

LES BARKER

by Tom Nelligan

The scene was a recent Massachusetts concert by the Watsonsons, arguably England's most respected singers of traditional songs. Towards the end of the set, Norma Waterson launched into a familiar melody, joined on the chorus by her husband, Martin Carthy, and their daughter, Eliza. It's the ancient lament of a frustrated wife, "My Husband's Got No Courage In Him" — or is it? There's a line about a little blonde girl in the couple's bed, and something about porridge. As the audience caught the joke, it became clear that this particular wife's song is a Yorkshire bear's slant on the Goldilocks story, and that the old ballad has mutated into something called "Me Husband's Got No Porridge In Him." It's perfectly written, drolly performed, and a highlight of the show.

Not that the Watsonsons have ever lacked a sense of humor, but for that song Norma, Martin, and Eliza were switching into one of their other musical identities as part of a "polished, multi-talented accident" called the Mrs. Ackroyd Band. The Mrs. Ackroyd Band, and the song, are in turn the creations of a unique genius from Manchester, England, named Les Barker.

Barker is not well known in North America, but he may be the best writer of parodies and wordplays that the English-speaking folk world has ever heard. While a few people have capably practiced that craft over here — Tom Lehrer in antiquity, Lou & Peter Berryman today, to name three — none can match the consistency and volume of Barker's work over the past two decades.

Consider how the worker's anthem "Hard Times of Old England" could be bent into a salute to dairy products called "Hard Cheese of Old England," and sung in utter earnestness by Martin Carthy. Or how the reggae spiritual "By The Waters of Babylon" might turn into the resigned chant of a rail traveler stuck on an immobile train "By The Portals of Paddington." There's a poem — a shaggy dog story, really — recounting the difficulties encountered by a man calling his three pups who happen to be named Stay, Go, and Fetch. Or another epic based on the career of a modestly skilled theatrical performer called Cosmo, the Fairly Accurate Knife-Thrower. This, along with a growing body of serious work and a list of collaborators, an all-star lineup of the British folk scene, is the world of Barker.

Although he's been a fixture of the British folk club and festival circuit since the late '70s, Barker has yet to tour North America. His February trip to Boston for the Folk Alliance conference — where this interview took place, in a semi-quiet corner of the hotel lounge — was only his second visit to this side of the Atlantic. Barker is a slight, softspoken man with a seemingly perpetual smile and a contagious aura of good cheer. After befuddling the waitress with an order for a common English soft drink, and receiving the bartender's best approximation of an Orange Squash, he talked about his unlikely musical/poetic career.

His previous visit to Boston had been about 25 years ago. "This was just after I finished college; I got a Greyhound Bus pass for three weeks. I started in Montreal, went to Chicago, Vancouver, Edmonton, hitched up to Alaska and back, finished the bus pass off down to Nashville, New York, and then flew home from there. I saw an incredible amount [of cities] for about three seconds each."

That condensed odyssey over, Barker returned home to Manchester, where he still lives. "I can't imagine living anywhere else. I like going other

just lovely, and I enjoy roaming around in it."

Trained in accounting, Barker might have been fated for a life of ledgers and spreadsheets had not poetry intervened. "I've been involved in the folk scene for about 18 years," he explained. "But I started years and years ago, long before that. I wrote one poem when I was in college and had nothing to do for half an hour. I forgot all about it. About five years later I was working as an accountant and one of me friends was in a folk group, so I gave him this poem and he started doing it. I used to go to their club week after week and people said 'Go on, do one!' and I said, 'Nah...'. Then after two months I thought they're going to make me do it eventually, so I rehearsed and rehearsed for a fortnight before the next meeting. They never asked me. I thought if I don't do it now I never will, so I volunteered. I just did the one poem and it worked, so I got hooked."

I CAN'T FIND MY CAMOUFLAGE NET!!!



places as well, but more than a fortnight and I've got to get back to Manchester. It's not a particularly attractive city, really; it used to be, but we've spoiled it. We built large shopping centers that look like lavatories turned inside out. But the scenery within 10 miles of Manchester is wonderful... It's

photo: Gloria M. Rosson

The title of that seminal work? "The Rise and Fall of Genghis Ackroyd."

Barker didn't initially intend to make a career of parodying traditional music. "At the time, I don't think I knew what a traditional ballad was. They were just songs. I knew nothing about folk music whatsoever. I wrote monologues because that was the first thing I did. I wrote parodies because they're very easy to do, and they're fun."

