

In Her Own Words: Practitioner Contribution 2

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I look back in wonder sometimes at the speed of change. Aged twenty, I was busking in Trafalgar Square during the 'Free Nelson Mandela' non-stop protests of the late 1980s. Eight years later, I was busking in Johannesburg when the same Nelson Mandela had been elected President of South Africa after nearly three decades in prison! As musicians we get the chance to write our share of the soundtrack to an ever-shifting, terrifying, awe-inspiring world.

Most women in popular music are not world-famous. Still they sing, play, write, create, teach, and inspire others. They compose advertising jingles, run open-mic nights, perform in care homes, work as music therapists for people living with dementia or anxiety, sing on cruise ships, write for theatre productions and television dramas, play in tribute bands. Some even write the 'hold' music we listen to when we're in a queue and our call will be answered as soon as possible! Some women are just starting out on their musical journey. They are embarking on an apprenticeship that may last years, on what we used to call 'The Toilet Tour'; pubs all over the country (UK) and in Europe, with sticky floors and all too often a crowd who can't contain their indifference. Late nights, little money, spirit-crushing venues.

Many, like me, have at one time or another, done many of these different jobs. To keep afloat and hone your craft you learn to be flexible, adaptable, and willing to wear many musical hats. A huge number of women in music, myself included, have also maintained a day job, to pay the rent and the bills when the wonderful wishing well of music dries up for a while, as so often it can. I've been a musician for thirty-five years, I'm known and respected in the genres within which I work. When I started out, I dreamed of being world-famous. Along the way, I realised it was the creative process that really drove me. I found an attainable vision for a future as a woman in music and began to aspire to more achievable goals:

1. Stop trying to be famous and get real.
2. Don't put pen to paper unless you've got something to say. Write songs that touch people, music that's relevant to their lives.

3. Accept that many of the jobs you'll get offered are not going to be remotely glamorous. (I once wrote and sang heritage songs from inside a mine at the National Coal Mining Museum in Huddersfield; £60 for two days' work!)
4. Learn your rights and develop the confidence to stand up for yourself as a woman, knowing that your value as a musician is equal to that of a man.
5. Believe in yourself and what you are trying to achieve, even when literally no one else does.
6. Get out from your own backside! Lose the ego, find some humility and humour.
7. Practise!
8. Practise!
9. Practise!

My dad smoked a pipe. My earliest musical memories are infused with the smell of tobacco. The whole family in the small living room of our Manchester semi; early 1970s, *Top of the Pops* on the telly. Melodies I remember, but what really struck me, even then, were lyrics. The fascination of songs with a narrative. Some of them frightening to a small child, like 'Billy Don't Be a Hero' (performed by Paper Lace, written by Mitch Mitchell and Peter Callander, 1974); 'Maxwell's Silver Hammer' (Lennon and McCartney, 1969); and 'Seasons in the Sun' (sung by Terry Jacks; originally 'Le Moribond' by Jacques Brel and rewritten by Rod McKuen, 1974). I loved them and learned every word, enjoying that delicious childhood combination of fear and intrigue. Those were the days of the record player. As the youngest of four, you had to play whatever records your three older siblings had bought, knowing you'd be dead if you put a single scratch on them.

When I was about five years old my primary school music teacher, Miss Smith, sent me home with a letter to my Mum and Dad. She'd been teaching the class a song and I, unable to reach the high notes, had instinctively sung a lower harmony throughout. She'd suggested that, if we had the money, I receive some private singing tuition. We couldn't afford it, but we did have a piano, and my musical mum taught us lots of songs and encouraged us to sing.

As I grew, I began to absorb the political and social times I was living in through the music that was being created, particularly by young people. The early '80s in the UK brought exciting fusions between white punks and black ska and reggae artists. These were the sounds of fused communities, blending

their cultures to create new genres, voices reacting to racism, unemployment, and riots. These were the Margaret Thatcher years of the poll tax and miners' strikes. Different styles of song were soaring up the pop charts; hits from sharp-edged two-tone to flamboyant New Romantic escapism and New Wave imports from America were all pumping through our young veins.

Women's voices were changing too. Alongside the usual musical catwalk of pop princesses came a fresh brand of female musicians. These girls were young and brave; their outspoken individuality was exciting and infectious. They weren't ashamed to be something other than just pretty. Women like Siouxsie Sioux, Annie Lennox, Chrissie Hynde, and Toyah Wilcox were giving young teenagers like me a sense that women could play a more relevant part in popular music, coming from their own place and time, with no one pulling their strings.

