English Folk Dance and Song Society

Gold Badge Citation for Jim Coleman

We are today honouring a distinguished folk musician, who has been playing for dancing for over sixty of the Society's 100 years, during which he has played for Morris, English traditional, Playford and Scottish dancing. He has been an inspiration to countless dancers and musicians over the years and has been able to combine brilliant technique with a creative and rhythmic gift which has enhanced all kinds of folk music.

Jim took up the fiddle at the age of 14 when, perhaps fortunately for us, his twin sister decided that she did not want to play it any more. He was largely self-taught and could immediately play in tune and progressed quickly. He studied at Hornsea College of Art and, as a talented artist, he went on to study at the Royal College of Art. While there, he was in 1949 invited by a fellow student, who also happened to be a Morris dancer, to play for his team, London Rodney. It has to be said that he found his first morris tune, *Wheatley Processional*, disappointing as he had apparently expected something more "gypsy", but folk engagements followed, which enabled him to finance his degree.

In the early fifties he was spotted by Douglas Kennedy at a Thaxted Ring Meeting and was immediately invited to join what was then an elite pool of players who provided music at Cecil Sharp House.

Jim quickly acquired a repertoire of dance tunes and caused a sensation with the beauty of his tone, intonation and technique and the dance quality of his playing. His playing stood out among the many amateur musicians who all enjoyed playing for dancing, and he impressed all who heard him. In those days everyone else "played the dots" whereas Jim could improvise and embellish. He played regularly at Cecil Sharp House and for Morley College group (which is now incidentally just 99 years old!) He was also a musician with the Beaux of London City Morris from 1951 to 1958.

This was the time of "The New Look" Society when Douglas wanted to move away from endless classes and enable dancers to have fun and really enjoy themselves. Weekend schools and holiday courses replaced classes but were still rather formal and would be unrecognisable to those who dance to Jim's playing in the 21st century. In the fifties he was invited by Douglas to play for national events and functions such as the Stratford upon Avon and Royal Albert Hall festivals. He was a member of the EFDSS party that toured South Africa in 1954.

In 1959 Jim and his wife, Betty, moved to Bristol and then to Chippenham where Jim became Head of Art at Chippenham Technical College and he continues to play at every opportunity.

He recorded incidental music for various BBC radio and early television dramas and made occasional solo appearances in Peter Kennedy's *"Early one Morning"* folk series and Kenneth Clark's series from the Midlands. He also transcribed various tunes for Peter Kennedy from his Field recordings of Irish fiddle music.

In the mid fifties he recorded about 40 discs on the Record Productions (London) RPL label under the auspices of the Society. These were either solo recordings or he

was joined by Michael Bell on piano and they were a mixture of Morris, Sword English Traditional and Playford titles.

He did not form a band himself but remained mainly freelance. He “sat in” with many Society band combinations, led a recording band called the Record Makers and worked with Nan Fleming-Williams, Pat Shaw and others as a member of the radio band The Jolly Waggoners who broadcast throughout the West Country until 1967. He also led the EFDSS orchestra at the Percy Grainger festival concert in 1970.

As he became increasingly well-known as a musician, Jim was invited to play for a variety of occasions; at dances and balls, for clubs and societies, at Easter and Summer Schools, at all the major festivals, as musician and tutor – Dartington Hall , Burton Manor, Halsway Manor, Belstead House, the Pump Room at Bath to name but a few. For a Dartington course Jim was advertised in the following terms:”Jim Coleman, who is one of England’s leading folk violin players, has an ambition to foster a sound tradition of an English style of fiddle playing”

Jim is also a fine exponent of Scottish dance music and has played regularly for over 40 years for the Westbury-on-Trym Scottish dance club in Bristol, for which he has been awarded a lifetime achievement.

He also played regularly for Scottish and English dance weekends at Dinton House, near Salisbury. One participant recalls: “It was at the Southern Scottish Summer School, many years ago. Jim was the musician for the dancing session, and as usual there was a lot of explanation and demonstration between bits of playing. Jim didn't want to give attention to such boring stuff, so he had the day's crossword on his music stand and got on with solving it until he was needed again.”

Jim first played in partnership with Denis Smith at a dance in Chigwell in 1957 and they have been in constant demand. Together they have recorded the complete set of ‘Apted’ and ‘New Series’ dances for the Society.

The following is taken from a 1980 press cutting about their performance at the Cecil Sharp centenary concert at Clare College (the centenary of Sharp’s time at the Cambridge College):*”There were… solo song versions arranged by Sharp himself and by Benjamin Britten and dance tunes played with a swaggering, infectious swing and lilt by Jim Coleman and Denis Smith, and you will realize why it was all so enjoyable. What was particularly enjoyable was the excellent technical level all round; nothing was over-sophisticated, nothing was really twee; but it all had guts and discipline. Which, I am sure, is how Sharp would have wanted it”*.

Jim is unmatched in his mastery of the tunes themselves and his ability to breathe fresh life into a familiar tune. This he achieves by his brilliant improvisation of countermelodies and descants which heighten the musical atmosphere, making exciting music and compelling dance rhythms. His interpretations of Playford dances have originality and intense energy which dancers find irresistible.

Jim has, for sixty years, consistently worked to provide dance music of the very highest standard. He set a new level of musical quality and has inspired many budding fiddlers to aim high and achieve more. He is a worthy recipient of the Society’s Gold Badge.

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