

George Monbiot

The *Guardian* columnist is known for his environmental and political activism. But as **Nathaniel Handy** discovers, he's also hugely passionate about folk music from the British Isles and further afield

“It's almost cutting out the tongues of the people. A combination of the enclosures, the New Poor Laws and industrialisation pretty much destroyed the English folk tradition. Remember, in the early factories you weren't allowed to talk, let alone sing. The workhouse was silent as well. You can imagine how that truncated the tradition because a lot of singing was done while people worked.”

The writer and social and political activist George Monbiot is at his passionate best as he deconstructs the savage yet strangely forgotten story of how modern, industrial England was forged on the forced removal of ordinary people from the land into new cities where they had to work in oppressive conditions. It is a story he found echoes of in countries around the world during his young adulthood. “I learned some crucial lessons about my own country by being away from it,” he explains. “Particularly in Brazil, working with social movements and landless people trying to get a foothold in politics, I realised that what I was seeing was what we faced in Britain a couple of centuries ago.”

These lessons led Monbiot to join the direct action environmental and social protest movements of the early 90s. It was on one of these protests that he got his baptism in folk music. “A bunch of us turned up in Newbury before the bypass was built to stake out some territory,” he remembers. “It was autumn and we were camping in the woods, living off pheasants, mushrooms and chestnuts. One night we had stacked up a big fire and everyone was huddled around it under blankets when suddenly this tall, ragged guy stands up with a fiddle and starts to play this raw, wild music. It captured the essence of where we were and what we were doing. Before I knew it, all these instruments started appearing from nowhere. It was magical and I became an aficionado of folk music overnight.”

Soon afterwards, Monbiot became a founder member of the land reform movement, The Land is Ours. Its first protest took place in 1999 on St George's Hill in Surrey, site of the Diggers' land reclamation event of 1649, commemorated in songwriter Leon Rosselson's song ‘The World Turned Upside Down’. “Billy Bragg came down to the protest and played that song,” explains Monbiot. “In fact, the premiere of his cover of ‘The World Turned Upside Down’ was in our camp, under canvas. It was one of those moments. The tears were streaming down my face because there was something about the rawness of his voice and his playing which seemed to echo down the centuries.”

It wasn't long before Monbiot discovered the folk voice and rousing social commentary of Scottish bard Dick Gaughan. Monbiot admires Gaughan's cover of Brian McNeill's searing iconoclastic dirge ‘No Gods and Precious Few Heroes’. “It's got that political realism which you very seldom find in music,” says Monbiot. “Music so often takes a heroic narrative of politics, but it has to be tempered with realism. ‘No Gods...’ says stop fantasising. We have to engage with the world as it is.”

Monbiot is keen to push at the boundaries of what some perceive as folk or world music. His playlist includes the track ‘Whole Lotta Nachna’ from Ron Singh's bhangra fusionists and festival favourites, Kissmet. “That track is actually a bhangra version of ‘Whole Lotta Love’ by Led Zeppelin,” says Monbiot. “I wanted to get some genre bending in!”

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Monbiot even takes us out of England into the wide open spaces of the US with the otherworldly Bonnie Prince Billy on the track ‘A Minor Place’. “He's totally out there,” Monbiot concedes. “He's got a very distinctive style and voice that I just love. I think he captures something very deep in the human spirit that others struggle to express.”

But for all his anarchism, Monbiot's tastes keep returning to a very pure form of the English folk tradition. This is evidenced in his choice of Nancy Kerr and James Fagan's delicately beautiful ‘Queen of Waters’ from their album *Twice Reflected Sun*. “The lyrics are incredible,” says Monbiot. “I love the interplay between the lines, I love the imagery. I listen to that song and think, damn, if only my lyrics were like that!”

He is equally in awe of the pure voice of Yorkshire folk singer Kate Rusby, whose track ‘The Wild Goose’ from the album *Sleepless* was one of any number he could have picked: “I love everything she's done,” he says. “I don't think I've heard a song by Kate that I didn't love.”

