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'Country Life'? Rurality, Folk Music and 'Show of Hands'

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Abstract

This paper examines the contribution of folk music to understanding the dynamic, fluid and multi-experiential nature of the countryside. Drawing from literature on the geographies of music, it examines the work of ‘Show of Hands’, a contemporary folk band from Devon in England. Three areas are studied. First, the paper examines the musical style of Show of Hands in order to explore how hybridised, yet distinctive, styles of music emerge in particular places. Second, it demonstrates how Show of Hands’ hybrid musical style has become closely associated with the Southwest of England. Finally, within these spatial and hybrid contexts, attention is given to the ways in which their music represents the ‘everyday lives of the rural’. Taken together these themes assess the relevance of music in the understanding of rurality as hybrid space.

1. Introduction

Over recent years there has been much interest in the way that representations of the rural contribute to discourses of rurality and the spatialities of everyday life in the countryside (Cloke, 2003a; Halfacree, 2006). As work in this area has progressed, commentators have moved beyond studying representations of the countryside as idyllic and towards texts that show the dynamic, fluid and multi-experiential nature of rural living from a range of viewpoints. In doing so, academics with an interest in the countryside are using a wider range of media sources to engage with different discourses and spatialities in the countryside (Phillips et al., 2001). However, despite moves in other areas of social sciences to engage with non-visual media (Smith, 1997), less attention has been given to music and musical performance in the representation of rurality. This is despite a surge of interest in the geographies of music (Anderson et al., 2005; Connell and Gibson, 2003; Leyshon et al., 1995; Rawding, 2007; Smith, 1997, 2000) and some apparently close connections between particular rural places and musical styles (Gold, 1998; Johnston, 2006; Matless 2005; Stradling, 1998).

A focus on music has the potential to contribute to rural studies in three ways. First, music can play an important role in the social construction of identity and the promotion of particular places (Hudson, 2006; Kong, 1995; Revill, 2000; Smith, 2000). The association of songs with specific places meant that music is often associated with national or regional identity through its celebration of local places, characters and landscapes (Storey, 2001). While some attention has been given to these processes, work on the relationship between music and place has been rather selective in its geography and genre, tending to focus on 'mainstream', popular music in urban locations (Halfacree and Kitchin, 1996; Hollows and Milestone, 1997;

Meegan, 1995). Yet music can also contribute to the marketing and promotion of rural places, whether it is through country music festivals in Australia (Gibson and Davidson, 2004), the recruitment of 'traditional music' as a potent ingredient in the appeal of rural Ireland (Kneafsey, 2002), or the heritage marketing of places such as 'Elgar country' in Worcestershire, UK (Stradling, 1998). However, identities are rarely fixed, stable or given and are constantly shifting and evolving (Brace, 2003). Significantly, music has the potential not only to reveal much about *identity*, but *identities*. Music is important as a medium by which individuals develop personal attachments to a complex suite of emotions, experiences, and in many cases, places. Indeed, a glance at many people's music collections reveals 'the sheer profusion of identities and selves that we possess' (Stokes, 1994, p.3).

Second, music from specific rural localities has the potential to represent the lives, grievances and celebrations of those living in rural areas. Kong (1995) notes that 'country' music (originally associated with the southern states of the USA) is capable of evoking symbolic meanings of rurality held by those living, or seeking to live, in rural places. Similarly, Bell (2006) suggests that country and western music can be interpreted as an image of 'rustic authenticity' that portrays 'a nostalgia for paradise, symbolised by a yearning for a simpler way of life, a looking back to an uncomplicated place and time' that is important to its listeners (Kong, 1995, p.8).

Finally, listening (Morton, 2005), performing (Revill, 2005) or dancing to (Revill, 2004) music is a corporeal performance that has the potential to engage people with places in emotional ways. It has also been recognised that music from or about places makes important contributions to the 'sonic geographies' (Matless, 2005) of particular regions and the emotional geographies of people's lives therein (Kong, 1996). In the same way that there has been interest in various activities and

rituals that engage people with the rural landscape, a focus on the performance of music has the potential to contribute to hybridised understandings of rurality that attempt to articulate the ‘mystery, spirituality and ghostliness of rural places’ (Cloke, 2003b p.6).

To begin exploring some of these themes, this paper continues by examining folk music and its association, imagined or otherwise, with rural places (Boyes, 1993). The following sections examine folk music and how it has been revived and developed in England. The main part of the paper uses the example of ‘Show of Hands, a contemporary English folk band, to examine the value of folk music to rural studies.

1.1 Folk Music

Folk music has come to be associated with a wide range of styles, influences and social practices. It has become closely linked with an oral tradition in which songs are passed down between generations and/or places through performance, rather than formal transcription. A rather normative definition of folk music is that it is:

‘collectively owned, of ancient and anonymous authorship and transmitted across generations by word of mouth; a canon celebrating life in the past and urging change for tomorrow, the performance being on simple instruments in natural settings .. the joyful performance by specially gifted but not ‘professional’ musicians’ (Ennis, 1992 p.88 quoted in Connell and Gibson, 2003, p.30).

Nettl (1965) suggests that these practices led to the emergence of 'standards' that are accepted and maintained in particular forms in particular places. Consequently, rather dualistic comparisons have been drawn between folk that represents the 'historic practices of small (often by implication rural) communities' (Kassabin, 1999 p.114) and popular or mainstream music that is 'contemporary, mass produced and consumed' (Kassabin, 1999 p.116). However, this binary does not withstand close scrutiny (Brocken, 2003; Kent 2007)¹.

