Gold Badge Citation – Sandra Kerr

The Gold Badge was presented to Sandra Kerr by Katy Spicer at a special concert at Newcastle University on 6 March 2015. The citation was written and read by **Mike Norris**.

At the age of 17, Sandra Kerr was encouraged by school mates at her East End school to check out the Singers' Club and, for the first time, she listened to folk music and song performed by the likes of Bert Lloyd, Ewan MacColl, Peggy Seeger and Joe Heaney. This life-changing experience started her singing folk songs and, as her father later remarked, Sandra had found her voice.

A year later Karl Dallas introduced her to Ewan and Peggy and, although they had heard her sing only once at the Singers' Club, they invited her to 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, Peggy and others, Sandra became a founder member of the much-acclaimed and controversial Critics Group and played a leading part in pushing forward the 1960s folk revival. Participation in the Group continued for some 10 years and included some notable productions. Several themed LPs were recorded; 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 work for the BBC, including a version of *Romeo and Juliet* set in London's East End using traditional song. Sandra was, of course, Juliet.

In 1973, Sandra left the Critics to concentrate on her own career in the media and as a singer and musician. The BBC link 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 created and performed the music and songs for the much-acclaimed children's BBC TV series *Bagpuss*, broadcast from 1974.

In 1975, Sandra and 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.

Television and theatre work continued. Sandra researched, composed, directed and recorded music for productions including *Gone For A Soldier* (BBC2) and *Can we Afford the Doctor* (Channel 4), and made extensive contributions to publications including *My Song is My Own*, *Sing For Your Life* and *Folk Music In School*. In 1983 and 1984 Sandra performed in support of the wives of miners involved in that bitter, community-destroying and most destructive of strikes.

There were more albums recorded in this period, including *My Song Is My Own* and *Nuclear Power – No Thanks* and for publishers specialising in songs for early years schoolchildren.

Towards the end of the 1980s, Sandra developed workshop techniques for teaching voice skills using some of the skills and knowledge acquired from her time with MacColl and Seeger. She soon became a much sought after workshop leader in the UK and abroad including Sidmouth festival, Folkworks Summer Schools and Work-Outs and the National Festival in Canberra, Australia.

By now living in Northumberland, Sandra was a tutor with the innovative Folkworks, and there was no shortage of creative work, including *The Song Sampler* (Folkworks book and recording of traditional songs for group singing), *Voice Union* (performance and CD collaboration with French and Italian singers, researching and arranging traditional songs in four languages), *On The Line* (a year-long education and performance project for Folkworks, involving musicians from Shetland, France, Catalonia and Burkina Faso) and *Small Arts* (collaboration with dancer/trainer Virginia Kennedy to train early years practitioners). Folk choirs have been Sandra's great passion. She was Music Director of the Caedmon Folk Choir for six years; she helped found and is Director of the women's folk choir Werca's Folk, now 20 years old; and, until recently, was Director of men's choir Voicemale. And for 20 years she has directed the Sidmouth Festival Choir.

Then there are three albums with Sisters Unlimited, the all-women folk quartet; Scalene, a trio with daughter Nancy and James Fagan performing a traditional repertoire of instrumental music and song; and touring with The Anti-Capitalist Roadshow. More recently, there have been the centenary celebrations of suffragette Emily Wilding Davison (Sandra wrote the song for a Channel 4 documentary with Clare Balding – now patron of Werca's Folk); and *The Coble, The Kye and The Coal,* a BBC-funded song project with Voicemale. Plus a *Bagpuss* retrospective with John Faulkner, *Yellow Red and Gold* (a celebration of 25 years of songwriting) and *Neat and Complete* with daughter Nancy.



Photo courtesy of Newcastle Chronicle and Journal

And finally we come to the fitting culmination of all the hard work that has gone before. Since 2002, Sandra has been a tutor and lecturer on the Folk and Traditional Music degree course here at Newcastle University. She leads the 'Traditions of these Islands' module, and teaches Music Skills, Songs and Struggle and Singing for Learning, and she is the principal Voice Tutor.

It is no exaggeration to say that all her students and colleagues think she is wonderful, and 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.'

A life in music, in particular the music of ordinary people, and a life of sharing her knowledge and skills with others – Sandra Kerr, multi-instrumentalist, singer, songwriter, musical director, radical, feminist, activist but above all teacher.

Mike Norris is a former Chairman of the EFDSS Board and presents the digital radio programme Classic Folk on The Wireless in London, also available internationally on www.thewirelessradio.com *and* www.efdss.org/listen