

deveronarts

THE SCRANKY BLACK FARMER

Sometime back in 2004, I received an anonymous jiffy bag through the post containing a recordable CD within a scratched jewel case. Inscribed on the inner sleeve, the optimistic words, *COB – Spirit of Love* eagerly beckoned me to play the bootleg disc that had mysteriously landed in my possession. I had been listening to folk music from the late 60's and 70's for the last few years, in some ways, to recuperate from a massive overdose of twenty-first century electronic music and my living out the death of the vocalist in the contemporary music genre. All this had changed, for now the melodies and spells of the Incredible String Band, Tyrannosaurus Rex, Roy Harper and other enchanted characters would gild the woofers and tweeters of my sound system.

As the liquid crystal display on the stereo registered the disc, I found that there was only one track on the disc, 42 minutes and 9 seconds long. This was because the CD had been recorded directly from an original 12" record with an uninterrupted stream of music from analogue vinyl groove to digital computer hard disk (I could hear someone turning over the platter and quickly putting the stylus back on the record about half way through). This in itself was a fantastic thing as it turned the CD into something more like a DJ mix tape or a home recording of a pirate radio station - I couldn't just pick out a track that I wanted to listen to or skip to the next track with any ease – it was all about the vibe, man. As a result, each track seemed to merge seamlessly into the next creating some sonic mind-body time lapse in the living room of my own home. I was about to be aurally transported to some magical clearing in a Green Wood glimmering with light, beneath briar and petal, by what I still perceive as being the finest psychedelic folk album I have ever heard.

The diverse collection of traditional ballads, songs, incantations and laments on the album recanted magnificent tales of gliding swans, golden apples, and star-drawn patterns across the sky - with the seemingly genuine voice of an Orphic bard or travelling minstrel. The lyrical and poetic quality of the verse and its vocal treatment, with marvellous drawn-out vowel sounds, at once giving rise to the simultaneous dual image of a mystical orchard planter who, crossing both time and space, finally emerges as a busking banjo player clad in striped trousers on a southern English pier. The effect was so entirely captivating that I was impelled to find out more about this hidden gemstone.

Clive's Own Band (COB) was a folk band formed by ex-Incredible String Band member, Clive Palmer, who released a couple of notable albums in the early-to-mid seventies. After recording his first album with the Incredible String Band, Clive and the other two members of the band each separately embarked upon their travels only to later reform on their return – with the exception of Clive. Continuing his solitary journey, Clive recorded a few fairly obscure solo albums; collaborated with the poet, *Bob Devereux* and the bands, *The Temple Creatures* and the *Famous Jug Band*, playing the banjo on their 1969 album, *Sunshine Possibilities*. He also released two albums with his Own Band – the first of which being the psychedelic folk classic, *Spirit of Love*.

About half way through the album, there comes a track entitled, *The Scranky Black Farmer* with which I was able to make a surprising personal connection. With references to *Leith Hall*, *The Garioch* and *Kennethmont* I was able to identify the song as being a traditional Scottish bothy ballad and that it was undoubtedly written in the local vicinity to the house in which I now lived. I wondered who the *scranky, black* farmer may have been since the song would have referred to some malignant character who once owned the farm at some point in the past. What of his dark countenance and why would someone put this to verse?

The Scranky Black Farmer is no exception to the Scottish tradition of the Bothy Ballad in its stark documentation of working life on farm towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth century with its crude living conditions, the 'feeing' markets and villainous farmers. In this instance, the Ploughman, the protagonist hero of the song, has come inland from the coast to find seasonal harvest employment. Here, he is enlisted as a ploughboy and exposed to the wind, the rain and the 'ill-fated crew' employed by the scranky, black Farmer. Although the song cannot be officially dated, it was possibly written in the early 1880's as this was an active period in North East folk balladry. What remains more elusive is the actual songwriter. Documents held in The Brander Library in Huntly make blurred reference to five or six farm workers who worked on the Earlsfield farm in the early 1880's but the nature of seasonal work meant that workers would regularly move on to new employment as little as six months later. This was no doubt the case with the author of this song. Incidentally, the word *scranky* is a fairly uncommon Scottish term that translates as either 'thin, mean or lean'. From this we might assume that author of the song worked like a Clydesdale horse for his staple diet of brose three times a day. Yet, what really sets this song apart from other bothy ballads is the idea that *The Scranky Black Farmer* illustrates an account of a 'travelling man'...