Ethnomusicologists have used sound, singing style, form, polyphony, rhythm, tempo, melody and scales to link particular types of folk music with particular places (Nettl, 1965). It is still possible to identify music that is based on oral traditions, regional styles of playing and local instruments, especially in less-economically developed countries (Nettl et al 1992; Nettl, 2005). However, folk music is more widely recognised as a constantly evolving hybrid of many different musical styles and forms generated by diverse economic, cultural and institutional influences (Nettl, 1965). This is evidenced by a series of 'revivals' that have occurred in folk music in different parts of the world at different times when traditional tunes were re-discovered, re-imagined and re-played using different technologies, instruments and styles by new generations of musicians (McCann, 1995, Vallely, 1999; Broken, 2003).

Folk music is therefore a broad cannon that has some elements of, or at least associations with, more traditional forms described above (Connell and Gibson, 2003; Revill and Gold, 2007). Thus, contemporary folk music may be played by professional musicians to high standards for commercial gain. Yet co-existing with

¹ This is summarised by the quotation "All music is folk music, I've never heard a horse sing" that has been attributed to various artists (Nettl 2005, p.357)

professionalization is a strong amateur scene that attempts to maintain (or re-invent) some of the many 'traditions' (or at least imagined traditions) of folk such as communal playing by amateur musicians. Labels such as 'traditional', 'folk-rock', 'punk-folk' 'nu-folk', 'roots' or 'world' are largely meaningless terms that have been applied to the music industry to categorise their products. They nevertheless serve to highlight the diversity of the genre, hinting at both the tensions and innovations that have shaped contemporary folk music.

It is therefore important to study folk music in a way that recognises it is a complex product of different, sometimes competing, discourses rather than seeking to distinguish whether it conforms to particular, normative definitions. In this vein, the following sections start to explore the associations between folk music and rurality. They argue that the countryside is often a prominent, but by no means dominant, discourse in folk music, but these associations are more imagined than real. Given the breadth of folk music, it does not seek to provide comprehensive account of the genre (see Nettl, 1965; Boyes 1993; Broken, 2003; BBC 2006) but, instead, focuses on English folk music to explore its value to rural studies.

English folk music provides a timely case study because it is currently enjoying a resurgence of interest. This is the latest in a series of revivals that has seen English folk music re-discovered and re-interpreted in different, hybridised ways. Each revival has engaged with rurality in different ways. Opinion varies on the timing and significance of each revival (Brocken 2003, Connell and Gibson, 2004, BBC 2006) and, rather like academic paradigms, new revivals have built upon previous ones rather than entirely superseding them. Nevertheless, a number of key developments can be identified, which are briefly discussed in the following sections.

1.2 The first folk revival: imagining the village

The first English folk revival is associated with 'collectors' of folk music, such as Rev Sabine Baring-Gould, Cecil Sharp (Gold and Revill, 2006) and Percy Grainger (Matthews, 1999) in the late Victorian/Edwardian period. These formally trained musicians collected 'living songs' (those that had been performed and passed on by oral tradition) from rustic characters living in different (mainly rural) parts of England (Roud et al, 2003). These tunes were transcribed for first time and published in portfolios such as 'Songs of the West' (Baring Gould et al., 1905) and the 'Cornish Song Book' (Dunstan, 1929). Their activities were given impetus by the formation of The Folk-Song Society in 1898 and the English Folk Dance Society in 1911. Their work is credited with 'saving' many folk tunes and dances, bringing folk music to a wider audience and contributing to the commercial growth of 'world music' (Boyes, 1993; Brocken, 2003; Revill and Gold, 2007).

However, many collections of folk music were written and edited to reflect standard musical notations of the era to such an extent that English musical conventions and styles were imposed on folk music in other parts of the world (Gold and Revill, 2006). The revival 'had less to do with preserving the past (which in the sense of rural community life was ever more distant) than with invoking a particular historic image' (Connell and Gibson, 2001, p.38). This first revival therefore reflected an 'Imagined Village' (Boyes 1993) rather the continuation of a rural, oral tradition. Despite this, the work of early collectors started a discourse that emphasised the 'authenticity' of folk music as 'an indicator of a musical past, as a historical meter in

the re-establishment of a living dialogue with a tradition' (Brocken, 2003, p.89). Such views fail to take account of how migration, social mobility and cultural hybridity have influenced the evolution and playing of folk music (Connell and Gibson, 2004; Gold and Revill, 2006). These influences became even more obvious in subsequent revivals.

1.3 The Second Folk Revival: Politics and Counterculture

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the growth of left-wing protest songs by the likes of Bert Lloyd and Ewan MacColl (Brocken, 2003). Lloyd toured cities, rather than the countryside, and MacColl, initially inspired by the American folk revival and collections of Alan Lomax, also wrote, collected and performed working-class songs from English urban areas, epitomised by his song 'Dirty Old Town' (Brocken, 2003, BBC 2006). Although MacColl introduced a radical, protest element to British folk, he maintained the discourse of 'authenticity' and 'tradition'. In an era that saw the establishment of folk clubs across England that gave performance spaces to enthusiastic amateurs as well as professional players, MacColl's policy was only to allow singers to perform songs from their own country of origin (for example, English people should only sing songs from England) in response to American skiffle influences in mainstream music (Brocken, 2003).

During the 1960s folk progressed in a number of different, perhaps competing, directions. Despite a discourse of English authenticity, the American folk revival, driven by Bob Dylan and the re-discovery of Woodie Guthie, became increasingly influential and inspired a number of key English folk artists such as Ralph McTell. At the same time English fiddle tunes were being re-interpreted by

Martin Carthy and inspiring new generations of players. His version of Scarborough Fair, for example, led to the well-known cover by Simon and Garfunkel.

