

The Opie Recordings: What's Left to be Heard?

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Peter and Iona Opie's work, *The Singing Game* (1985), while based partly on surveys completed for *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959) and *Children's Games in Street and Playground* (1969), draws significantly on a collection of recordings collected by Iona Opie throughout the 1970s. Travelling the country and often accompanied by fellow collectors of children's games such as Father Damien Webb and Berit Østberg¹, Iona collected traditional singing games and playground songs from a range of childhood haunts including school playgrounds and council estates; inner city recreational grounds and leafy fields.² When meeting with the children, Iona ensured that these were not formal or prescribed interviews, but relaxed discussions amongst small friendship groups of children as they played and sung. Often letting the children hold the microphone or experiment with the recording device, Iona appears a welcome member of these gangs, casually discussing with

¹ Interestingly, there is little indication from the recordings that Peter Opie accompanied Iona on these visits. On a few recordings, particularly those from the London area, Iona makes reference to the fact that she is accompanied by her Norwegian friend who is presumably Berit Østberg, mentioned in the preface to *The Singing Game*. Iona explains that Østberg is also a collector of children's games and songs in Norway, however, little else is said about her. Father Damien Webb can also be heard on a set of recordings from St Benedict's Roman Catholic Primary School, Garforth, Yorkshire where he taught. He is heard discussing with the schoolchildren their singing games and songs and commenting on these with Iona.

² The interviews were collected on a combination of open-reel tapes and cassettes. The medium of each recording can be found by searching the British Library catalogue which provides the details of each.

the children songs and games, boyfriends and enemies. The result of these interviews is a collection of recordings that, as Iona concludes, is evidence of a distinct and fiercely guarded playground culture. In a period in which social commentators and scholars alike were bewailing its apparent death, Iona therefore countered that this tradition was in fact 'a truly living one'.³

In light of this conclusion and having read *The Singing Game*, one may assume that this animate culture was one in which tradition thrived, familiar melodies persisted and scatological rhymes were shunned in favour of loud and wholesome renditions of *A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea*. Indeed, a brief thumb through *The Singing Game* reveals girls mimicking the 'young people of the Middle ages'⁴ in their singing games, clapping games that boast one hundred and fifty years worth of history, and mild-mannered 'buffoonery'. Yet, if one was to actually listen to these recordings, would one draw the same conclusion? Or, alongside this material, have the Opies captured something more; material that they recognised to be of significance yet due to the purposes of their own research, did include in *The Singing Game*? Ultimately, the researcher may ask: what, if anything from these recordings, has gone unheard? To claim that the Opies suggested that the playground culture of the 1970s was one of pure continuation and unfettered tradition would be incorrect. Throughout *The Singing Game*, the Opies document instances in which references to the media and other popular sub-cultures appear. For example, we read that in Scarborough, two girls performing the song *Sunny Side Up*, include a reference to 'Larry Grayson' who presented the television show, 'Shut That Door!'

³ I & P. Opie, *The Singing Game* (Oxford, 1998), p. vii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.31.

The authors also provide a short list of pop songs that girls throughout the country used as clapping songs. However, it is the range of material that Iona collected that is of the most significance. The fundamental purpose of these interviews was to capture traditional skipping, clapping and singing games; not popular culture. Having listened to the recordings, it is therefore significant that Iona did in fact take the time to record the many instances in which children refer to these various medias. What is particularly notable is the number of pop songs heard on the recordings. When asking the children what their favourite singing or clapping games are, more often than not a schoolgirl would suggest a song that is in fact topping the charts at that time. However, this distinction between songs from media cultures and those from the traditional stock of school playground songs is not made by the children. In that moment, this song is firmly a part of *their* culture. For example, when interviewing children in Coram Fields, London, in July 1974, Iona asks a group of girls if they have any singing games that they enjoy playing. Having sung the often-heard singing game *When the War Was Over and Josephine was Dead*, the girls excitedly ask if their friend can sing 'Mama' and one of the schoolgirls reassures the interviewer: 'she does sing that in the school playground', in fact she stands on the bench and sings it to 'all the people'. The girl then begins to perform Lena Zavaroni's *Ma, He's Making Eyes at Me*, and the other girls join in on the chorus. Having sung this the girls then move on to sing the skipping game *Salt, Vinegar, Mustard, Cider*. The fact that this song had won Zavaroni 'Opportunity Knocks' is not mentioned, nor the fact the song was released as a record in 1974. Instead, it appears in and amongst their regular singing and skipping songs. Furthermore, when visiting Dulwich, in May 1976, Iona

asks a group of girls what songs they use when 'Chinese Skipping'⁵. One of the girls asks Iona: 'can I sing a song?' and the children begin to perform Gary Glitter's, *I Love You, Love Me Love*. Although it is not clear whether the children are in fact skipping to this song, one can hear the children playing 'Chinese skipping' in the background. Having sung this, one of the schoolgirls then comments to her friend: 'Georgie, that Mamma Mia one' and the children launch into an enthusiastic rendition of Abba's *Mamma Mia*. The 'traditional' skipping games and the 'new' pop songs therefore appear to co-exist contentedly alongside one another.

