The Yetties Gold Badge Citation

In 1967 at the Sidmouth Festival The Yetties received the English Folk Dance & Song Society's Sidmouth Award, the citation for which read: *Always ready to go anywhere, they have spread songs and music in all mediums and walks of life. Their talents extend across the broad spectrum of folk repertoire as singers, musicians and dancers. This Award is made to them for their folk singing and music inspired by their infectious enthusiasm.*
Now, forty years later, The Yetties are about to receive the folk world's greatest honour, the Society's Gold Badge. It is entirely appropriate that this ceremony takes place here in Halsway Manor for the folk music, dance and song of the West Country have always been close to their hearts.

Bonny Sartin, Mac McCulloch and Pete Shutler, along with Bob Common the other original member of the group, first came together as members of the 1st Yetminster St Andrews Scout Troop, based in that small Dorset village in the early 1950s. Apart from songs sung round the camp fire they had little interest in folk until 1959 when some enterprising ladies in the Women's Institute began running folk dances for the local youth in Yetminster village hall. The boys saw this as an excellent opportunity to meet young ladies, so they abandoned reef knots and billycans for the delights of the Dorset Four Hand Reel and Wiltshire Tempest.

Their enthusiasm was such that they soon found themselves members of The Yetminster and Ryme Intrinseca Junior Folk Dance Display Team which made its first appearance at Sidmouth Folk Festival in 1961. It was shortly after that when the Team was appearing at a festival in Offley in Hertfordshire that the master of ceremonies, unable to cope with their full title, introduced them as "those Yetties". And The Yetties they became. Round about the same time they became The Ranters too. Frustrated by the lack of dance bands in their area they decided to set up one of their own. Pete and Mac acquired a couple of old accordions which they struggled to play together – in those early days Pete just played the right hand part while Mac played the left – with Bob playing tea chest bass.

Through contact with singers like Cyril Tawney they began to develop an interest in folk song and in 1963 they had their first paid booking, singing at a Harvest Supper in the village of West Lydford for a fee of two guineas (two pounds and twenty pence). By now they were completely immersed in folk; in addition to their dual roles as folk group and dance band, which were kept very separate at that time, they were dancing morris with The Wessex Men and running their own folk club in Yeovil. As their bookings increased their daytime jobs began to suffer so on 1st October 1967 The Yetties became a professional folk group. In those days there were literally hundreds of folk clubs all over the country, they recall

staying in Sheffield for three weeks and playing a different club each night, and their blend of West Country songs, music and humour became immensely popular. Billed as "Fifty Stone of Loveliness", the title of their first album, they were also in great demand for festivals, including the Society's Royal Albert Hall festival, appearing there first in 1967. Following that appearance at the Albert Hall the show's producer, Ron Smedley, invited them to join a team he was taking to an international festival in Rumania in 1969, the first of many overseas tours.

In 1970 they made their debut album for Decca's Argo label and began broadcasting regularly on the daytime programmes on BBC Radio Two. This exposure introduced them to a wider audience which led to them making the difficult transition from folk clubs and festivals by taking "a little bit of Dorset" to concert halls and theatres throughout the country. However busy they were they always kept close to their roots in Dorset and for many years they ran a monthly folk club in the skittle alley of The White Hart in Yetminster; a tradition continued today in their monthly Music Nights at the West End Hall in Sherborne.

Over the years much of their material has been found close to home. Bonny's own family is the source of many traditional songs; The Hammond brothers collected over a hundred songs and fragments from two of his forebears in 1906-7. Dorchester Museum is a happy hunting ground, containing the Hammond and Gardner manuscripts, material on William Barnes and Thomas Hardy's family tune books. It was there, too, that they discovered Hardy's own fiddle which Roger Trim played on their double album "The Musical Heritage of Thomas Hardy". The Saturday night singsongs at Sherborne's cider house The Digby Tap have been another rich source of material and the exploits of the characters there have provided inspiration for many of their stories.

Their ability to engage the general public has led to them into many areas of show business, from pantomimes to agricultural shows - where for one season they found themselves promoting Czechoslovakian tractors. At a more serious level they have undertaken many tours abroad for The British Council, visiting countries as diverse as Thailand, Nepal, Sri-Lanka, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Singapore, Pakistan, Sudan, India, Bangladesh, The Maldives, The Philippines and Canada. The British Ambassador in Ethiopia reported that they had done more good for British/Ethiopian relations in 2 weeks than he had achieved in 2 years.

Their workload has been phenomenal. Over the past forty years they have produced forty-eight albums in their own right as well as appearing on albums featuring, amongst others, Cyril Tawney, Bob Arnold (Tom Forrest of The Archers), Laurie Lee (providing background music for his spoken word recording of "Cider With Rosie") and John Arlott on an album of cricket stories and songs.

John Arlott commented: *They are, in the first place, genuine folk singers – genuine by nature and from the heart. They are not sophisticated; not, perhaps, musically scholarly – but they are music, and the kind of spontaneous music that puts mere scholarship to scorn*.

In addition to their albums they have produced five Yetties' DVDs, five DVDs about Dorset, four song books and two books of Bonny's poetry. They have appeared on innumerable radio and television programmes including three series of their own show for Radio Two – "Cider and Song". Their version of "Barwick Green" has been introducing the Sunday morning omnibus edition of The Archers for over thirty years.

Their association with the Society goes back to that first appearance at Sidmouth festival as members of The Yetminster and Ryme Intrinseca Junior Folk Dance Display Team in 1961 and has continued ever since. They appeared in the Royal Albert Hall festivals in 1967, 1970 and 1983 and before Princess Margaret at the Society's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 1971. The Society published The Yetties Song Book in 1971.

Perhaps more important to The Yetties though is their connection with Halsway Manor. They came as soon as it opened over 40 years ago and soon began running events here. The current series of weekends has been going for 11 years and they are always completely oversubscribed. Seven years ago Bonny's wife Cynthia took over running the library, amongst other things putting all the information about the bookstock on the web. Bonny himself had the distinction of becoming President of Halsway Manor Society at the Society's AGM in October 2006.

So today we honour The Yetties: Bonny Sartin, Mac McCulloch and Pete Shutler. As many people here will know, in spite of their undoubted success over the past forty years as a professional folk group they have retained their genuine feeling for the countryside, which coupled with their obvious enjoyment of what they do has won them friends all over the world. They are, indeed, "a little bit of Dorset" and long may they continue to be so.

Jim Lloyd
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