The late 1960s and early 1970s saw the retrenchment of folk music and folk clubs. However, it also witnessed the development of folk-rock as artists such as Fairport Convention, Steeleye Span, Mike Oldfield and Pentangle to produce a hybrid sound that drew upon folk and (electric) rock influences with commercial success. More widely, folk-rock was part of a counter-cultural movement that linked the making and playing of folk music with rural places (Halfacree 2006). Increasingly, outdoor festivals, linked to versions of the rural idyll, replaced urban folk clubs as repositories of playing and performance of folk and on folk-rock music. As folk-rock grew in popularity (as well as other form of music such as punk), more traditional forms of folk music declined and the end of the 1970s was a moribund period for the genre in England (BBC 2006).

The 1980s re-established closer links between protest and folk music through singers such as Billy Bragg, himself influenced by both folk and punk, that reflected the political division of the Thatcher era. Meanwhile, the rural festival circuit inspired the rise of New Age Travellers seeking an ideological break from urban poverty through rural lifestyles that engaged in new forms of politics and environmental protest. This movement was supported by its own folk and folk-rock bands, such as the Levellers, that promoted radical views on rurality and rural living (Lowe and Shaw, 1993). In time, however, legislation led to a decline in travelling and the absorption of their bands into more mainstream musical activities.

1.4 The Current Folk Revival: The next generation

Recently, folk music has undergone another revival. Central to its growth are a number of young artists whose work connects with key folk traditions. Some are closely associated with particular rural places including Seth Lakeman (Dartmoor) and Kate Rusby (Yorkshire). Interestingly, family connections are important with a young generation of players emerging from their parents' shadows including Eliza Carthy (daughter of Martin Carthy); Benji Fitzpatrick (son of John Fitzpatrick) and latest generation of the Copper Family. Other bands, such as 'Bellowhead' and 'The Imagined Village'² have taken contemporary, energetic and innovative approaches to playing the tunes originally collected in the Victorian era. These artists and many others, together with media support, a growth in festivals and a plethora of independent (often self-owned) record labels, have helped to bring folk music to a wider audience.

1.5 A Place for Folk Music in Rural Studies

The brief account above has sought to chart *some* of the ways that folk music has developed in England. Whilst acknowledging that folk music is not exclusively associated with the countryside, it has traced some of the connections between different styles of folk music and different views of rurality. Interestingly, folk music is associated with different imaginations of the rural, from pastoral to radical. It is also evident that urban and rural folk music alike can provide a vehicle for political movement and protest.

² 'The Imagined Village' was inspired by Boyes' (1993) book of the same name and is a collaboration of various 'folk' and 'world music' artists that has received much media attention. They seek to use 'traditional song to honour modern-day England in all its diversity' (www.imaginedvillage.com). The result is a hybrid of traditional and the modern, the local and the global including contemporary retellings of traditional songs such as 'Hard Times of Old England' by Billy Bragg and 'Tam Lyn' by Benjamin Zephaniah to address respectively contemporary issues of rural hardship and the alienation of immigrants.

Although folk music has changed considerably in its style, there are also strong discourses linked to tradition and authenticity that have also affected the way it has been studied by scholars. Initial work on folk music attempted to place and fix particular folk styles in particular geographical regions (see Kong 1995 for a summary of this work) in manner that was 'drearly functionalist and timeless, with limited relevance in relation to the dynamic nature of contemporary cultures' (Connell and Gibson, 2001 p.32).

More recent research has therefore engaged with music as a way of conveying myriad experiences and emotions with an intensity that escapes other forms of media (Kong, 1995). Music has the ability to move, inspire and motivate the listener in an equally diverse ways, according to personal taste and cultural norms. Although Kong asserts that music can produce and reproduce social systems, it must also be appreciated that music can only be understood in multiple, relational ways that take account of the conditions of production, form of the song, readings, society and impacts (Johnson, 1996).

Driven by current academic interest in performance (Thrift, 2007), researchers have attempted to communicate the sensory experiences associated with music. A significant body of literature is emerging on the playing of music in particular places (Anderson et al., 2005; Morton, 2005; Revill, 2004; Kent, 2007; Knox 2008) that now encompasses a spectrum of geographical scales, from the national and regional to the spaces of specific music venues. Studies of the micro-geographies of playing, dancing and listening have highlighted the power of music in 'creating geographies of inclusion and exclusion, inviting communal identification, and making rhetorical link between material evidence and ideological aspiration' (Revill, 2000, page 610).

There is therefore a need to examine the intersections of folk music and rurality in a relational manner. Rather than using folk music to impose a binary between 'real' and 'imagined' versions of rurality, it can instead be used to understand rurality as a 'complex interweaving of power relations, social conventions, discursive practices and institutional forces that are constantly combining and recombining' (Cloke 2006, p.24). Halfacree (2006) also notes that rural localities, their representation and the varied experiences of lives lived out within them are not only interwoven but relational according to wider power structures and political influences. These are reflected in his three fold model that identifies the relative importance of 'rural locality' (shaped by changes in production and consumption); 'representations of the rural' (dominated by the views of powerful agencies but challenged by other voices) and the 'everyday lives of the rural' (the often fractured and incoherent experiences of rural life, both communal and individual) in shaping rural space, identity and coherence.

To begin exploring these issues this paper examines the work of 'Show of Hands', a popular duo who have played a strong part in the current revival of English folk music. They are closely associated with songs about the countryside and, specifically, the English Westcountry. Three main issues are examined. First, the paper examines the musical style of Show of Hands in order to explore how hybridised, yet distinctive, styles of music emerge in particular places.