Considering that I have now listened to just thirty out of the eighty-five recordings, I am confident that there are many more of these pop songs yet to be heard. Thus although such songs may not have reached the pages of *The Singing Game*, Iona's careful recording of them offers the researcher a rich resource from which to explore the relationship between the media and the playground. Perhaps Gary Glitter's, *I Love You, Love Me Love*, enjoyed only a brief spell as a skipping song and the children at Coram Fields soon stopped singing Lena Zavaroni's hit, but the frequency with which these songs appear suggests that they represent something more than a an ephemeral enthusiasm. As Sutton-Smith notes, the children's playground culture seems almost to have 'taken on the character of modern mass media culture with its cycles of fashion and popularity';⁶ something that the recordings corroborate.

Television show theme tunes and advertisement jingles also make their way onto the recordings. Of particular popularity is 'The Wombles' theme tune. When

⁵ This is also known as 'American skipping', 'Elastics' and 'Dutch skipping'.

⁶ B.Sutton-Smith, 'Review: *The Singing Game*', *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 99, 392, (April-June, 1986), p. 240.

interviewing schoolgirls from Nottingham in June, 1977, the children discuss with Iona various singing games that they play, including *I'm a Little Dutch Girl*. One of the girls then suggests that they sing the song that 'Michaela learnt us' and they begin to sing 'The Wombles' theme tune. What is interesting is that the children do not mention that this is from the television and explain that 'Michaela made it up, it's ever so good'. In another instance, when interviewing children in Hampshire, Iona records a small group of children performing a television jingle for fruit gums. They sing: 'put them pastels round Ma, put them pastels round, pastel picking Mama, pass those pastels round'. Again, this song appears in and amongst the other traditional playground songs and that it is borrowed from the television is not mentioned by the schoolgirls; indeed, it is of little significance to them. Finally, in Boughton and Salford, November 1970, when performing the popular clapping song *When Susie Was a Baby*, a group of schoolgirls chant the line: 'when Susie was a Saint' before beginning to sing the theme tune from the popular television show 'The Saint' starring the fictional adventurer, Simon Templar.⁷ This particular example shows great creativity on the part of the children as they match the narrative of the song (which follows the life cycle of 'Susie') with a jingle that they have heard on the television. This fascinating example is indicative of the significant role that these various medias play within the playground culture and raises questions concerning children's agency and their ability to identify, comprehend and appropriate these sub-cultures.⁸

⁷ This popular television series was aired between 1962 and 1969. Based on the fictional works of Leslie Charteris, the show followed the life of adventurer Simon Templar, played by Roger Moore.

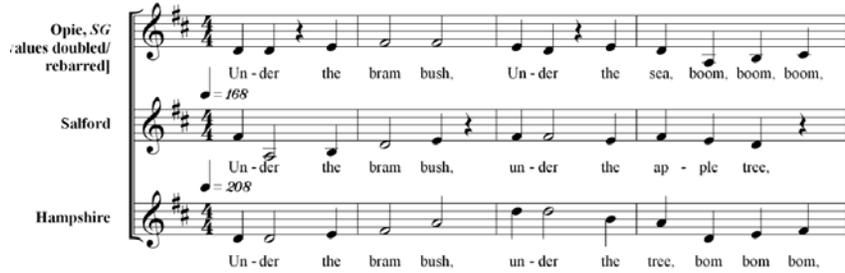
⁸ See A.James, 'Agency', in J.Qvortrup, W.A.Corsaro & M.S.Honig (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 34-45 and D.Buckingham, *After the Death of Childhood* (Massachusetts, 2000).