On the coasts of the West Highlands, the people have drawn living from both sea and land, and the crofter-fisherman was common. Likewise, in East Anglia, the year was often divided between work on sea and land. In the North East of Scotland, however, the fishing and farming communities were much more sharply divided. It is unusual, therefore, to find that in this bothy song the narrator appears to be of a seafaring background, possibly drafted in initially for the seasonal work of harvest. Whatever his background, however, his opinion of the farmer is little different from that expressed by most bothy singers.

from Ord's book of Bothy Songs and Ballads

To learn more about the origins of *The Scranky Black Farmer* and the history of Folk Song in the North East, two very important reference books became known to me: *Ord's Book of Bothy songs and Ballads* and *The Grieg-Duncan Folk Song Collection Vol 3*, published by Aberdeen University Press. Both books are very detailed and informative for those who would care to read further, although the latter is an incredible compendium spanning 8 huge volumes and represents the most comprehensive collection of traditional Scottish folk songs I am aware of. Of the 706 songs in *Volume Three*, collected by Gavin Grieg and Reverend James B Duncan in the early decades of the twentieth century, *The Scranky Black Farmer* is entered as Song No. 357 and features seven different variations to the lyrics. Was this where Clive Palmer originally came across the song or had he heard someone else sing it beforehand?...and of all the possible ballads to choose from I wondered why he would choose to sing such an obscure song as *The Scranky Black Farmer*. Did it bear similarities to his own life experiences of solitary travel and seasonal labour?

The 1975 album, *Beware of the Aberdonian* by North East folk band, *The Gaugers* also features a version of *The Scranky Black Farmer*. I was now able to compare these two recordings and found that both had been treated very differently. The Gaugers rendition is clearly a more genuine Scottish sound in comparison to Clive's bardic soliloquy and probably far closer to how the song was actually sung a hundred years ago. You also get the impression that Arthur Watson, the vocalist on this particular track, had possibly heard the song first-hand from an old ploughman in some bothy or cottar house. His use of the local dialect and pronunciation of terms such as *The Geary* and *Kinnethmont* allows for a wholly authentic experience. On a personal note, it was interesting to learn of this recording since I knew of Arthur's work as a visual artist through my fourth year painting tutor, Joyce Cairns - his exhibition, *Singing for Dead Singers* in Aberdeen making a big impact upon me. I then began to wonder how many other versions of the Scranky Black Farmer had been recorded. It did not feature on any of the bothy compilations available locally or those readily obtained in charity shops. From asking around, very few people seemed to know of the song although ballads such as *Bogie's Bonnie Belle*, *Drumdelgie* and the *Muckin' o'*

Geordie's Byre, which have been recorded a great many times, were known word-for-word. The Scranky Black Farmer was not like this.

Looking further a field over a longer period of research, I was able to discover only five other versions giving a total of seven. These included modern, rare and antiquated representations in a manner of Scottish styles that gave a robust and comprehensive feel to my collection. On listening, I could hear a sense of the changing social attitude towards Scottish farming life for the earlier songs seemed to reflect the harsh years prior to industrialisation that saw the decline of the Horse and Plough; to those most recent versions that were more of a celebration of the Plough with a sense of nostalgia and romance. However, collectively they all seemed to combine to form one unanimous voice – a voice that spoke of man's essential and enduring connection with the land. Recorded over a period of over fifty years, the compilation would convey the fundamental idea that history is a living thing and that it is constantly shaped and re-moulded by the interaction between People, Places and the Past. In some ways, I was a contemporary echo of an age old North East tradition - or a murmur, at least. This seemed to be confirmed by the uncanny notion that the songwriter of the Scranky Black Farmer would have observed the same landscape that I do today albeit over a hundred years have passed in between. When I get off the 306 bus from Huntly-to-Kennethmont and walk three-and-a-half miles home through the ploughed Aberdeenshire landscape towards Clatt it can feel a little haunting to utter those dour verses that have become permanently inscribed in my memory. Dare I re-animate the spirit of the Scranky Black Farmer?