Second, attention is given to demonstrating how Show of Hands' hybrid musical style has become closely associated with the Southwest of England³. Hudson (2006, p.628) has argued that music can engender deep attachments to

³ It is not the intention of this article to make a historically accurate inventory of Westcountry folk songs. This has been given attention by musical historians and readers interested in this are referred to the work of Martin Graebe and colleagues (<http://www.greenjack.btinternet.co.uk/>)

particular places although, as this section has demonstrated, there is scant connection between place and 'authentic' local styles. Instead Hudson recognises that places experience 'ongoing mixing of different musical cultural traditions' that create new hybrid musical identities that fuse 'local and global, traditional and modern' in ways that both destroy yet enforce local attachments between music and place. Attention is thus given to the impact of Show of Hands' music beyond its immediate performance space (Revill, 2000).

Finally, within these spatial and hybrid contexts, attention is given to the ways in which their music represents the 'everyday lives of the rural'. The aim is not to assess whether their work provides 'an authentic voice' for rural people but, rather, how this form of media can represent multiple issues, emotions and people in ways that escape other forms of media (Kong, 1995) or, as Halfacree's model suggests, how musical representations of rural space can impact on rural locality and everyday lives in that locality.

The following section introduces the band before examining their work in relation to these themes.

2. Show of Hands: An Introduction

The band 'Show of Hands' (SoH) were formed in Devon 1992 by Steve Knightley and Phil Beer (Figure 1). Their musical approach has been variously labelled as acoustic 'roots' or 'folk', although it is influenced by a wide range of musical styles including blues, country and rock as well as traditional music from other countries including Ireland, India and Chile (Robinson, 1997).

Their work comprises mainly of original songs written by Knightley (1996, 2001, 2007) and is supplemented by performances of traditional songs or instrumentals as well covers of contemporary popular or folk songs. Knightley usually sings the main vocal parts and provides rhythm on mandocello⁴, guitar, concertina or cuatro. He is accompanied by Beer on vocals and a range of acoustic stringed instruments including the violin, guitar (slide, Spanish, folk, tenor), mandolin and cuatro.

Knightley and Beer began playing together in pubs and bars on a part-time, casual basis. Prior to this Beer was a professional musician in various folk-rock bands and Knightley had been working as a teacher. Their performances attracted a growing audience as well as increasing interest in their original material. As a result the band became full-time, releasing its first commercial album in 1992. Since then the band has continued in a professional capacity, regularly releasing albums and maintaining a constant touring schedule.

While the band maintains its identity as a duo, their work has involved contributions from other guest musicians. For instance, over the past five years, Miranda Sykes, a talented double-bass player and vocalist, has regularly performed with Knightley and Beer, adding depth to their live sound and vocal arrangements. All three are regular contributors to other artists' albums and periodically release solo or collaborative works with other people.

⁴ The mandocello is an eight-stringed instrument that is a member of the mandolin family. It is tuned two octaves below the mandolin, providing a distinct and rich tone with which to accompany songs (www.hobgoblin.co.uk). The cuatro used by Show of Hands is of Venezuelan descent, has four strings and resembles a small Spanish guitar or ukulele. See Knightley (2001) for technical details Show of Hands' instruments.

As a result Show of Hands have emerged as one of the most successful roots bands in England, releasing 17 albums (Table 1) on their own record label and amassing a strong following of fans, especially in the Southwest. Although they mainly play in smaller venues, SoH have also performed at the Royal Albert Hall in London three times and have headlined many UK festivals. Over 15,000 people are listed on their mailing list and they are supported by a vibrant web-community known as 'Longdogs'. However, despite these successes, the band has not troubled the mainstream music charts.

Figure 1: Show of Hands: Phil Beer (left) and Steve Knightley (right) in a publicity shot taken by the Exe Estuary that promotes the duo's connection with rurality and place. Source: www.showofhands.co.uk



Show of Hands' original material is written by Steve Knightley. In keeping with folk traditions, many of his songs are stories that tell of the lives and experiences of people living in the countryside or on the coast. A pertinent feature of their music is an emphasis on the English Southwest (Figure 2), a region that is recognised

formally as one of the most rural localities in England (Countryside Agency, 2004). Although the area is presented as a unified region in some official discourses, it encompasses a diverse range of settlements (including large urban conurbations) landscapes, places and people and, consequently, its identity as a coherent region is politically contested, not least by Cornish nationalists (Jones and MacLeod, 2004). Show of Hands' music simultaneously celebrates the region and recognises the variation within it.

Figure 2: The Southwest of England showing the imagined location of some of the songs discussed in the text.

