

Sandra Kerr - Citation

At the age of 17, Sandra Kerr, having been encouraged by schoolmates at her East End school, checked out a place called the Singers Club and, for the first time, listened to folk music and song as performed by the likes of Bert Lloyd, Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger, and Joe Heaney. This life-changing experience started her singing folksong and as her father later remarked - Sandra had found her voice.

A year later Karl Dallas introduced her to Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger and, although only having heard her sing once from the floor at the Singers Club, they invited her to come and live with and be taught by them - as a sort of musical apprenticeship - and thus began an extraordinary and formative period that helped launch her career.

In 1964, with Ewan and Peggy and others, Sandra became a founder member of the much acclaimed and controversial Critics Group and played a leading part in pushing forward what has become known as the 60s folk revival.

Participation in the Group and its work continued for some 10 years or so and included some notable productions. A number of themed LPs were recorded with the group and one each with Peggy Seeger and partner John Faulkner. Critics Group members performed annually in Ewan MacColl's 'Festival of Fools', toured in Italy and Cuba and produced several pieces of work for the BBC, including a version of 'Romeo and Juliet' set in the East End of London that included traditional folk song. Sandra was, of course Juliet.

In 1973 Sandra left the Critics Group to concentrate on her own career in the media and as a singer and musician.

The link with the BBC continued to develop. She researched, wrote and presented the BBC Schools Radio programme 'The Music Box' for 10 years, appeared in 'Playschool', 'Listening Corner' and many other schools programmes. Then at the invitation of Oliver Postgate, she and John Faulkner began to create and perform the music and songs for the much acclaimed children's BBC TV series Bagpuss, that began broadcasting in 1974.

In 1975 Sandra along with new husband Ron Elliot achieved what she still considers to be her greatest achievement and greatest gift to folk music - the birth of daughter Nancy.

The work with television and theatre continued - Sandra researched, composed, directed and recorded music for a number of productions including -'Gone For A Soldier' on BBC2 and 'Can We Afford The Doctor' on Channel 4 - and also made extensive contributions to some publications including 'My Song is My Own', 'Sing For Your Life' and 'Folk Song In Schools'.

In 1983 and 1984 Sandra performed several times in support of the wives of miners involved in that bitter, community-destroying and most destructive of strikes.

There were more LPs recorded in this period also - too many to list here - but they included 'My Song Is My Own' and 'Nuclear Power - No Thanks' and some cassettes for publishers specialising in Early Years songs for schoolchildren.

Towards the end of the 1980s Sandra started to develop workshop techniques for teaching voice skills - using some of the skills and knowledge - particularly in regard to the singing of traditional song - acquired from her time with Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger. This led

to her becoming a much sought after workshop leader both in the UK and abroad including - among others - work at Sidmouth International Folk Festival, Folkworks Summer Schools and Work-Outs, and the National Festival in Canberra, Australia.

It was also at this time that Sandra, having now along with Nancy and Ron moved to Northumbria, began working as a tutor with Folkworks, the innovative organisation based in Newcastle, that had been started by Alistair Anderson and Ros Rigby. Work with television had dried up but a number of major projects ensured that there was no shortage of creative work. Including in no particular order

'The Song Sampler' - a book and cassette of traditional songs for group singing for Folkworks

'Voice Union' - an International collaboration with French and Italian singers, researching and arranging traditional songs in four languages, performances around Europe and one CD. '

'On The Line' - a year long education and performance project for Folkworks, involving musicians from Shetland, France, Catalonia and Burkina Faso, production of a CD, a video, a hand-book and performances on tour.

'Small Arts' - A collaboration with dancer/trainer Virginia Kennedy to train Early Years practitioners

'Folk Choirs' - Sandra's great passion - she was Music Director of the **Caedmon Folk Choir** for six years; she led the creation of, and is currently Director of, the women's folk choir **Wercasfolk** - now 20 years old; and, until recently, was Director of mens choir **Voicemale**. And she continues to direct the **Sidmouth Folk Festival Choir** having completed 20 years so far.

'Sisters Unlimited' - Long-term member of all-women folk quartet with 3 albums recorded so far.

Scalene - a trio with daughter Nancy and James Fagan performing traditional repertoire of instrumental music and song. One CD so far.

The anti-capitalist roadshow - touring and recording with the group and recording one CD.

And then more recently...

For the Centenary celebrations for Suffragette Emily Wilding Davison - wrote the song which featured in 'Secrets of a Suffragette' on Channel 4 with Clare Balding - now patron of Werca's Folk - and with whom Sandra also worked on the Radio 4 programme 'Ramblings'.

'The Coble, The Kye and The Coal' a BBC funded song project with Voicemale. and the recording of a song written to celebrate the centenary of the WI.

And a few more recordings including a 'Bagpuss' Retrospective with John Faulkner, 'Yellow Red and Gold', a celebration of 25 years of songwriting and 'Neat and Complete' with daughter Nancy.

And thus we come to the work that Sandra possibly regards as the fitting culmination of all the hard work that has gone before.

Since 2002 until the present day Sandra has been a tutor and lecturer on the Folk Degree Course here at Newcastle University. She is the leader of the 'Traditions of These Islands' module in which she teaches Music Skills, Songs and Struggle; Singing for Learning and is the principal Voice Tutor.

It is no exaggeration to say that all of her students and her colleagues think she is wonderful, although also true that they remain amazed by her commitment and the amount of work that she continues to perform. There is no doubt that Sandra loves to teach and is certainly a natural in the role. Allied to her own musical abilities and her ability to communicate, there can be few people more able to help the next generation of singers and musicians acquire the skills and confidence necessary for a successful career - and to carry this music and song forward.

And perhaps the most fitting summary of her teaching work comes from Alistair Anderson, who said:

'Sandra was a key tutor at Folkworks Summer Schools and education projects. When I was first persuaded to start the folk degree I wanted all of the students to sing. It was amazing the way that Sandra could get even the most reluctant students to discover their voice. I can't think of anyone who could have done it better'.

So there you have it. A life in music, in particular the music of ordinary people and a life of sharing her knowledge and skills with others. Multi-instrumentalist, singer, songwriter, musical director, radical, feminist, activist but above all teacher. That is what has brought about the award of the Gold Badge of 'The English Folk Dance and Song Society'. And here to present that award is the Chief Executive Katy Spicer.