

## News

## FOLK AGAINST FASCISM

Jill Turner reports from the British folk scene fighting back against misappropriation of its songs by the BNP

“They want to take our music; we will not let them.” Galvanising words from Folk Against Fascism, a campaigning

group formed in June this year by Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Derbyshire folk music luminaries, Tom Rose, Joan Crump, Kit Bailey and Vic Cutting.

One only has to look to New York in the 1940s and the testimony of the songbooks of Pete Seeger, Josh White and Leadbelly to know that folk music has a long history of anti-fascist activism. There's the iconic image of Woody Guthrie, holding his guitar with its indelible words, *'This machine kills fascists'*, plus the legacy of Joe Hill before them. Over here, from recording artists Ewan McColl, Roy Bailey and Leon Rosselson, to floor singers in pubs and clubs up the length of the British Isles, there's been many an anti-fascist song sung. So what's happening with British folk music today and why now for a campaigning group?

Joan Crump, artistic director of Sidmouth Folk Week, explains that Folk Against Fascism was formed in reaction to a number of simultaneous events. First, the election to the European Parliament of two members of the British National Party in June. Secondly, confusion upon discovering a 'folkie' and regular singer at Sidmouth Folk Week had stood in the local elections as a BNP candidate. Finally, and with most urgency, it was to provide a practical strategy to counteract the appropriation of British folk music being used as the political soundtrack for a nationalist party who seek to divide communities and gain political ground by blaming economic problems on immigration.

Part of the BNP's declared strategy to 'get people onside' is encouraging party members to engage themselves in the revival of folk traditions and customs. Their activists' handbook states, *'ideally our units will lead their communities in organising or at least supporting St George's Day or events which are unique to the area.'* Music commentator Karl Dallas indicates the knock-on effect: "any performer who is asked to perform at any St Georges Day events next year should ask who is



organising the event." You may get a gig, but when details are published on a right-wing nationalist website, performers will be co-opted by default into supporting someone else's political aims. "Find out where the money is coming from," urges Dallas, "make sure the event actively welcomes all of England's communities."

In a further attempt to own Englishness, the BNP has set up a CD merchandising arm, selling albums by folk musicians alongside their own folk music compilations, without seeking permission from artists concerned. Jim Moray says: "It is regrettable that these CDs are available. I hope the artists featured manage to get the CDs withdrawn. As I understand it, the specific tracks have been recorded on defunct record labels, where rights have reverted to another company that will license tracks to anyone."

Licensing is not always the issue. Steve Knightley's lyrics have proven attractive for misappropriation: *'I've lost St George and the Union Jack, it's my flag and I want it back.'* "I actually wrote 'Roots' in response to the new licensing laws," responds Knightley, "protesting at the obstacles faced by traditional pub singers, and the derision of an MP who said that his idea of hell was three folk singers in a pub."

In a recent BBC news broadcast, Bellowhead's Jon Boden commented, "if we continue to allow traditional (English) culture to be mocked, we can't be entirely surprised when groups like the BNP come along



Clockwise from above: the new Folk Against Fascism logo; Steve Knightley performing at Sidmouth Folk Week; Woody Guthrie in the 40s, with an anti-fascist sticker on his guitar; Jon Boden, whose violin sports a 'Nazis Keep Out' sticker

and start getting their mucky hands on it and claiming it for their own." In the same broadcast, a BNP spokesman said: "we don't need to ask these people's permission to use the material. We use a product to raise funds for the party – whether the musicians like the BNP is irrelevant."

"To hear my song on their website is very upsetting," said a betrayed Knightley as he opened the official Folk Against Fascism launch concert at Sidmouth in August, where it was announced that labels have been produced to stick on CDs, thus offering artists an opportunity to distance themselves from the far-right's political agenda.

On the subject of a forthcoming BNP radio station, the party spokesman declares: "any musician that attacks us and is worried about it, well, we'll just start playing more of their music and there's absolutely nothing they can do about it." Dave Eyre, of the Thank Goodness It's Folk radio show, doubts their future success: "The BNP aren't part of our folk culture and never will be; they don't understand it and they don't realise that there is no room for filthy, race-based politics in folk music. It has always been inclusive: the songs show that."

Joan Crump concludes: "We started this campaign almost by accident, as a little bit of consciousness-raising, but it has obviously struck a chord with many people. We need to take action now, before it's too late. Let's empower people and not let the thriving British folk scene suffer from misappropriation." ●

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