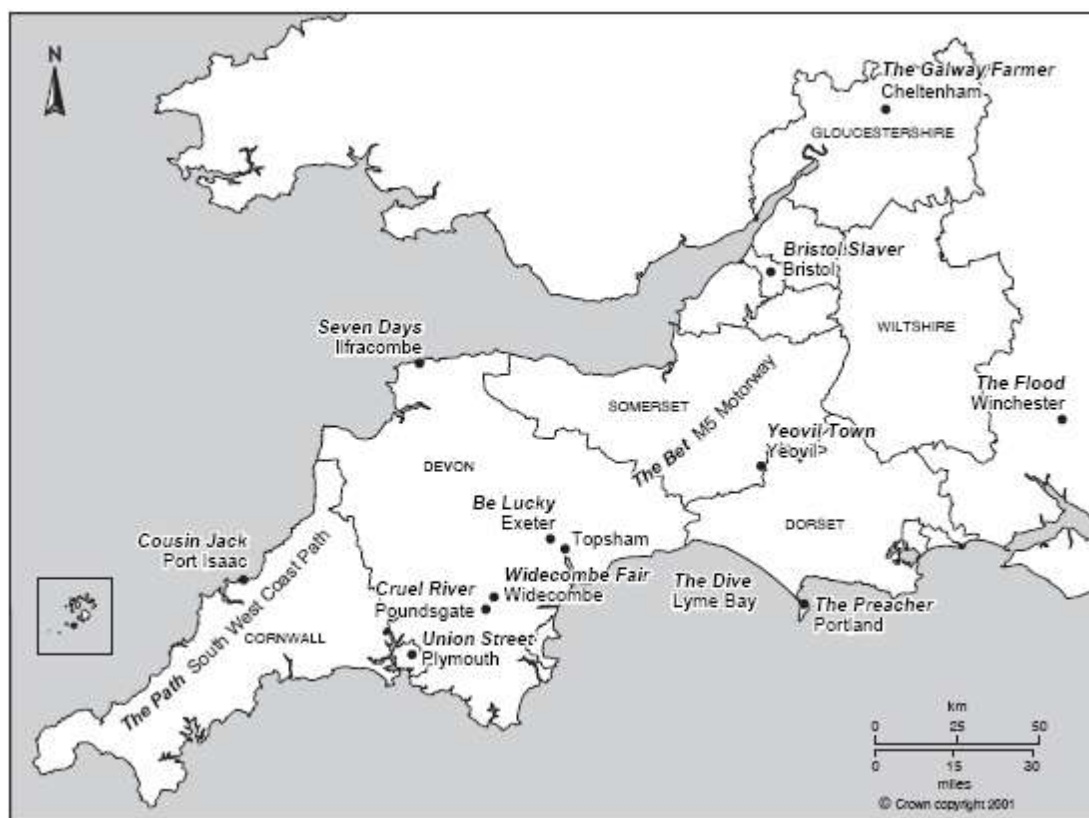


Table 1: Studio and Live Albums released by 'Show of Hands' and Steve Knightley on their 'Hands-on Music' Label. Source: www.showofhands.co.uk

Title	Year
<i>Show of Hands Live at Bridport</i>	1992

<i>Beat about the Bush</i>	1994
<i>Lie of the Land</i>	1995
<i>Backlog 1987-1991</i>	1995
<i>Live at the Albert Hall</i>	1996
<i>Dark Fields</i>	1997
<i>Folk Music</i>	1998
<i>Track of Words (solo album by Steve Knightley)</i>	1999
<i>Covers</i>	2000
<i>Cold Frontier</i>	2001
<i>Cold Cuts</i>	2002
<i>The Path</i>	2003
<i>Country Life</i>	2003
<i>As you were</i>	2005
<i>Witness</i>	2006
<i>Cruel River (solo album by Steve Knightley)</i>	2007
<i>Roots: The Best of Show of Hands</i>	2007

The following sections examine their work in more detail. They are based on two main sources of information. First, semi-structured interviews with Steve Knightley and Phil Beer were conducted in their home town of Topsham in February 2007. These interviews were arranged via the band's manager and both respondents were sent a copy of the interview schedule prior to the meeting. We interviewed Knightley and Beer separately in two forty-five minute sessions. The conversations were recorded and scratch notes were also taken by two other observers at the interview. The recorded versions were transcribed and coded etically. Second, we conducted a textual analysis of Show of Hand's work. These tended to emphasis the lyrical content of the songs, rather than a de-construction of their musical characteristics. This reflects our training as geographers with

knowledge of textual analysis rather than formally trained musicians with the authority to interpret the musical structure of songs. Particular attention was given to the songs and albums discussed by the respondents in the interviews. The interviews and textual analysis were supplemented by secondary data about the band published in the folk music press.

3. 'World music from the Westcountry': hybridity and locality

3.1 Music from the Westcountry

The Southwest locality is important in the production, consumption and imagination of Show of Hands' music. Their songs are often written *about* and recorded *in* the Westcountry using locally produced instruments and distributed from their own record label based in Topsham, Devon. Some of their work is also based on traditional music from the Westcountry such as their recording of 'Haul Away Joe', a song taken from Dunstan's (1929) 'Cornish Song Book'. Consequently, they have marketed their work as 'World Music from the Westcountry':

SK: "That's our catch phrase to try and say to people ... that there is music that is based in a location and a landscape as much as all the other places like Louisiana"

Yet their music does not feature a coherent, identifiable Westcountry *style*, even though the region acts as a muse in terms of the lyrics and themes of their songs. Yet, as Connell and Gibson (2003) point out, the strict association of style with place is largely meaningless given that migration and globalisation have led to the mixing of musical styles. Thus, although SoH's music is from and about the

Southwest locality, their musical influences and style draw from far beyond the region. Thus, as both Beer and Knightley are at pains to point out, their work is not part of a traditional Westcountry style of playing:

PB "There's no drawing on existing traditions in a purely handed down sense because of course none of them have existed since the turn of the last century except in very isolated pockets"

SK: "we don't have the bagpipes or the fiddle or the flamenco guitar or the steel guitar. You know, we don't have the local sound".

Thus, Beer will draw on a range of instruments and styles that originate in diverse localities to support songs about the Southwest:

PB: "it can be a fiddle, a viola or a bass violin, something stringy or it can be a slide guitar or it can be one of the other instruments. You know ukulele, cuatro or mandolin or it's a tenor guitar at the moment."

He often plays slide guitar, which draws on American blues influences, rather than English folk music. Similar comments have been made about Knightley's vocals:

SK "I'm sometimes accused of singing in an American accent because the Westcountry only comes out on [the letter] r and when you sing a lot it can sound American. Obviously, because the American accent derives largely from this part of the world".

Show of Hands' musical style illustrates Hudson's (2006) assertion that regional music is a fusion of 'local and global, traditional and modern'. Show of Hands have further enforced their hybrid musical identity by collaborating with artists

from other countries including India ('The Train') and Chile ('Santiago') and, more recently, with World Music' producers on their last studio album, 'Witness'.

