35 years ago. "So we went up into the studio, and I really had no idea what they were on about, I just sat there and sang it," Carthy recalled. "And then I gradually got into this idea that they had, the two of them, for arranging it. It's nice to go back to a song like that."

"What we think of as folk music is not the only thing that's affected me through my life, and I'm more and more reluctant to exclude a whole lot of other things.....It's very hard to exclude 'Heartbreak Hotel.'"



Ron Hill

Like Brass Monkey, Wood Wilson Carthy plans to continue touring and possibly recording, on a limited basis. But Carthy's main band these days is Waterson:Carthy, made up of Carthy, his daughter Eliza, his wife Norma Waterson, and his son-in-law, Saul Rose. Waterson:Carthy have several albums available already and have recently finished recording another CD.

"It's very consciously all English stuff. I think it's rather good, actually," Carthy said. "In many ways, I've not been on an album quite like it. Liza's been digging around in some of the more interesting tune books, trying to find some of the more interesting tunes, like double hornpipes. Liza sings a thing called 'The Forsaken Mermaid,' and she does 'The Raggle-Taggle Gypsies' as done by Walter Pardon. Norma sings 'The Bay of Biscay' and 'Fare Thee Well Cold Winter.' I do 'The Bald Headed End of the Broom,' as found in Northern Ireland, and 'The Lion's Den.'

"It was a very exciting album to make," he continued. "It's nice when you're playing with your family, and you actually have that intuition flying around the room so that you can play songs that are completely out of tempo and not miss a step. It's a lovely feeling, something that's never happened to me before. Norma just shrugs her shoulders and says, 'What are you talking about? This is boring old family stuff again!' And then there's me being all excited!"

There's plenty of excitement to come for Martin Carthy, MBE. With a solo tour and a Waterson:Carthy tour planned for the coming year, he'll have lots of hard but interesting work to do, both alone and with the family. "It's funny," Carthy concluded. "At the age of 58, I think of it as being more excited than I've ever been in my life." What's the secret? Simple, he said. "Life gets more interesting the more toward old git-dom you get!"