

The **FAMILY**

Phoebe was born at Tenner Street, Faversham, Kent in 1913 the youngest of Anne (nee Jones) and Bill Scamp's twenty one children. Phoebe's parents had stopped travelling but they would still move around for seasonal work, as Phoebe's son Manny told me:

"I suppose life was like a holiday in those days: we would spend a couple of months here to work, then move on to another area for the next harvest, and we'd meet up with our aunties and uncles and cousins. It would be Essex, near Chelmsford for the sugarbeeting. Kent for the cherries, apples, plums and pears, then up to the Fens for the potatoes. That would be the times when the singing was practised. You'd be by yourself six or seven hours. no-one to please. no-one to offend, and an old uncle in the next orchard would shout over, "Have you heard this one?"

Phoebe married Joe Smith in 1931 and they had seven sons: Joe, Henry. Nick, John. Manny, Fred and Tom, and lived for many years at Melton near Woodbridge in Suffolk.

"Our house was spotless. Mum used to scrub the floors till they shined, no Hoover or anything. nor would she have a washing machine, and with seven of us, on a Saturday before we went out we were all on parade to make sure we were properly turned out."

"Mum had such a clear voice and when she'd had a glass or two of Guinness she would sing and you could hear her at the other end of the village, but when she was recorded for the record (Once I Had a True Love) they wanted her to sound like a folk singer, so her singing is subdued. She liked songs with meanings and her favourite was **A Blacksmith Courted Me**. A lot of her songs she learned from her mother and father and **Higher Germany** came from her oldest sister, Polly and her younger brother Henry had a good voice. Her uncles Bill and George were also great singers and Bill had a high pitched voice. If he was singing in another room and you couldn't see him you would swear it was a woman singing."

"Mum used to love to get into a pub to sing and step dance, Years ago they had a board on the back of the waggon and they would step on that and it had spring in it which gave a bounce to the dancing. Dad (Joe) used to play fiddle and tambourine, and one night he'd left his bone behind and there was an old man with a pipe sitting there, well he borrowed his pipe to play and the next thing the bowl was flying in the air 'cause it had broke in half. Dad said to me, "Take it back" but I said "No I won't!" One night there was a gathering of fiddle players and they were having a bit of a competition and Dad said, 'I'll show you something.' He loosened all the strings and put a fork in between them and tightened them up again and when he played it sounded just like bagpipes. We asked him how he did it but he wouldn't tell us."

"Mum used to sing in London sometimes, at folk clubs and the like, and for the BBC. Once they provided a dinner at the Post Office Tower and Bob Roberts was there. She got on well with him. Bob always took his dog with him, as he did this day and of course they wouldn't let him in, so they all walked out in protest and the BBC had to apologise,"

I asked Manny if any of the younger members of the family were singing. "Well we were at a party recently and my daughter Linda Alice got up on the microphone and sang the theme from 'Titanic' and the family listened and everyone said that she sounded just like Mum." Maybe the issue of this CD will encourage more singing of her grandmother's songs!

John Howson
July 1998

The COLLECTOR

I first heard of Phoebe Smith in 1963, when I was working a Cecil Sharp House as an assistant to Peter Kennedy. Peter had recorded Phoebe as a part of the BBC collecting scheme and he was busy transcribing her songs when I first went to work for him. Some years later I began collecting songs from English gypsies and travellers and whilst in Faversham, Kent, I met Phoebe's relatives who told me that she was still an active singer. They gave me her telephone number and, within days, I was in Suffolk, driving out of Woodbridge along the Melton road looking for her home.

In those days Phoebe and her husband Joe were living in a bungalow at the side of a moderately busy road. There was a small scrap yard at the side of their home, where Joe and his sons worked. I think what most impressed me on my first visit was Joe and Phoebe's large collection of Crown Derby porcelain. Every shelf and furniture top seemed to be holding yet another prize piece. They clearly loved their collection and were only too happy to tell me how the horse-drawn gypsy waggons of old had always been full of similar items.

In September 1918, Cecil Sharp paid a visit to the Appalachian singer, Mrs Sina Boone of Burnsville, N.C. He later wrote, 'We found her at home and ready to sing, much to her delight and that of her husband.' And the same could be said of Phoebe and Joe. There was never any question of persuading Phoebe to sing. She just loved to sing and was willing to do so at any opportunity. Often Joe would quit working and come and sit quietly at Phoebe's side, giving her an occasional prompt when she became unsure of a word or two. At times we would have to wait until planes from a nearby US airbase stopped their noisy overhead manoeuvres.