'Witness' exemplifies how the digital recording techniques contribute to hybrid musical styles. Unlike their concerts, songs on the albums are not 'live performances' that are recorded in a single 'take'. Instead, digital technology is utilised to produce and edited to a high level of precision, a departure from the imagined 'raw spontaneity' of folk music:

PB: "It's cutting and pasting. You can take something from somewhere and put it anywhere else ... so in a chorus of a song if a word sounds funny in one place but fine in another chorus, you cut and paste and see if they dovetail together"

PB: "he's [the producer of 'Witness'] spent hours and hours and hours agonising over where to lay a bell beat: do we put it there or a nano-second earlier? Because it matters, it actually matters where it falls".

Moreover, live performances by the band are also enhanced with modern sound technology. Although their instruments are acoustic they are amplified using direct input methods and a public address system. Such performances, as well as the use of studio techniques to present a polished product, are reminders that Show of Hands are a commercial band whose studio and live work is driven, at least in part, to provide them with a living. 'Witness' was Show of Hands' best-selling album but was criticised by some long-standing fans for its use of electronic drumbeats:

PB: 'the simple point is at the end of the day this album is outselling any others we have made and it's got us a new audience and you

could cynically say we've sacrificed some of our old audience to gain a new one.'

Broken (2003) has suggested that competing discourses of authenticity and commercialism have caused angst that has hindered the growth of folk music. But he argues that the two are not mutually exclusive. Thus, SoH have the usual trappings of a commercial band (www.showofhands.co.uk/commerce), yet much of their commercial success has been based on 'word of mouth' recommendation by fans. Contrary to copyright law, the band encourages their audience to copy CDs and pass them onto their friends. This might seem an unusual step given that such actions might reduce the profits of their own record label but to Knightley, copying CDs is a process that mirrors the oral tradition of folk songs being passed around between groups of people or friends:

SK "We've always made a point of getting people to copy the songs. ... Traditionally all the collecting and ownership of music were based on people being employed to sing it and collecting. .. You make the audience feel good and encourage them rather than making them feel guilty about breaking the law or letting you down."

The internet has also been important in spreading the 'word of mouth'. The lyrics and chords to SoH's songs have also been published by fans on the internet that have helped his songs to be performed by amateur musicians of various standards in different spaces. While this is a departure from the oral tradition of learning folk songs from word of mouth, it does represent the passing on of songs, on a communal basis, from one person to another in a fairly informal manner (Ennis 1992, Broken, 2003).

As a result of this commercial success, SoH have contributed to the geographical imaginations of the rural Southwest by people both in and well beyond the immediate locality. This is driven by an approach to song-writing and playing that emphasises the locality of the Southwest.

3.2 Music of the West Country

The region is Knightley's home and his song-writing reflects his interests in its histories and everyday geographies. On the one hand, his songs draw out the different histories and geographies of the Southwest and recognise the social and landscape diversity of the region. On the other, they tend to enforce well-known representations. This is so much so that in 2003 the band released an instrumental album, 'The Path', in association with the National Trust, English Heritage and the (then) Countryside Agency to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the South-West long-distance coast path. Other songs about miners in Cornwall ('Cousin Jack') or Dorset ('The Preacher'), the slave trade in Bristol ('The Bristol Slaver'); fishing in North Devon ('Seven Days'); wreckers on the south Devon coast ('Tall Ships') and the Cheltenham festival ('The Galway Farmer') draw upon and re-enforce well-known associations with these areas.

Cornwall has a strong association with fishing and mining, as symbolised by its county crest. The term 'Cousin Jack' is a local colloquialism that refers to the Cornish Diaspora of deep rock miners in Australia, South Africa and the Americas. Knightley's eponymous song (Figure 2) at once celebrates and mourns the decline of mining in Cornwall whilst praising the enterprise, spirit and graft of its miners who are hewn, it seems/seams, from 'a hole in the ground'. The song also celebrates other

well-established dimensions of Cornish identity with its references to Methodism ('when John Wesley gave us a voice'), fishing and language.

The song has become something of an anthem in Cornwall and is frequently played by others in amateur folk sessions. To an extent the song's popularity has arisen because it simultaneously re-enforces formal and radical representations of Cornwall. On the one hand it draws upon well-known constructions of Cornish identity that are already widely celebrated in the county. The song projects national Cornish identity, recognising Cornwall as 'a land' with a (lost) language that is occupied by 'English living in our houses'. It reflects the resurgence in Cornish nationalism (Jones and MacLeod, 2004) that has sought to distinguish the county from the wider region of the Southwest.

Figure 2: The Lyrics of 'Cousin Jack' written by Steve Knightley

Cousin Jack
(Knightley)

Verse 1: This land is barren and broken,

Scarred like the face of the moon,

Our tongue is no longer spoken

Towns all around face ruin.

Will there be work in New Brunswick?

Will I find gold in the Cape?

If I tunnel my way to Australia,

Oh will I never escape?

Chorus: Where there's a mine or a hole in the ground.

That's where I'm going to,

That's where I'm bound,

So look for me under the lode,

And inside the vein,

Where the copper the clay, the arsenic and tin,

Run in your blood they get under your skin,

I'll leave the county behind,

I'm not coming back,

Oh follow me down Cousin Jack.

Verse 2: The soil was too poor to make Eden,

Granite and sea left no choice,

Though vision of heaven sustained us,

When John Wesley gave us a voice.

Did Joseph once come to St Michael's Mount?

Two thousand years pass in a dream

When you're working your way in the darkness

Deep in the heart of the seam.

Verse 3: I dream of a bridge across the Tamar.

It opens us up to the East.

I see English living in our houses.

The Spanish fish in our seas.