Doing good parodies is immensely difficult, though as the current staff of "Saturday Night Live" no doubt knows... Barker found a receptive audience in the folk clubs and began to write verses that they, especially, would understand. He also seems to have absorbed an immense amount of the traditional repertoire.

By the mid-1980s Barker was a premier performer in the folk clubs, played major U.K. festivals, and had begun releasing albums on his own Dog label. He blended his fractured ballads with a catalog of monologues recounting the deeds of characters such as Cohen The Barbarian, Jason and the Arguments, and the aforementioned knife-hurling Cosmo.

Asked where the parodies originated, he said: "Your mind's been trained to do what it's got to do for a living. It thinks in a strange way for writing monologues because it's been doing it for a long time. When it comes to a parody, I hear a song and my brain thinks, 'what can I do with this?' It doesn't think, 'this is a nice song; I like it'; it thinks, 'what can I do with it?'"

His favorite? "Ah, that's a hard one. The one that I'm most involved in at the moment is one that has not been recorded yet, which we'll be recording next week. It's part of the '1812 Overture'."

Working his way around England, Barker was not performing alone. His partner on stage was a small, hairy, and uncommonly cute mongrel named Mrs. Ackroyd. She not only became a folk club legend; she got top billing over Barker in their ads. Her passing in 1988 rated an obituary, with photo, in *Folk Roots*. Barker eulogized his former accompanist, and explained her role in his performances: "A wonderful dog, yes. She was about 14 when she died. She was the focal point of the act. I'd go on and do half an hour, work really hard, and she'd lie there doing nothing, and in the second half the same would happen again, and we'd come off stage and everyone would say, 'What a nice dog!'. And then she bit them."



Mrs. Ackroyd Band

photo: Laurie Devine

While Mrs. Ackroyd may have been the star of his shows, Barker gathered notable human collaborators as well. "I'm not a singer," he explains, "I'm totally non-musical. When it comes to writing a song to an existing tune I count the syllables. It's not quite that simple, but more or less." So he engages other people to sing his songs on stage and on record under the banner of the Mrs. Ackroyd Band, described as "a loose assortment of people who wanted to be associated with Mrs. Ackroyd, and unfortunately had to work with Les in order to do so." Barker's most frequent musical partner is Lesley Davies, a woman with whom he has worked for eight years, whose versatile voice can handle whatever he comes up with. "There's the Mrs. Ackroyd Band, which is me, Lesley, Chris Harvey [on keyboards], and [singer] Alison Younger; the Very Big Mrs. Ackroyd Band, which also includes Martin, Norma, and Eliza, and whenever we go to festivals there's always someone there to join in, and they do. The record's 17. That was in Sidmouth. We started at one end of the stage and went halfway down the wall of the room. It was very impressive. I don't know what we sounded like, but we looked wonderful."

On recordings, June Tabor has frequently lent her voice, and other U.K. notables like Phil Cunningham, Pete Morton, Keith Hancock, and Roy Bailey show up from time to time. The Oyster Band and the Albion Band have been part of Barker's festival shows. How does he recruit musicians? "I've been around a long time so I've gotten to know them over the years. Whenever it comes 'round time to do an album I say 'Can't you do something?' and they usually say, 'Yes,' which is nice."

Barker's solo performances in small venues are essentially recitations, something he was spotted doing for amused hallway audiences during the Folk Alliance conference. In Britain he often leads what he calls "chorus poems" — bits of doggerel whose rhyming lines are so obvious that the audience shouts them out. When touring with groups he sometimes reads narration over the music and sometimes just lets the singers sing his words.

A further description of the Barker act inevitably sounds like a string of one-liners. For example, there's the recitation called "I Can't Find My Camouflage Net." There's a poem called "Déjà Vu," which repeatedly reflects on the fact that one can never experience déjà vu for the first time. The BCCI financial scandal turns into a jolly song borrowing the tune and arrangement of the Village People's disco hit "YMCA" ("Nobody cares what you have to confess/ We're the bank that loves to say 'yes'/ It's fun to be in the BCCI..."). Chuck Berry's "Johnny B. Goode" turns into the tale of a cinematic Paris hunchback named "Quasi B. Goode." The Napoleonic ballad "Plains of Waterloo" becomes a yuppie wife's dirge for her stockbroker husband who, while racing home, fell under the wheels of the "Trains of Waterloo." There are poems, too; 46 self-published booklets of poetry at last count, some funny, some serious.