When listening to the recordings, it is not only these media references that are of interest. There are also instances in which a particular and well-known song is sung to an entirely different tune to that often heard and to that recorded in *The Singing Game*. Iona admits in the preface to *The Singing Game*: 'we have given more than one tune in the few cases in which there are several well-established tunes for the same game, but we have not given all variants'. Instead, the Opies interests lay more so with lyrical variations and the complex amalgamation of words and passages. However, melodic variations are nonetheless recorded by Iona. One striking example of this is heard when a child, recently moved to a school in Liss, in 1974, sings her version of *Under the Bram Bush*. Her school friends have already sung their version and this follows the familiar rhyme recorded by the Opies in *The Singing Game*. The children seem reluctant to let the 'new' girl sing her version and Iona notes that the girl has trouble trying to persuade her friends to sing it with her. Eventually, when she does sing, the tune and rhythm are entirely different to that previously heard. Interestingly, another variation of *Under the Bram Bush* is sung by children from St Clements School, Salford, November 1970. This tune is reminiscent of the song *Down by the Riverside*; a popular gospel song sung frequently throughout the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The following notation attempts to demonstrate these markedly different tunes and rhythms. It compares the most traditional *Under the Bram Bush* tune with that heard in Liss, 1974, and that in Salford, 1970:

Opic, SG
values doubled/
rebarred]

Salford

Hampshire



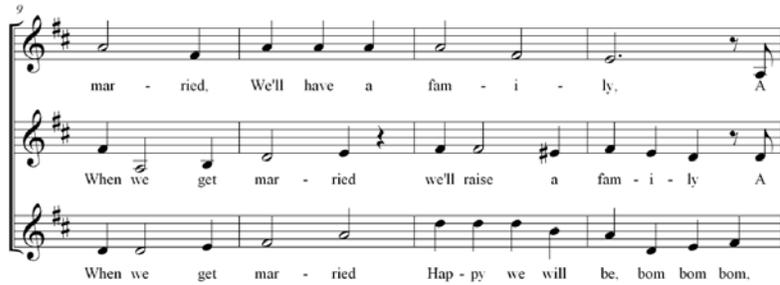
Un - der the bram bush, Un - der the sea, boom, boom, boom,
 Un - der the bram bush, un - der the ap - ple tree,
 Un - der the bram bush, un - der the tree, bom bom bom,

5



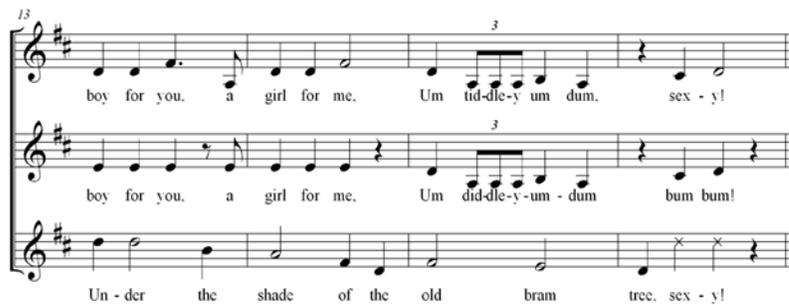
True love for you, my dar - ling, True love for me, When we get
 True love for you my dar - ling, true love for you and me,
 That's where my true love is wait - ing for me, bom bom bom,

9



mar - ried, We'll have a fam - i - ly, A
 When we get mar - ried we'll raise a fam - i - ly A
 When we get mar - ried Hap - py we will be, bom bom bom,

13



boy for you, a girl for me, Um tid - dle - y um dum, sex - y!
 boy for you, a girl for me, Um did - dle - y - um - dum bum bum!
 Un - der the shade of the old bram tree, sex - y!

Notation provided by Dr. Julia Bishop

Alongside these markedly different tunes, we also hear slight variations that borrow from other rhymes. For example, when recording children performing *Under the Bram Bush* in London's American School, the children merge the usual tune with the rhyme 'Row, Row Your Boat'. The girls sing: 'and when we're married, we'll raise a family, of forty children, all in a row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, tip your teacher over board and listen to her scream, ah!' Although understandable that the Opies perhaps had neither the time nor the space to note these variations, the recordings remind us how easy it is for these songs and rhymes to become standardised and indicate that further research into these variations and the complex inventiveness of this culture is required.

A brief glance through *The Singing Game* would suggest that the children's oral tradition of the 1970s was one largely free of the highly scatological or offensive. From the one girl heard on the recordings, too embarrassed to refer to 'Susie's bra' (lost in her boyfriend's car), to the giggling children in London who refer to Queen Mary's apparent hairiness, this appears to be a culture that carefully toed the line of what might be considered socially acceptable. An airing of the Opie recordings, however, suggests otherwise. When listening to the recordings, one must bare in mind that the Opies main goal was not to collect rhymes and satirical pieces (such material had already been documented in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren*). Furthermore, it is entirely plausible that stringent publishing policies may have even prevented the Opies from publishing such material. As Iona remarks: '[...] it was editorial policy amongst publishers in the 1950s, not to include dubious material, and that prevented us including anything that was unacceptable to OUP:

'knickers' was the limit'.⁹ Of course, by the 1980s one may assume that such censoring may have lessened, but even so, this disclosure highlights the certain rules and regulations by which the Opies had to abide by.