It then came to me that I should try to discover the true identity of the notorious farmer, give him a face and a name and thereby forge a personal connection with the man. The footnotes in the Grieg-Duncan collection state the names of two farmers which were probable candidates: Ironside and Skinner. The Earlsfield farm had been owned by Mr Ironside until 1863 before Mr Daniel Skinner took over the lease from 1863–1882. The exclamation by Gavin Grieg, "Skinner was his name!" written on one of the manuscripts relating to the Scranky Black Farmer would certainly indicate the latter. The notes go on to say (about Skinner):

"...information and details about life on the farm from the farmer's point of view are given in the posthumously published *Autobiography of Daniel Skinner. Farmer, Earlsfield*. Skinner was dark, as can be confirmed from a photograph . . . and therefore fits the title."

Could this Skinner be the man I was in search of? (It would be a funny coincidence if it was since my taxidermy exploits over the last few years had given me the title, Skinner Blyth.) Remarkably, I was able to order *The Earlsfield Skinners and their Descendants* and the revised *The Earlsfield Skinners Millenium Edition* from The Brander Library. These locally published books provide a fascinating insight into the family history of the North East Skinner Family beginning with the personal accounts of Daniel Skinner the First. Here he describes his life, his marriage to Mary Jane Smith of Rhynie, and the conditions of the many farms he had worked on. He also makes note of the family's arrival to Earlsfield with the unduly high rent, the price of the workers fees and the poorly condition of the beasts. From another essay in the book, written by Alexander Skinner, I learned that in 1892 Daniel Skinner built a house in nearby Inch that had been named after his wife. From this date, Mary Jane House would become the ancestral seat of the Skinner Family – a tradition that still continues today. Finding the phone number in the directory, I was shortly in conversation with Daniel Skinner the Fourth about my research relating to The Scranky Black Farmer.

As the ballad did not portray the Farmer in a good light I was anxious not to offend the gentleman on the other end of the phone with the suggestion that he was a direct relation to the man in the song. However, Mr Skinner took the news surprisingly well and although he had been unaware of the song it was possible that my benign accusations were legitimate. We arranged a suitable time for him to call by my house to listen to the song. On his arrival, I was greeted by a tall, dark haired man with piercing blue eyes and a lady, smaller in stature, again with dark hair and a friendly smile. This was Daniel Skinner and Yvonne Flett. They both had an interest in genealogy and had

been involved in compiling the books about their family history. Over a cup of tea, we played my Scranky Black Farmer collection while discussing some of the more obscure references within the song. I explained my intention to release an archive collection on vinyl record and though it could not actually be proved that Aul' Danny Skinner was the farmer in question they were still happy for the project to continue.

Daniel and Yvonne had brought with them an envelope containing some old family photographs that might be of interest to me. These images had been taken late in Aul' Danny's life for they depicted him as an elderly man with pure white hair and a white beard. They also had one other photograph with them that had been taken at a much earlier time than the rest. I was astonished to see a sepia-toned image of a strapping man in his late twenties with short, cropped dark hair and big bushy side growths. A real character of his time, I assume. The photo had been taken in Duke Street, Huntly when Daniel Skinner was roughly twenty eight years of age – this would be approximately fourteen years before he took on the Earlsfield Farm. Looking into the eyes of the man in the photograph, I wondered to myself whether these were the 'glowering' eyes that bore into the lyrical ploughboy at work in the furrow? Even though this would not confirm it for definite, my instincts would tell me otherwise. My visitors kindly allowed me to scan a few of the photographs and to use them within the design of my project as this would, at least, represent a farmer from the same time period as the farmer that had been immortalised within the lyrics of the song.

What the project now needed was a conclusion of some kind that would bring my research full circle. This would finally come from a chance meeting with traditional Scottish singer, Shona Donaldson from Huntly, who agreed to undertake the commission of a live recording of the Scranky Black Farmer in a byre at Earlsfield Farm. The only female voice on the record, Shona's contribution would make an interesting addition to my collection and to the ongoing history of the song. With the consent of Mr Grant, the current owner of the farm, a date was arranged for early February. The weather was in full sympathy with the Scranky Black Farmer that day and the recording became a slightly chilling experience for those who witnessed the occasion. With the exception of Jim Version, our faithful sound technician, I realised everyone present had some personal family connection or close affinity with the event which was unfolding before them...and as Shona sung the final verses, the enduring image of human breath leaving the body in cold winter became, for me, inextricably bound to the words of That Song.

David Blyth, Spring 2006



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