

Fourtold are Anne Hills, Cindy Mangsen, Michael Smith & Steve Gillette - "A Quartet of Note"

Part 2 - Song By Song – As Related By Fourtold.

Last week we looked at the musical history of the members of Fourtold, and how they came together to make an album exclusively featuring story songs. This week they talk about the twelve songs they recorded.....

*Ian Tyson's "Four Rode By" opens the album. It appeared on Ian and Sylvia's "**Northern Journey**" in 1964 and features two generations of a wayward bloodline, the McLean's. Anne you found this song.*

AH. I was on my way up to rehearsal in Vermont. I borrowed some CD's from **Sing Out**. One was a re-release on Vanguard of Ian and Sylvia. I heard "Four Rode By," and thought it would be perfect. I'd never heard it before. When I showed up I was so excited about it, both Michael and Steve said "Oh yeah, that was a big hit." Clearly, I was too young when it was a big hit, to know it was a big hit – I'm a few years behind them. Not many, but a few.

*I found "Molly And Tenbrooks" one of the most stunning aspects of the Fourtold album. Steve, I have your 1967 Vanguard album, and it's same song, yet the "**Fourtold**" version sounds totally fresh and new.*

SG. Being that there were four of us, brought things to life in a new way. We could explore – first of all the melody, Cindy reminded me that I don't actually sing the melody. I started singing it to get the four parts working, and I actually sang it in such a way that Cindy is on the melody.

CM. Well Anne and I trade off. I think the rhythm changed too.

SG. Yeah. Of course being able to hear it with the division of parts, no one person has to keep it going all the time. The twelve-string, I think, does some wonderful things on the track, and it gave me a chance to play some lead guitar, which I would never otherwise get to do.

Was it an obvious quartet song from the outset.

SG. Michael suggested it and I was honoured. He liked the idea of the horses speaking to each other. He thought that had a wonderful poignancy about it. My tendency would have been to bring newer songs, or write something. The same with "Darcy Farrow," that was his suggestion also. It felt right, to be able to draw from that early time. Ian and Sylvia, and a lot of the elements that were influential on all of us appear in this album.

"Molly" was co-written with Linda Albertano. What do you recall about the process.

SG. Of course it's based on a traditional song, so it's our adaptation. For instance the name Kuyper, is such an unusual and strange name and if we were writing the song, we probably wouldn't have chosen it. That was what we were given, so we worked with it. We were intrigued by the idea of the horses having voices. It showed they had compassion. Especially Tenbrooks [**Note.** The male horse] for Molly.

Kuyper is Tenbrooks jockey.

SG. Yes. I have the impression that he is, like, the son of the owner of the horse. There is a sense of "Come on boy, get it together." The song appeared in **Sing Out** at one point. It seemed to me that the story was centred around Lexington, Kentucky in the 1870's. I saw a tv special last night on Sea Biscuit. It appears Sea Biscuit was sent to California to be trained and raised. That meant the horse was not part of the accepted Eastern establishment. War Admiral's owners refused to race against him. The stigma being, he was a lowly westerner.

Anne, "Pendle Hill" is based on the story of the Lancashire's Pendle Witches. The main character, Alice Nutter, is an ancestor of yours. Did you discover this recently.

AH. I've known about it since I was a little girl. We had a book on the Lancashire Witches. My mom gave me a school report written by a cousin of mine. It gave enough information so I thought, "I want to do this."

I was on the road and sat at my computer and worked on it all day, one day. This was around the end of last summer, when I was doing the first Faire Winds tour [**Note.** With Aoife Clancy and Bill Jones].

Alive Nutter was a woman of considerable financial means. One theory is the trial was instigated by a neighbouring landowner, also the court judge, as revenge over a disputed land boundary.

AH. Some reports say she was not liked because she gave money to the poor. The land dispute rumour turns up regularly. The school report emphasised that it was Good Friday, and that they may have been holding a Catholic service. I brought that into the lyric.

It's set in the reign of James I of England [also James VI of Scotland] and there was a split with the Church of Rome years earlier when Henry VIII was king.

AH. I pursued a number of things, because they were interesting, and then left the lyric open to speculation. Somebody did die, and one accusation was that they had passed a curse on this fellow. He probably died of a heart attack or an aneurysm, but they were blamed.

"Joshua Gone Barbados" focuses upon a cane cutters strike that ends in disaster. How long have you known the song Cindy.

