

Photos: Roswitha Chesher

Jo Freya

Gold Badge Presentation at the National Youth Folk Ensemble concert at Cecil Sharp House, April 2026, by Michael Morpugo.

Meeting Jo, and Coope, Boyes and Simpson, was for Clare and for me a happy accident. We went to Ypres in Belgium for a conference on writing about war for young people. CBS turned out to the cabaret, by pure coincidence. We were all glad of it, because CBS were of course amazing, but the conference was mostly in Flemish and so rather long and tedious.

So began a 25-year collaboration. We had a CD of their songs at home that we had already listened to and loved for a while, and there they were up on the stage singing all the familiar songs in their own inimitable way, in the In Flanders Field Museum in Ypres.

We were hearing them live, went to say hello. Had a beer or two with them, hatched the idea, the notion of a music and story collaboration, of doing a concert together. Then, quite by chance again, they came to Devon to sing in a local church. More beer, more concert hatching, but now we weren't talking just the notion of a concert, but the intent.

There followed years of concerts, often in Ypres again, often a concert of their WW1 songs, now interwoven with my story of Private Peaceful. We went up and down the country, in village halls, at folk festivals, in churches, in concert halls.

Out of this grew another concert around *The Best Christmas Present in the World,* a story I wrote of the Christmas Truce of 1914. CBS, I knew had done many folk carol concerts which we had known and loved. We wove story and carols into a concert which we performed year after year in churches, in cathedrals, here there and everywhere.

And then I wrote my own version of the nativity, in which the shepherd boy is left alone to look after the sheep whilst the shepherds go off to Bethlehem to see this child, this King of Peace born in a stable. The shepherd boy in my telling, plays the main part in the story along the Angel Gabriel and the Holy Family. On Angel Wings, we called it. Such joy we had doing it.

Virginia McKenna, Jenny Agutter, Juliet Stevenson, often narrated with me. Starry starry nights they were!

And we also created another concert performed in folk and book festivals, from a book Clare and I had written together – *Where my Wellies Take Me.* But sadly all good things do come to an end. Coope Boyes and Simpson were suddenly no longer together. But we have our memories of the music, of the friendships music makes, performing together makes.

It was the most more enriching time of our lives, a creation of friendships born of music and words. And that endures. Music is indeed the food of love, as the great man wrote.

I would say the same of stories. And the combination of the two can be very powerful, moving and meaningful.

So, to be here to celebrate the life and work and music of Jo Freya today is sheer joy. She was always the life and soul, often heralding our concerts on her saxophone as we made our entrance through the always amazed audience at the start of our concert, and then always singing her heart out. She has a voice that peals, that chimes, that touches our hearts. She means every word, every note she sings.

You so deserve this award, dear Jo, and more. We need you and your singing and your saxophone more than ever. Folk music, is meant music, the people's music. It has purpose and power. It was never more needed. We need it to cheer our hearts, to confirm who we are, to celebrate our joys, sing away our sadness.

What was it Berthold Brecht wrote In the dark times of the 1930s and 1940s, with the rise of racism and nazism infesting the world.

He wrote. "Will there be singing in the dark times? Yes, there will be singing, of the dark times." We are in dark times again. And there must be singing.

Jo and her life of music-making shine a light for us through the dark times of today, a light we sorely need, a light we love.

Thank you for the music, Jo. And bless your heart.





Open House Festival: Cecil Sharp House

Architecture, art and folk history under one roof.

Open House Festival is a London-wide festival that opens up and celebrates the city's built environment. Every year, buildings and other sites across all 33 London boroughs open to the public, so that Londoners can explore them for free. The festival this year will take place 12-20 September. We are joining in this year, with Cecil Sharp House opening its doors on Saturday 19 September for guided tours.

Librarian Alex Burton will be leading the tours; taking in our garden, which is maintained by volunteers from Permablitz; as well the main hall with our Ivon Hitchens mural, our other rooms and spaces, each named after people instrumental to the founding of the English Folk Dance and Song Society; the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, and the art and sculpture we have on display around the building. The entrance alone boasts roundels by Sir Anthony Caro and reliefs by Gordon Herickx.

Tours will last one hour and will start from the main entrance at 10:30am, 11:30am and 12:30pm on Saturday 19 September. Free; booking opens on 19 August, at **open-city.org.uk/open-house-festival**

Of course, Cecil Sharp House is open for admiring eyes most days of the week, and during gigs and events.

The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library is open Tuesday - Friday 10:30am to 4pm, and on the first and third Saturdays of the month (excluding August). Discover more at **efdss.org/vwml**