When I visited Phoebe I was aware that she had also been recorded by Paul Carter (see track 11) on behalf of Topic Records. There seemed little point in going over old ground and so we worked on the songs that Phoebe had learnt in her youth, many of which lay half-buried in the depth of her memory. Some songs came back quickly. Others had to be coaxed, verse by verse, sometimes line by line, until she was happy that she could recall no more of the song. And what songs they were: the majestic **Barbara Allen**, late 18th and early 19th century broadsides, such as **The Sheepfold**, **Young Morgan**, **The Game of All Fours**, or **The Yellow Handkerchief**, which seems to be especially popular with travellers. One song, **Green Broom**, had started life in 1845 when J.W. Buckstone based a play on the song (or did the song come before the play?). Incidentally, Phoebe's version of **Green Bashes** opens with a 'rogue' verse - from the song **Pretty Susan the Pride of Kildare** - which, characteristically, does not sound out of place. **Raking the Hay** was usually titled **Joy After Sorrow** by the broadside printers because of an additional final two verses that Phoebe was unable to remember:

When 40 long weeks come and gone
This lovely damsel brought forth a son
She blessed the hour all in the day
When she went with the soldier and left the hay

When the soldier the news did know
Great favour to this girl did show
They soon married were and she blessed the day
That she went with the soldier and left the hay

Johnny Abourne is thought by some to be based on the life of James Raeburn, a Glasgow bakery worker who was transported to Australia in the first half of the 19th century, although the Scottish song collector Superintendent John Ord of Glasgow Police failed to trace Ruehum's supposed crime in police records. The song appeared on numerous English Broadside as **The Hills of Caledonia**, and Phoebe's reference to Canada is probably the result of an English singers mishearing of the word Caledonia.

I was keen to see if Phoebe knew any of the Anglo-Romany songs that I had heard from other travellers. If she did she kept them to herself, but she did offer me one, **The Old Gypsy's Waggon** or **Romany Rye** as it is sometimes called, which I suspect may be from a stage play, (one based on George Borrow's book 'The Romany Rye' perhaps?) and **Wings of a Swallow**, a song which Phoebe believed had been composed by an unknown traveller.

Phoebe and Joe Smith came from large families and were used to entertaining. They loved social gatherings such as dances, where Joe would play his fiddle, or pub singsongs where Phoebe would sing and step-dance. and they especially loved the company of other people. I think that they were two of the kindest and most likeable people that I ever met, and I am very glad that John Howson is now able to make so many of their songs available again. I know that Phoebe and Joe would approve.

Mike Yates
May 1998

The SINGERS

To some of us - singers who have long admired and been influenced by Phoebe Smith's wild, individual style - it's astonishing that these recordings have been unavailable for so long and that the art of this national treasure has been so long ignored or forgotten.

Among the very few commercially recorded English women gypsy singers, Phoebe shines in terms of her repertoire, which is weighty, magisterial, and surprisingly intact in comparison with so many other gypsy singers. But it may be, above all, her style that marks her as extraordinary - the swoops and reaches, the apparent abandon which allows her to reach wildly for a note which may or may not be attained spot on, adding an 'exotic danger' to the performance. Phoebe sang more slowly than any other singer, with a splendid richness of tone, but always with that unnerving edge of abandon. Her style is one which carries absolute authority which is at one with and complimented by the authority of the repertoire. .

When Phoebe made an appearance at the first Keele Festival she was certainly considered extraordinary. Many found her singing too inaccessible, too strange. Nonetheless this woman who sang the big songs, and also frivolously step danced on stage, made an impact on many, even if they couldn't totally grasp what she was doing. It did indeed turn some on to looking further into the repertoire and singing style of travellers.

To see her in the comparative intimacy of a London folk club, The Fox, and later on The King's Head, made everything clear. In this setting she would sing all sides of her repertoire, including music hall songs and popular standards. She was an ordinary woman who danced couple stepdances with Bob Roberts and cracked jokes in a shy way. She was relaxed and the audience was able to get to grips with the unusual and powerful performer that she was. Although the apparent lack of control meant that some found her style inaccessible, the unexpected wild delivery of the pub songs and country songs next to thrilling, totally unknown, unfamiliar versions of songs we all knew, such as **Higher Germany** or **Molly Vaughan**, was more than enough to open the door to new possibilities for those amongst us who were seduced.

We were led on to seek out and listen to other traveller singers. The brilliant Stewarts of Blairgowrie and the wonderful Margaret Barry we knew from appearances in London and commercial recordings, but there were also more obscure recordings of Lal Smith, Win Ryan and Mary Doran on the Irish side, and Mary Ann Haynes, Louie Fuller and the magnificent Queen Caroline Hughes on the English.

We were moved by the exotic wildness and freedom of these singers, possibly born of the very 'foreignness' of the gypsy people, and the particular magnificence of repertoire epitomised by Phoebe Smith.

Few enough of today's performers have followed anything of Phoebe's style although one or two of her songs such as **Higher Germany** and **The Blacksmith** took an early hold on the folk revival's imagination. Yet she remains one of the most important English traditional singers of our time, and there is still much to be learned from her in many ways. This new album will be a prized possession for the many of us who have long wanted a comprehensive Phoebe Smith collection, and will be a revelation to new listeners, who with the recent popularity of similar unruly and uncontrolled music, such as Rembetika and Fado, are less hidebound in their acceptance of all important traditional music.

Danny Stradling and **Peta Webb**

June 1998