Although he made his mark as a



photo: Gloria M. Rossan

humorist, Barker is also a talented writer of serious songs. In 1989 he produced a folk opera called "The Stones of Callinish," the story of a young couple from the Isle of Lewis who migrate to London, find a hard life, and return to home and to each other, called back by the standing stones. "That began when I was booked at the Shetland Festival, and it was me, Kashmir [Davies' group], and hundreds of fiddle players. There are loads and loads of lovely Scottish airs and I thought, 'I've got to do something with them.' So I've got these tunes, I've got Lesley's voice, and for the next six months or so I just wrote one or two songs with this traditional music, and I got into it, and I thought, now I want to do something big with this." The first song written was "Stones On The Hill" [sung by Tabor], one of the tunes that runs through the opera, and that sort of directed me towards the story. It's just a lot of really good Scottish musicians, lots of incredibly talented singers; they all did a wonderful job on it."

Anyone who's heard June Tabor on recent American tours has heard "Elephant," a haunting and angry Barker composition about the beast's impending extinction. When Barker gets serious he tends to deal with war, hunger, and the misery humans inflict on the planet and on each other. "When I write a serious song it usually is *extremely* serious. When I'm not going for comedy I really go in for heavy stuff, because I wouldn't write something serious unless it was something I really considered worth saying. It's got to be something major. With 'Elephant' it was obviously something I felt strongly about, and I also had a tune in mind for it; it was off a Capercaillie album, and it was just a question of doing lots of research, finding plenty of ideas for things to put in it, a story to go with it, and then sit down and work at it until it's done."

More thoughts on writing: "It's just the use of words; there's no great difference in technique between comedy and serious stuff. Sometimes I manage to make a serious point in the comedy." And regarding his mastery of turning deadly serious ballads into comic gems, he notes: "If a song is dramatic, then the impact's so much greater. If you take one that's fairly stupid to start with, then it's hard to improve on."

[continued on page 98]

Barker from page 20

Barker will have a new CD out this spring, called (with perhaps a nod to a certain heavy metal band) *Gnus and Roses*. He describes it thusly: "It features the usual members of the band... June Tabor's doing a song about being June Tabor and being miserable. We've got Martin Allcock [of Fairport Convention] playing on a couple of tracks. He's playing an old Cream song, 'Born Under a Road Sign,' and he's also playing an instrumental in the middle of a Richard Thompson song, 'Down Where The Sausage Rolls.' Norma's recorded 'Me Husband's Got No Porridge In Him.' There's also a Schwarzenegging song — kind of a pace-egging song — it's about being very large and demanding money off of people. Lesley's recorded a version of 'Tam Lyn' that's about seven minutes; it's about Lady Margaret combing her hair every three verses."

Future plans? "The main reason to come over here is to get work, because I've made enough contacts with people coming over to England for it to happen, I hope. I'm aiming to be over here in November for a few weeks, if I can get a tour together, and if anybody wants me before, and I'm free, then I'll do it. Also a tour by the band next July."

"Because I've got so many things to write for, I'm getting faster and faster. When all I was doing was writing things for me to do live, then I did two books a year. But now I've got things to do live, things to do with the band, things for Martin, things for June, things for Roy Bailey. There are just so many options."

**Les Barker and friends...
Selected Discography**

Mrs. Ackroyd Superstar
(Free Reed Records)

on Mrs Ackroyd/DOG records:

The Mrs. Ackroyd Rock'n'Roll Show
(DOG 001) [Barker and band]

Dogologues (DOG 002) [solo]

Earwigo (DOG 004)

[solo and with Mrs. Ackroyd Band]

The Stones of Callinish (DOG 005/006)
[a large Anglo-Scottish cast]

Oranges & Lemmings (DOG 007)
[Mrs. Ackroyd Band]

*An Infinite Number of
Occasional Tables* (DOG 008) [solo]

Some Love (DOG 009) [Barker, Mrs.
Ackroyd Band, and various guests]

Gnus and Roses [forthcoming release by
Mrs. Ackroyd Band]

Note: DOG 003, omitted from the list above,
was an album by Kashmir called *Stay Calm*.

Available in the U.S. from Devine Celtic
Sounds/ P.O. Box 5983/ Glendale, AZ
85312-5983

Mrs. Ackroyd Enterprises/ P.O. Box 95,
South District Office/ Manchester M20 4LB/
England