But for Monbiot, the folk tradition is as much about a cultural approach as a musical style. It is an approach he finds in the work of John Clare, a poet from the Romantic era of English history whose work is far less celebrated than contemporaries like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Byron, but who tapped into the voice of the rural poor.

“The way he captures the voice of rural people, which is very much in the folk tradition, no one has done more effectively before or since,” says Monbiot. “When the folk singer Chris Wood, whose work I love, wrote the song ‘Mad John’ about John Clare's work, well, I was in heaven.”

The rural voices Clare captured bring us back to the root of both Monbiot's passion for folk music and his earliest experiences of it. For him, it's deeply embedded in the working lives of ordinary people, and although its line was broken in England, it has lived on in many other cultures. “When I worked in Africa, I was very aware of people constantly singing as they work,” Monbiot remembers. “Music picks up the rhythm of the work. I've seen African women hoeing their fields and the hoe comes down, providing the beat for the song. I worked in East Africa where, at the time, most of the music that people listened to was actually West African. I became very used to the twangy strings, tied up with pantyhose at the top to give them that very steely sound that I so love in West African music.” His appreciation for the West African sound is showcased on his playlist by the work of Moh! Kouyaté, a newly emerging artist from Guinea, now based in Paris. “Kouyaté's is quite a modern take, but I think he's doing something very interesting building on great traditions,” says Monbiot. “The discovery of West African music in Europe has been one of the more exciting events of the last 50 years.” ♦

+ **PLAYLIST** See p7 for Monbiot's playlist as featured on the covermount CD, or visit www.bit.ly/songlinespotify for his full playlist

+ **MORE** Monbiot's album with Ewan McLennan, *Breaking the Spell of Loneliness*, was reviewed in #123, see monbiot.com/music for tour dates

+ **WIN** We have three copies of *Breaking the Spell of Loneliness* to give away. To enter, answer: Where did the first *The Land is Ours* protest take place?. See p19 for competition rules and deadline



+ GEORGE MONBIOT'S PLAYLIST



11

11 Nancy Kerr & James Fagan 'Queen of Waters'

From *Twice Reflected Sun* on Navigator Records

"The lyrics are incredible. I love the interplay between the lines, I love the imagery. I listen to that song and think, damn, if only my lyrics were like that!"

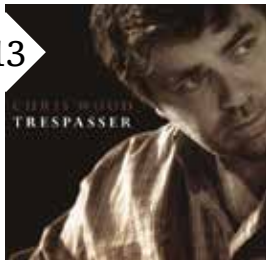


12

12 Moh! Kouyaté 'Loundo'

From *Loundo (Un Jour)* on Foli Son

Kouyaté's track puts a modern spin on West African music. For Monbiot, it helps show not only how folk music is still embedded in other cultures outside of Europe, but that it continues to live on.

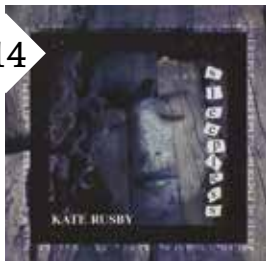


13

13 Chris Wood 'Mad John'

From *Trespasser* on RUF Records

This track was written about the 19th-century poet, John Clare. "The way [Clare] captures the voice of rural people, which is very much in the folk tradition, no one has done more effectively before or since."



14

14 Kate Rusby 'The Wild Goose'

From *Sleepless* on Pure Records

George Monbiot loves the Yorkshire folk singer's pure voice – especially on this track from *Sleepless*. "I love everything she's done. I don't think I've heard a song by Kate that I didn't love."



15

15 Kissmet 'Whole Lotta Nachna'

From *Trippin' The Life Fantastic!* on Buzzin' Records

This guitar-led track from Ron Singh's *bhangra* fusion group, "is actually a *bhangra* version of 'Whole Lotta Love' by Led Zeppelin... I wanted to get some genre bending in!"



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Turn to p74 for the full interview with George Monbiot



NEXT ISSUE: SIR DAVID ATTENBOROUGH'S PLAYLIST

The legendary broadcaster and naturalist chooses his five favourite world music tracks to feature in the March 2017 issue (#125).