

Chaos, Clocks, and Watermelons Pt 2

Folklore 1979 is Milkweed's third album. Their first *Myths and Legends of Wales* was based on a book by Tony Roberts and their second, *The Mound People*, draws on a similarly titled book published by the Danish archaeologist P.V. Glob in 1974. Each follows an approach similar to their latest: the texts are 'found' – given by friends or stumbled across in second hand bookshops – lines that inspire are extracted and shaped into songs, the albums are short (21minutes and 11minutes respectively) and the recordings are bare bones.

All three 'source texts' deal with rituals and myths from the distant past, the natural realm of folk song but they also, particularly in the hands of Milkweed, find resonance in the modern world. *Folklore 1979* obliquely highlights the tenuous nature of the world's physical and cultural ecosystem, the fragile links that connect us to the past. *Myths and Legends of Wales* points to the vanishing of beliefs that tie us to more spiritual dimensions and give us a sense of identity. *The Mound People* excavates (literally) worlds that were previously unsuspected and, in the process, shifts our understanding of the world around us today. Glob's more famous volume, *The Bog People*, first published in English in 1969) provided the Irish poet Seamus Heaney with a series of inspirations in much the same way *The Mound People* touched Milkweed, though the more extreme situation of early 1970s Northern Ireland underlined how much can be at stake in these textual encounters. *The Bog People* appeared just as the Trouble got underway in Northern Ireland but was already shifting from riots such as the Battle of the Bogside and the burning of Conway Street and Brookfield Street in Belfast to the more entrenched regularity of tit-for-tat murders, car bombs and sniper fire. Glob's book was well illustrated with graphic photographs of the bodies retrieved from Danish bogs – The Tollund Man and The Grauballe Man in particular – and it was written in an accessible style, light on academic paraphernalia. As bodies were found in roadside executions in Northern Ireland, Heaney found a dark solace in Glob's archeological accounts:

The Tollund Man seemed to me like an ancestor almost, one of my old uncles, one of those moustached archaic faces you used to meet all over the Irish countryside. I felt very close to this. And the sacrificial element, the territorial religious element, the whole mythological field surrounding these images was very potent. So I tried, not explicitly, to make a connection between the sacrificial, ritual, religious element in the violence of contemporary Ireland and this terrible sacrificial religious thing in *The Bog People*.

The Danish text quickly sparked poems that remain central to the emotional understanding of the Troubles:

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,

Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

[from 'The Tollund Man', *Wintering Out*, Faber, 1972]

Texts, however theoretical or academic, enter the folk tradition and act as transmitters of stories, songs, and images alongside the performances and recordings of artists. Song collectors also fall into this category of 'texts' as do record collectors: the growth of blues and American folk depended heavily on the preservation of 78s while the impact in Ireland of 78s recorded by Michael Coleman, James Morrison and Paddy Killoran among others in New York reinvigorated Irish music.

An author such as Tony Robert's crosses all boundaries as he presents simple versions of myths and legends from Welsh history. In the introduction to his book he says

I have tried to give a cross-section of all folk-legends, from the famous traditional tales of the Mabinogion, tales of the Saints, well-lore, cave legends, historical legends, to the beliefs like Phantom funerals and Corpse Candles. What is not so easily apparent in so small a compass is the extent to which these tales were believed in and how closely they touched the life of ordinary people.

This is hardly the place to try and explain the inexplicable; it is enough to say that the historians have not had much success with it. Nowadays they do not even try to give rational explanations but, prudently perhaps, limit themselves to analysing and classifying, tracing international folk-tale elements. So you can accept or reject these tales if you wish — crude superstition? Or was there some strange basis of fact?

It's interesting that Roberts moves so quickly from the pervasiveness of the Welsh myths to a quasi-apology for historians who approach them soberly with an academic set of tools, evading the mysterious quality fundamental to the stories. It echoes the comments of Jude Quinn at the end of the film *I'm Not There* when Jude/Cate Blanchett tries to explain traditional music to a journalist:

What I'm talking about is traditional music, which is to say it's mathematical music, it's based on hexagons. But all these songs about, you know, roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans turning into angels—I mean, you know, they're not going to die. *They're* not folk-music songs, they're political songs. They're already dead.

You'd think that traditional-music people would, would gather that—mystery, you know, is a traditional fact, seeing as they're so full of mystery. (And contradictions.) Yeah, contradictions. (And chaos.) Yes, it's chaos, clocks, and watermelons—you know, it's everything.

These people actually think I have some kind of—fantastic imagination. It gets very, uh, lonesome. But traditional music, it's too unreal to die. It doesn't need to be protected. You know, I mean, in that music, is the only true, valid death you can feel today, you know, off a record player. But like everything else in great demand, people try to own it. Has to do with the, like, the purity thing. I think its meaninglessness is holy.

Everyone knows I'm not a folk singer.¹

Blanchett's character of course is based on Bob Dylan at the peak of his 1966 tour when he 'turned electric'. The speech is based closely on an interview conducted by journalist Nat Hentoff with Dylan for *Playboy* magazine in that year. Though, in keeping with this theme of mutation and transmission, the original interview was rejected by Dylan after he saw the magazine's edit. Hentoff recalls what happened next:

So one Saturday morning I was sitting ready to type and the phone rings. It's Bob Dylan. He is furious. "They changed some of my stuff, I won't allow that." I said, "You know the deal with that. You just tell them not to run it." Dylan said, "No. We are going to do another interview right now." Fortunately I had a tape recorder on the desk.

And so, a second interview was recorded. It seems likely that Hentoff or an editor also reworked that one too.²

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-nO64wpfeQ&t=6s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vse26CHEPhQ>

¹ Bob Dylan a February 1966 interview for *Playboy Magazine* by Nat Hentoff

As far as folk and folk-rock are concerned, it doesn't matter what kind of nasty names people invent for the music. It could be called arsenic music, or perhaps Phaedra music. I don't think that such a word as folk-rock has anything to do with it. And folk music is a word I can't use. Folk music is a bunch of fat people. I have to think of all this as traditional music. Traditional music is based on hexagrams. It comes about from legends, Bibles, plagues, and it revolves around vegetables and death. There's nobody that's going to kill traditional music. All these songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans that turn into angels – they're not going to die. It's all those paranoid people who think that someone's going to come and take away their toilet paper – they're going to die. Songs like "Which Side Are You On?" and "I Love You, Porgy" – they're not folk-music songs; they're political songs. They're already dead. Obviously, death is not very universally accepted. I mean, you'd think that the traditional-music people could gather from their songs that mystery – just plain simple mystery – is a fact, a traditional fact. I listen to the old ballads; but I wouldn't go to a party and listen to the old ballads. I could give you descriptive detail of what they do to me, but some people would probably think my imagination had gone mad. It strikes me funny that people actually have the gall to think that I have some kind of fantastic imagination. It gets very lonesome. But anyway, traditional music is too unreal to die. It doesn't need to be protected. Nobody's going to hurt it. In that music is the only true, valid death you can feel today off a record player. But like anything else in great demand, people try to own it. It has to do with a purity thing. I think its meaninglessness is holy. Everybody knows that I'm not a folk singer.

² <https://www.openculture.com/2014/09/hear-bob-dylans-unedited-bewildering-interview-with-nat-hentoff.html>