Besides Cornwall, Knightley uses other familiar geographical fragments of the Southwest in his work:

'I focus on a particular part of the Westcountry. I can picture exactly which side of the hill a certain song describes, which fields the hunter hunts and the poacher traps or which cliffs on Portland the preacher walks. The prosaic doesn't have to be mundane or banal - I think that

whatever your world is, that's what you have to describe.' (Steve Knightley quoted in Robinson, 1997)

This attention to local detail has endeared his work to many who have lived in or visited the Southwest. For example, the ghost story told in 'The Bet' begins with:

'Driving down the M5, early in the morning,

February, bitter cold, the moon shines

South of Bristol, down the M5, news report says 'motorway closed ahead',

So I turn off down south through The Levels to Langport,

it's a long shot, I made a bet ...

So 10 miles later in the landscape, flat fields and canals, dykes and ditches'

Traversing the M5 - and its periodic delays - has become such an essential ritual for regular travellers to the Southwest Peninsula that listeners are drawn into the song. Even those not familiar with the locality or road will have doubtless have been diverted at some point in their lives from a motorway along a quiet country lane. Knightley thus transforms a specific stretch of motorway, mundane yet inescapably familiar for so many, into an evocative thread of attachment for the listener.

Examples of other place specific songs include:

'It was ten years ago I did a show in place called Yeovil town' (Yeovil Town)

'November noon, leaving the docks, heading Southwest from Orcombe Rocks' (The Dive)⁵.

As these quotes also suggest, Knightley's songs are often peppered with the local vernacular terms, which contribute to evoking a sense of place:

SK: "Since I was a kid I heard 'River Dart every year you claim a heart'. I've been to Poundsgate since I was five and I've always know that there is a local saying about the river and I wanted to get it into a song. And I've done it. It's quite a Seth-like song⁶ about a guy whose girl falls in and he can't rescue her ... It's getting the local expression in".

These songs contribute to, and draw upon, the sonic geographies (Matless, 2005) of the Southwest. Part of the appeal of SoH's songs derives from skilful use of the familiar and everyday to summon a sense of place. The emotional attachment to places extends to artificial features such as roads and buildings as well as more 'natural' aspects of the landscape such as the sea. Thus, Lyme Bay is credited in the album notes for providing the atmospheric sounds of the sea in 'The Dive'. Similarly the A35 road is specifically credited in 'The Bet'.

Beer also contributes to a musical sense of place by producing atmospheric sounds on the violin through the use of 'false fingering' and harmonics, which he refers to self-deprecatingly as 'whale noises'. Yet he accepts these techniques do not draw on a 'traditional' or local music style:

⁵ Orcombe Rocks are located close to Exmouth.

⁶ Seth Lakeman is a young, successful folk musician from Dartmoor. His work, which includes original material and contemporary re-workings of local folk songs, is usually based on historical events, myths or legends. He has collaborated with Knightley on a number of songs.

PB: *'That's about creating atmosphere than any form of tradition or acquired stuff. No one's sitting in a pub playing jolly tunes making whale noises.'*

Nevertheless these sounds, inspired by the wind and the sea, help to re-create the soundscapes of the Southwest. It is feasible that over time they may become associated with a contemporary Southwest sound.

The places featured in SoH songs also set a dramatic backdrop for songs that tell stories. For example 'Widecombe Fair' draws on the traditional folk song of the same name and alludes to characters and lines within it. However, it is a far more sinister song, replacing the joviality of the original with a dark tale telling the murder of two teenagers on the moor. Dartmoor is evoked lyrically ('I'll meet you at the crossways, at noon on the Whiddon Down road. We all hit the road again, four miles to the fairground...') and also musically; the song is often performed without any amplification (notably at the Albert Hall in 2007), helping to create acoustically the sense of distance and openness associated with the sonic geographies of the moor.

Show of Hands mix musical styles, fusing traditional and modern ways of performing music. In this sense, there is nothing vernacular about their work. Yet, because of their hybrid yet original style, their work has found an audience across and beyond the region⁷. Instead of presenting the Southwest as a closed region, their songs develop a relational sense of place that has meaning both in and outside the locality. In this way, their songs might be understood as part of a trans-border network that links and performs different spatial identities (Jones and MacLeod, 2004). These are explored in the following section.

⁷ This is evidenced by numerous awards including winning 'Best Live Act' in the 2004 BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards. In 2006, they won a poll organised by Devon County Council to name the 'Greatest Devonian' (see www.devon.gov.uk/press_greatest_devonian_-_result).

4. Regional Identity

Relationships between place and regional identity are ambiguous and hard to quantify. Aspects of regional identity are used in the formal marketing of place but, more significantly, it contributes to an intangible attachment to place and well-being (Hudson, 2006). However, region and regional identity are not 'closed' but, rather, are imagined, placed and understood by networks that cross over and circulate within officially defined regional boundaries (Jones and MacLeod, 2004). As Stokes (1994, p.4) notes, music can play an important role in 'transcending the limitations of our own place in the world, of constructing trajectories rather than boundaries across space'.

One example of how place is recruited to accentuate association and identity in SoH's music is when Knightley overlays additional place names while performing (beyond those in his 'original' lyrics):

'All the way to Canada, America, Australia, South Africa, where there's a mine ...

I'm leaving the county, all the sad towns forever, farewell Launceston, Bodmin, Camborne, Redruth' ('Cousin Jack', live version, 2005)

'Seaton, Sidmouth, Exmouth, round to Torquay, Kingsbridge, Salcombe, it's always the same, the same story' ('Undertow')

'Through the Westcountry towns I wander: Bridgwater, Crewkerne and Chard, Axminster, Bridport' ('The Bet')

These brief, rather haunting litanies fix the songs geographically; they reinforce the attachment to the Southwest, so that both residents and non-residents

may identify, even if briefly and temporarily, with distinctive places and their associations. Yet the issues discussed in the lyrics are not confined to particular places in the Westcountry. For those listening in the region they are celebrated as being 'part of' that place rather than anywhere else, but for those listening elsewhere these places form points of comparison with places better known to them. The result is that regions are linked rather than separated by local detail. The audience understands the places and people in Show of Hand's work in relation to other spaces.