CM. That was on an album by Howie Bursen in the 1970's. A Folk Legacy record. I used to sing it solo, with the guitar in an open C tuning. It was a nice arrangement and seemed like a great song for four voices, especially the chorus. I love Michael's voice on that song, because he just shoots way up into this high screamy kind of voice.

The lyric is not written in precise English, but in a local dialect that they would call, patois.

CM. It was written by Eric Von Schmidt. I know there's a true story behind it and once saw it somewhere, and I was never able to track it down again.

You must have written "Panther In Michigan" about twenty years ago Michael.

MS. Yeah, I would say. Eighteen years old. It wasn't something I wanted to do. My idea was that I was going to come up with new ones. Or find folk songs that I liked that I thought we could do. Once we got started I was very happy. I've come to think of "Panther" as that old song that everyone knows, when in truth there aren't any songs of mine that everyone knows. My nose is too close to the line in the sand as it were.

Didn't Steve call for that song.

MS. He may very well have. As I say, I can't recall. But it certainly was not my idea, that's what I would say. At the same time, I'm very glad that it's there. I also got a chance to experiment with it a little.

Maybe you could tell our readers about the lyric.

MS. There was an article in the Chicago Tribune, with the headline "There's a panther in Michigan" or "Panther in Michigan." I thought it was a wonderful title for a song. When I looked at the article, which for all practical purposes I reproduced in the song, I saw that every line had this power, and if those lines were sung there would be an honesty to it that you could not buy – let alone, think up. Lines like, *"Thirty-four years in law enforcement, I've never been so scared."* I only made up about two lines in the entire song.

Next is Steve's "Darcy Farrow."

CM. That's another song that you wouldn't think would work for four voices particularly.

SG. That's right. I wouldn't have suggested it, but again Michael felt strongly that it had a place. Tom Campbell and I wrote that in 1965, and it has been done in so many different ways, different versions. I honestly feel this is the best version that I've ever been a part of.

With “Darcy Farrow” I have to pause for a second and think “No, that isn’t a traditional song.” Was that a deliberate approach when writing the song.

SG. It wasn’t like we were trying to create a counterfeit wooden nickel. We were enchanted by old cowboy ballads, many of which have old Scottish, Irish or English melodies. We were steering in that direction. Darcy is my little sister’s name. I was a little anxious about singing a song that was so dark and so sad, using my sister’s name. We sort of took refuge in the fact that we were steering it toward an old sounding song.

Anne, how long have you known Peggy Seeger’s “The Springhill Mine Disaster.”

AH. I probably sang that in high school years ago. There was a mining incident in Pennsylvania, where I live, about two years ago. It was probably covered around the world. Nine miners were trapped in Western Pennsylvania and they managed to save all of them. They didn’t know where they were underground, and they were just lucky. That sort of work is never going to be guaranteed as safe. I started singing it and we all could sing it.

I believe “Aramalee” is based on an old English folk tale and there’s a John Jacob Niles song. Michael did you undertake much lyric rewriting.

MS. I tried to make up my own version of it melodically, when I first encountered the words. This was maybe ten years ago. I encountered the “Courting of Aramalee” in this Niles book I found at Anne’s house. I sat with it for five or six years and it didn’t work for me. Then I got a new melody – well, a setting for it, as there isn’t a specific melody – some of the words just didn’t quite swing with the new melody. I wanted people to have this particular mental picture – in traditional song when the villain is drowned they talk about the bones lying in the sea, for some extensive period of time – or forever. I wanted to see some juxtaposition of the fact that his bones are lying at the bottom of the sea and he’s received his retribution, while on the other hand, nine of his victims are rejoicing that he’s finally got his comeuppance. So I thought “I’m going to mess with this, because it’s what they call the folk process.”

The words to “Nine Little Goblins” are by Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley [1849 – 1916]. Anne how much of the poem did you use.

AH. The whole thing. There was no rewriting of the words, that’s why it took me a long time [laughs]. To make those words fit I had to come up with a melody that was both joyful and fun – and also a little bit spooky, in a quirky way.

How long have you been aware of the poem.

AH. I love old bookstores. I have two different, original books of his that I just happened to come across. This was probably back in the late seventies when I moved into Chicago. “Little Orphan Annie” is probably his best-known work. I know that he played banjo or guitar, and liked to sit around with friends and play, so I think I will set some more of his poems as it was great fun.