Considering these factors, it is therefore significant that Iona is vigilant in recording those instances in which the children test the boundaries of what might be deemed suitable, performing songs that range from the mischievous to the scatological. One particular example comes from a school playground in Poole. While performing singing games, one young girl begins to sing: 'One plus one, we're in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah.' The song progresses and she sings: 'three plus three, we're jumping all around in the bedroom' before briefly noting to the interviewer, with a giggle, that this song is 'rude'. Nonetheless, she continues to sing: 'four plus four, he caught me on the floor in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah; five plus five, my legs are wide open in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah, six plus six, he's pulling down my knicks in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah'. The song continues and Iona can be heard laughing as the schoolgirl finishes her song (concluding with the couple 'breaking up' in the bedroom). Thus although predominantly collecting traditional singing, clapping and skipping games, that Iona recorded this song suggests that she was aware of its significance. Indeed, these recordings would be particularly pertinent in testing and validating theories such as those of Sutton-Smith who suggests that play can be utilised by children to transcend

⁹ I. Opie cited in G. Boyes, 'The Legacy of the Work of Iona and Peter Opie: The Lore and Language of Today's Children', in R. Beard (ed.), *Rhyme, Reading and Writing* (London, 1995), pp. 131-47.

the 'normal limits' of their society and as a means through which they make sense of the adult world around them.¹⁰

What is particularly interesting is the number of children who are willing to perform these scatological pieces once they are safely withdrawn from the school playground. Outside this area, far removed from figures of authority and the moral perimeters of the school, the children seem more confident, even daring in the songs and rhymes that they are willing to perform. This is particularly apparent on a recording Iona collected when visiting a housing estate in Chelsea. From the start of this recording, a particular boy can be heard in the background, continuously shouting rude rhymes, curses and insults. The fact he remains in the background suggests that he is careful to exercise some caution, unsure of his peers and most importantly the interviewer's reaction. Initially, he begins by teasing his sister who is being interviewed, mimicking her voice and answers. He then begins to shout insults, such as: 'Guess what, she [his sister] never combs her hair in the mornings' and 'Deborah I think you've got a bloody big thick head'. As no-one has reacted to these insults, he grows in confidence, shouting: 'Deborah, why don't you do a stripsys show?' He concludes by announcing that he would like to perform a song and remarks: 'can I say another one for the old bag [presumably referring to Iona]?'. Neither the other children or the interviewer, however, react. Given this unusual behaviour and that such conduct is rarely heard on the recordings, one wonders whether this young boy would have behaved in this way if within the confines of his school.

¹⁰ See B.Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play* (London, 1997).

Nonetheless, perhaps encouraged by this particular boy's behaviour, the other children begin to tell churlish rhymes. One boy sings: 'ip, dip, dog, shit, who trod in it. Not because you're dirty, not because you're clean, my mum said you're the fairy queen'. A fellow peer then sings: 'Chocolate biscuits down the drain, if you want some spell your name, if you want them, fucking go away'. When Iona asks the young girl to repeat this, the schoolgirl censors the rhyme and does not swear. This particular group of children also tell many jokes referring to 'bosoms' and 'willies'. Consequently, as the majority of the Opie recordings are conducted within the peripheries of the school playground, where such rhymes and behaviour is unusual, it is significant that when the interviewer moves beyond these boundaries, such behaviour is uncovered.

To say that *The Singing Game* is an inaccurate and distorted reflection of the eighty-five Opie recordings would be untrue. Having listened to the recordings, the playground culture of the 1970s was one marked by the continuation and transmission of traditional singing games and rhymes. Each recording has a certain predictability and a familiar stock of characters such as Cowboy Joe from Mexico, Poor Jenny, Shirley Temple, and Diana Dors, appear throughout. Yet, alongside the traditional and the continuous also exists the new and the ephemeral, and while this material was not necessarily suitable for the Opies focus of study at the time of its collection, it seemed that they considered it significant enough to be recorded. Consequently, the researcher is bequeathed a diverse and rewarding archive of recordings that demands further investigation; something that this project will undoubtedly address not only through its research, but by means of the British Library's work to publish the Opie collection in full online and through an educational

website dedicated to children's games and songs. The result will be full and final access to a fascinating set of recordings containing an abundance of scatological rhymes, media littered songs and diverse variations, all of which are still waiting to be heard.

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