

An interview with Janet Kerr

Janet Kerr is a multi-instrumentalist folk musician who has played with greats like Tom Paley (in the New Deal String Band) and Lonnie Austen and Norman Woodlieff (of Charlie Poole and the North Carolina Ramblers). She met Mable Hillery in London in 1967.

Parker Fishel: What were your initial impressions of Mable Hillery? What was it that led the two of you to hit it off?

Janet Kerr: First impressions of Mable. Mable was very outgoing and friendly. She had great energy and laughed and smiled a lot and was keen to engage with people, which was infectious. I was drawn along by her - one of those people you feel you have known all your life.

PF: Do you remember any of the repertoire she was playing at the time?

JK: Her repertoire at the time was pretty much the same as she sang on the tapes made by Hedy (of which you have a copy) and on the album she made with Bill. I remember "Juba". "Juba this and Juba that, and Juba killed the yellow cat!" This was a clapping game. Probably frowned upon now, but a brilliant rhythmic clapping sequence and definitely part of her heritage. "Juba" refers to giblets or offal - the diet of the poor black people, and "yellow cat" were the whites.

PF: Do you know how Mable and Hedy West knew one another?

JK: I'm not exactly sure how Hedy met Mable. I thought it was probably at a festival in the States. I remember Hedy came back from a tour over there, talking about how she'd like to arrange a tour over here for her - which she did, of course!

PF: How did you know Hedy?

JK: I met Hedy through an American duo, Sandy & Jeanie who were playing Old Time Music around the folk club circuit here in the 60's. At the time, American Old Time was popular, and as a banjo player and fiddler with a special interest in American traditional music, Sandy & Jeanie thought I should meet Hedy, and so invited us both to dinner. You may have come across Jeanie McLerie, who became one of The Delta Sisters, and now lives with her husband Ken Keppeler in New Mexico - they perform as "Bayou Seco". Hedy was a very well respected singer here and across Europe, and based herself in London for a number of years. We became friends, and she taught me a lot about the banjo, and introduced me to Tom Paley, also resident here, and I later joined his band as fiddler.

PF: How did you know Bill Farrow?

JK: I knew Bill Farrow from the Barking Folk Club in east London. We were both regular resident performers there, supporting the headline acts.

PF: What was the folk scene in the UK like at that time?

JK: The folk scene was really thriving at that time, and the clubs, mainly in backrooms in pubs, were always heaving. All types of folk music were represented and enjoyed. From Buffy St Marie to Willie Scott (an elderly retired shepherd who sang unaccompanied the traditional songs from his area of the Scottish Borders).

PF: Did you go on the road with Mable and Bill Farrow?

JK: No, I didn't go on the road with Mable and Bill, although I did go and see them in any clubs that were in reach of London, where I lived at the time. I also went to the recording sessions for the album. I can't remember if Hedy drove them around, she probably did- Bill would know this.

PF: Were there any qualities of Mable's voice that came across live, but were difficult to capture on record? What made her a unique singer?

JK: I think it was Mable's great energy and twinkle in her eye that was difficult to reproduce on record. Also, I think the audience was aware that it was in the presence of the real thing. Her upbringing was genuinely hard, and her songs had been absorbed (rather than learned) during those times of privation, but she knew of nothing else and it didn't occur to her to dwell on misfortune, she always saw the funny side.

PF: What was the reception to Mable and her music? Did Mable discuss her reception in the States?

JK: Mable was very well received. She would involve the audience in her clapping games - resulting in great hilarity when they would get tied in knots, trying to clap out these complex rhythms. She would also encourage them to sing along. People came away feeling they had been entertained, informed and involved. She never mention her reception in the States to me.

PF: Did Mable ever mention anything about the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project or her activism?

JK: No, she never talked about the Southern Folk Cultural Revival Project. Is that what she was involved in when she was based in New York? She mentioned Alan Lomax. If so, she did say that she really struggled with the paperwork, but loved the teaching.

PF: How did you come to visit Mable in New York City in 1970? What did the two of you do together?

JK: I had been travelling to the States each year to go down south to learn more and record the music I loved. I think it must have been Hedy (who by then was back in the States) who told me Mable was in New York and so I think I found Mable's name in the phone book. According to her letters, I had tried to reach Mable in '69, but she was away. It was 1970 when I caught up with her. When I arrived she was watching a soap on tv, apologised, and said we could talk when it finished! She was surrounded by her dreaded paperwork, but we had a good time. She was keen to hear about everyone she knew back in England. We had a meal and that was it really -it was lovely to see her, and I fully expected to see her again.

PF: What was most memorable about Mable Hillery as a friend, person, artist?

JK: The most memorable thing about Mable was her warmth and her ability to see the funny side. She was a marvellous raconteur. To me, I think she felt she was very privileged that people were interested in her music, and was grateful for the opportunities it gave her.