“Two Men In The Building” appeared on your 1998 “Texas & Tennessee” CD Steve. I presume that the conspiracy in Dallas on November 22nd 1963 has troubled you for years.

SG. I think that’s a good way to put. In the song, there’s also the theme of the Roman Empire – the idea of the Roman ruins. Caesar’s Palace and the concept that “*hope springs eternal.*” People are trying to do these large powerful things and, of course, that’s so much in the news today. Look at the Tigris and the Euphrates, look at the history that’s there. Part of my scope, was that these are eternal things. At the same time, it was very personal. Everyone in my generation was affected by that event. I felt it said something about my childhood, illusory sense of Texas. Everything from doggies and pioneers and ghost riders all the way down to the politics. When we started singing it, everyone pretty much objected to the last section musically, which droned. It set up a chord and stayed on it. I ended up changing it, so that the chords change in a way that’s more like the earlier verses.

Cindy I understand that “I Drew My Ship” was a last minute decision.

CM. Yeah. I kept suggesting songs [laughs]. I wanted to do a traditional ballad and I have to say Michael gave me a hard time about quite a few songs. I was at the end of my rope about finding something that he would want to work on. Finally, in the studio, I sat down at the piano and said *"What about this."* Completely by accident, it's my piano debut. Actually in the hotel that night I sang through the song to make sure I remembered all the words. It's got to be fifteen or twenty years since I sang it. I always loved the mysterious kind of quality it had, and it's a real long, detailed story.

My synopsis ran to it being, the unrequited love story of an impatient sailor.

CM. [laughs]. Well, he's dead.

SG. It has a wonderful poignancy. The way that it describes death, I think, is a fascinating thing, because it talks about *"forgetting your home."* To me that was a wonderful way to portray that.

CM. *"Where bright eyes glancing and fishers dancing, Have made him quite forget his own."*

The closing track, "Run, Come See, Jerusalem" was brought in by Michael. It's a fairly rousing tune, although, lyrically, it relates a tale about shipwreck and death.

MS. Yes, as far as I know it was a totally true thing that happened. That's the whole point of ballads, it's not like you made them up. Consequentially, there is a strength about them that other kinds of songs don't possess. You know exactly that this is a real thing. When I first heard it, all those *"My God's"* that happen over and over – I found that really powerful. I've known that song since I was maybe eighteen.

OK, each person has talked about the songs they brought to the project. Does anyone want to offer any comment on a song they haven't talked about so far.

MS. I'm really knocked down by "Pendle Hill." I've got to say, I was impressed. It's a fairly lengthy ballad, and yet when I sit down and listen to it, it just zips by. The pictures are so exciting, and the melody is so elusive and kind of old and worn sounding that it appears very authentic to me. I must say, each person in this group has come up with things I like very much. I've always loved "Darcy Farrow." "I Drew My Ship" makes me cry every time, and I don't even know why. I want to take a little credit for it. Right at the end of the album I was feeling bad about having been so negative with Cindy and said *"Cindy I feel like you need to be more represented here. Is there something you have?"* She played "I Drew My Ship" and I was so thrilled. It's the song I'm happiest to have been involved in.

CM. I love Anne's setting of "The Nine Little Goblins" [Steve laughs]. To me, I think we really needed something kind of joyful and exuberant and that song gives those qualities to the album that it would be lacking otherwise. The little goblin laughter is one of my favourite parts.

SG. I like the diversity. "Panther In Michigan" I have admired a lot. I felt that it was unique, and I thought that with four parts it would have a kind of breathless, heart pounding kind of rhythm – you work with the four voices, and consider the possibilities - that one seemed to fully realise the potential that I'd hoped for.

AH. Let me see. "Molly And Tenbrooks" came to the project because Michael loves that song. It had nothing to do with Ian and Sylvia's version. He told me about a time he was listening to it while he was out running and he got all choked up by it. He was very moved by the song. "Joshua Gone Barbados" was one of the songs I used to hear Cindy do in Chicago and I always love the way she sang it. I'm glad she finally recorded it. "I Drew My Ship" is such a beautiful way to kind of draw things down to a quiet place before we do the final "Run, Come, See Jerusalem." I'd never heard that song before. **"Fourtold"** kind of fell together, in a nice way [laughs]. It has got a nice variety of styles and feeling to it.

Arthur Wood.

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