



Saltwater, Stone and the Folk Process

Jo Philby Hones Several Crafts in Orkney

By Rob Weir

To say that Birsay is out of the way doesn't do it justice. There's a village of sorts, but the name mostly references the northeast corner of the Orkney island of Mainland, where once Norsemen cavorted in greater numbers than modern-day residents. Travellers wander there to visit the 16th century ruins of Earl of Orkney Robert Stewart's palace, or await low tide and stroll across a narrow sea channel to the Brough of Birsay, a 7th century Pictish fort that did not deter the aforementioned Norsemen. It's about 17 miles from Birsay to Kirkwall, Orkney's largest town, but you won't get out of third gear once you leave the A965. Birsay is a remote place from which to sustain a singing career, and that's just fine by Jo Philby, who is not sure she wants one.

Last summer my wife and I were leaving Birsay when we impulsively followed a sign directing us to Fluke Jewellery. We entered a small shop next to a tidy stone farmhouse overlooking hills, stonewalls, and the sea. There I met Jo Philby, who gave me a copy of her new CD, *Saltwater & Stone*. We began a conversation about music that continued over email. Although Philby considers singing as more of a “hobby” than a career, to me, she’s part of an old path: the folk process — those informal ways in which music is learned and passed on.

We’ve become spoiled by the easy accessibility to traditional music. We find Celtic lands music in well-apportioned stores, on TV and radio, and in local clubs. Whatever we want is, at worst, a mouse click and a credit card away. Performers such as Jo Philby are throwbacks to the time in which songs were sung in kitchens, town halls, and at house parties, not on concert stages. This was especially the case in remote places such as Galway, Cape Breton, and Orkney.

The folk process is organic, draws from many influences, and unfolds according to its own time, apt descriptions of how Philby came to singing and recording. She’s English, spent much of her youth in Wales, and only moved to Orkney in 2002. “The first person I identified with at a young age was Maddy Prior,” says Philby. “I grew up hearing her with Steeleye Span. Her voice was always so warm and she drew you into the heart and soul of the song. I’ve always loved stories of faeries, mermaids, legends, and times gone by. Maddy’s songs left an imprint on my mind.”

Philby later attended folk clubs in Surrey, where she heard other great singers, but she had to be prodded onto the stage. That happened when she met her future husband Roger in the 1990s, and they “started going to an Irish session at The Herschel Arms in Slough, where we met Sara and Les Daniels. “Being a traditional singer herself, Sara encouraged me. We also went regularly to Anchor Folk Club in Byfleet run by Mike and Maureen Peach, where I got my confidence to perform as a floor singer, which in turn inspired me to sing at sessions.”

An old path indeed. How many recording artists honed their craft at sessions? But, as improbable as it may sound, there may not have been a Jo Philby recording had she not left the greater London area for Orkney, a place whose population is less than 1/50th of that of Surrey. In 2001, the

Philbys attended the Orkney Folk Festival to see friends from the band Flook perform. “Because we are both keen wildlife enthusiasts we decided to come back a few months later to enjoy the magic of Orkney,” Philby relates. With no intention of moving we were told of a place for sale. Once we’d seen it that was it....”

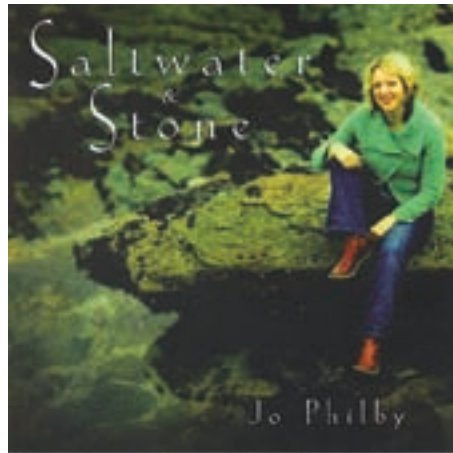
They came to produce jewelry and run a small farm, not make music. Roger’s work is inspired by marine animals, and Birsay abounds in orcas, dolphins, sharks, and fin whales. Quite coincidentally, it also proved to be a nurturing shoal for singers like Jo. Diminutive Orkney is awash in

pubs, halls, and community events that feature music. Fiddler Fiona Driver remembers, “When I first saw Jo, she was singing unaccompanied in a pub. Anyone who can stand up alone and sing in that situation has my admiration! She did well and got great reports and appreciative audiences everywhere. Since then she has flourished, widened her range of material, and has appealed to a wider audience. She has a lovely clear voice that’s well-suited to any tempo or subject.”