Aged sixteen, I went to college in Chester to do A levels in English and Drama. I began busking with a friend who played guitar. He had been a choirboy and the sweet combination of our voices was a hit with the tourists who flocked to the beautiful, historic city. Vocal projection was learned on the job by a crude process of elimination: finding the balance between singing too quietly and being ignored by the passers-by, to shouting the words and watching people cringe!

I discovered folk clubs during this time. I made friends with a talented guitarist, Stewart Lupton. He kindly lent me an old guitar and patiently taught me a few chords. Chester's folk scene was really buzzing in the early 1980s. Clubs like The Raven were born in the late 1970s and are still going strong to this day. Hanging around with young songwriters and being introduced to the music of John Martyn, Richard Thompson, Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Bob Dylan, and Tom Waits; these truly were my most musically formative years and it comes as no surprise to me that I ended up making songwriting my vocation.

Folk wasn't my only musical influence, however. The 1980s produced some outstanding hip-hop and funk artists and I was out clubbing as much as possible, dressed in old men's long johns bought at jumble sales, combined with monkey boots and a battered Victorian dinner jacket borrowed from the college drama department. Mine was the generation who ritually taped the top 40 onto cassette every Sunday. I would write down the lyrics to my favourites, so I could be word-perfect ready for the dance floor the following weekend. The highlights of the early 1980s culminated in a pilgrimage to Manchester's mighty Hacienda Club to see Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, and my first Glastonbury in 1984, with Ian Dury, Joan Baez, and Dr John amongst the headliners.

The following year, I began writing my own songs. At first, I found myself limited to the few guitar chords I'd learned. Gradually I got better, adding minor keys and more complex melodies. A friend had a four-track recorder and helped me to make my first demo. Not long after that I was in London, living in a squat on Charing Cross Road, next to Denmark Street (aka 'Tin Pan Alley'). I bought my first acoustic guitar there, from Andy's Guitar Shop. It cost £80.

I busked every day in the Underground at Tottenham Court Road, earning enough to get by. My songwriting was flourishing; within a year I had twenty decent songs to my name. I made another demo cassette and began trying to put a band together. The problem with London's music scene was that it was so transitory; musicians were moving on all the time. In those days you often had to 'pay to play' at venues. If you were unknown, you had little chance of pulling a crowd. It was particularly difficult to get gigs playing original music. Cover bands seemed to be the only ones making money.

I spent the next twenty years touring in bands and as a solo artist, in the UK, France, and Spain, and several years on the 'Madchester' music scene of the early '90s. I toured the British folk club circuit. For those of you unfamiliar with the UK folk scene, many of the clubs are small and friendly, run by passionate enthusiasts who often provide trays of sandwiches for the crowd. People from all walks of life get up and play a couple of songs. Regardless of their level of talent, they are enthusiastically received, and the ethos of the clubs is that everyone is welcome. In those days, the fee for the guest artist was usually £50 and you were given a one-hour slot straight after the raffle!

In 2010, my husband, John Kettle – formally of Wigan band, The Tansads – invited me to join a new folk-rock band he was forming with his brothers, Bob on mandolin and Andrew on vocals, I was to share songwriting duties and sing alongside my brother-in-law. From the very beginning, we all knew there was something special about coming together at this time in our lives. Each of us arrived as individuals, but what we created, and continue to create, is shared. Our values and responses to politics, diversity, conflict, injustice. Our age, our humour, and our musical skills have all blended together to create Merry Hell. Now in our eighth year. We are currently working on our sixth album. We've won several awards and have reached a level where we are playing theatres and festivals across the UK and in Europe.

Someone asked me recently if I ever suffered from stage fright. I realised I very rarely do these days. As I've got older, it's become less about me and

more about the audience. I feel so genuinely privileged that people take the time out of their busy lives, buy tickets, drive through traffic, turn up at our concerts hoping to leave behind their troubles for a while. As a band, we always aim to switch off from what's going on in our own lives and deliver what people have come for: uplifting, thought-provoking entertainment.

From a woman's perspective, I've found the modern folk scene to be particularly non-sexist and non-ageist. Perhaps because its audiences seem to value good songwriting and playing above image. Many musicians, especially women, can feel that they lose their value as they get older and/or if they don't fit the narrow bandwidth of young, sexy, skinny. The folk industry is much kinder and more mellow. Older female artists are highly respected. Like fine wine, they are said to develop more richness and depth as they mature into their vintage years!

I've witnessed the music industry undergo profound changes in the last couple of decades. The way music is shared via the internet has brought financial and copyright challenges for the artist, but at the same time, a significant power shift away from the traditional record company control into the hands of musicians themselves. I'm now in my early fifties and at present have absolutely no plans to slow down. I'll shortly be venturing into the world of television, writing music for a drama about the Pendle Witches.