Philby ended up recording *Saltwater & Stone* on Driver’s Newtonhill label. For the first time, Philby sang with backing musicians, including Driver, guitarist Graham Simpson, and flautist Derek Curtis, another transplant from England. The album, produced by keyboardist Phil Anderson, is a yeasty baker’s dozen of old and contemporary songs, mostly stripped down to emphasize lyrics and basic melodies.

On Orkney, time stops in May for the annual folk festival, though Philby’s life speeded up considerably once it ended. “I launched my album at the 2009 festival, and it became apparent that people were responding to it. Festivals and gigs were more available. Fiona, Graham, and I decided to do a tour to promote both my and Fiona’s album.” Their journeys took them southward to Dorset and to Jo’s old stomping grounds in Surrey and Hampshire.

The positive vibes, tours, and ensemble playing might force Philby to reconsider her self-proclaimed amateur status. It wouldn’t be the first surprise that music has dealt her. In the spirit of the folk process, Philby absorbed a lot of her repertoire without actually knowing where it came from. Says she, “I called myself a traditional singer because when I first started singing I learned a few old songs. I also sang unaccompanied and felt that I was singing the songs in their



raw state. When I did research for the listings on my CD I was surprised to find a couple of songs I had always thought were traditional were actually contemporary.”

Indeed, just four of the thirteen tracks are traditional in the sense that original song authorship is unknown. Among the other nine are two from Sara Daniels, an Emily Smith song, a cover of Bill Staines’ “River”, two from Kate Rusby, and Karine Polwart’s “Follow the Heron”, a song that contains the “saltwater and stone” line Philby used as her album title. Philby’s hardly the first to be surprised to learn that “I Courted a Sailor” is a Rusby original, but more to the point, she’s among the few singers whose voice is lovely enough to cover anything from Rusby’s repertoire. In fact, Philby’s strong, clear soprano suggests a cross between Polwart and Rusby.

For Philby, “poetical words” are most likely to draw her to a song. That was especially the case with “Follow the Heron”. As she recalls, “I was singing the song one day and came to the line, ‘of ice and saltwater and stone,’ which conjures up strong images of Orkney because the sea and the geology of the island is such that these elements are ever present. I often walk the cliffs and sit on the rocks beneath the house practicing my songs looking out to sea. So *Saltwater & Stone* is very personal to me.”

Her cover of “River” came about quite differently and via the Irish band Arcady. She loved the song’s inviting chorus, one that encourages sing-a-longs. She also jokes, “I was also aware that traditional singers get a reputation for singing sad songs, so I’m always on the lookout for songs that are uplifting. I only kill off two people on my album, which is quite rare for a folk singer!”

Philby enjoyed making her record so much that she hopes to another soon and, perhaps, include some Orkney source material. She hastens to add, though, “It would have to suit my voice because I don’t have an Orcadian dialect.” Authenticity remains important to her, even though she’s discovered that not all that sounds traditional is traditional. “I feel a deep respect to old songs and try to stay true to the version I originally heard. I’ve no desire to change my style. I sing in my voice and try to interpret songs in an honest way.”

What matters most to Philby is “performing and breathing my interpretation into chosen songs and sharing the stories with people. It is very satisfying to know that people respond to what you are doing because as a singer you are bearing your soul. I have been overwhelmed by the response I have received for *Saltwater & Stone*. When people find the time amidst their busy lives to write, email, or phone to tell you

how much they like your album I don’t think they realize how much that means. It has been a very rewarding experience and has given me a renewed confidence as a person.”

Of one of Philby’s 2009 shows John Ross Scott of *Living Orkney* wrote, “The contrast between this show and the first time I saw Jo perform ... in 2004 was immense. Her distinctive voice still holds its pitch well but maturity — in stance, presentation and overall confidence — has taken over....”

Perhaps in the end it will be audiences and critics who decide whether Philby remains a hobbyist or becomes a folk circuit regular. But even if *Saltwater & Stone* is, as the Brits say, a “one off,” it will stand as a testament to the resiliency of the folk process.

Sample files and ordering information is available at www.jophilby.co.uk/music



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