It is perhaps no surprise that Show of Hands' audiences are largely, but not exclusively, from the region:

SK: 'The bulk of our audience I suppose is from the south coast ... so much so that in parts of Dorset and Devon. I suspect that we have the profile, and people have told me that we have the profile, of a mainstream musician in terms of the numbers who have heard of us.'

It is significant how localised references to places strike a chord outside the Southwest. Wherever 'Cousin Jack' is performed, it usually provokes a lusty sing-along from the audience. It is a stark illustration of the direct emotive appeal of folk music when played live (Morton, 2005) and demonstrates that music can help to evoke intangible connections to places that extend well outside the rural locality being portrayed in a song (Hudson, 2006) or, as Stokes (1994, p4) notes people can use music 'to locate themselves in quite idiosyncratic and plural ways.' Music helps people 'become' something beyond their assigned dominant identities – to join 'others' via music. This brings to mind the identification, conscious or otherwise, of

middle class audiences with vaguely formed, but passionately *imagined*, Cornish outsiders. Songs invite us to imagine, to empathise with and ‘be close to’ very different others for a fleeting moment.

Unlike the patterns described in Stokes (1994), whereby music consolidates, constructs identities and ethnicities for assumed ‘authentic’ members of social formations, Show of Hands surreptitiously invite in ‘outsiders’ and *temporarily* enrol them into alignment with other places and people. Music allows otherwise conservative audiences to *sense* rebellion, resistance, and other forms of transient and temporary departure from their more conventional personae, ‘position’ in society and even personalities. This invokes the ancient tradition of music as escape, as transformation (e.g. from restrained to wild, from undemonstrative, phlegmatic existence to passionate). Music *per se* surely stimulates altered consciousness and emotional states – and *lyrics* can also alter their mundane everyday sensitivities and attitudes. The live performance of folk music is especially oriented to such pressure on everyday emotions – to prick us, if only briefly, out of our mundane, reasoned and apparently stabilized ways of existing and into altered levels of sympathy, anger, and other emotions. Perhaps songs offer associational unity in diversity, via their kaleidoscopic West Country prism.

Certainly music’s capacity to lure listeners and participants into temporary emotionally-exotic terrain is also reflected in the enthusiastic search for, and promotion of ‘Celtic’ music – often by those who are not native speakers of Celtic languages or who do not even claim legitimacy by birthright. Brace (2003, p135) notes that ‘to feel and understand something of Cornwall depended not on being able to trace your Cornish ancestry or speak the language but in the sense of being connected to a place unlike.’ Music provides a more accessible route to Celtic

affiliation than the much more problematic learning of the language or proof of 'authentic' descent (Chapman, 1994).

Knightley's explanation for these phenomena is that local detail is important:

SK: "the more local and specific you make your songs the more universal their appeal seems. In a sense its self evident because if Bruce Springsteen sings about one town or Appalachian mining or highways in Nebraska he's making stuff right down to the detail. The world is interested in it... very often it's the small scale that reveals the big picture ... it's that thing about the specific and the universal. It does seem to touch people."

References to specific places retain significant but differing meanings to audiences outside the Southwest and so the spatial reference of songs also changes to a degree as the band perform in different areas of the country.

SK: "If you sing Union Street⁸ in the north it does suggest something to people. It doesn't have that familiarity but it's that thing about the specific and the universal. It does seem to touch people. You probably get a truer reaction from people in that location. Yeovil Town is another one isn't it? You have to try and make these places metaphors for other places because there's a Union Street everywhere and a Yeovil Town"

Songs frequently link distinct places, issues and times. Examples include: 'The Flood' (the flooding in Southern England and the travails of illegal immigrants);

⁸ Union Street is in Plymouth's notorious night-club strip. The song 'Yeovil Town' tells of an 'after hours' altercation in a fish and chip shop in the town. Although both songs are locally grounded they tell of experiences that frequently occur in many English towns after midnight.

'Cold Frontier' (the memory of a Roman soldier on the fringes of the Empire with integration in today's EU), 'Cousin Jack' (the poverty-driven migration of the past / present pressures on Cornwall), 'Poppy Day' (a London drug dealer working smaller towns in the M4 corridor and a friend fighting in Afghanistan), 'Captains' (linking the care and skills of airline captain and sea captain with a personal relationship). So often the lyrics slip in references to a several essentially separate issues, places and times, yet invite the audience to recognise the connections, dualities and ambiguities framed in the intensified sensations and emotional catalysts of music.

Significantly, locally-specific places and events are used in some of Knightley's songs to draw attention to problematic issues and episodes happening in other parts of the world. A song that demonstrates this especially effectively is 'The Flood'. The song draws upon carefully researched detail to describe the literal flooding of Winchester. It then moves to critique the banal, metaphorical use of 'flood' to describe immigration. The song moves from the local to global in its outlook, railing against the injustices of 'people trafficking' and blaming trade injustice for the plight of its victims. The song encourages the listener to look beyond their immediate locality to (re)consider how local concerns fit into, and influence, other peoples' lives in other rural places. Similarly 'Columbus didn't find America' is an anti-colonisation song that traces how voyages of discovery led to 'the plundering of wealth and scattering of tears'; 'Crooked Man' takes a stance against the invasions of Iraq; and 'Armadas' tells the story of the Falklands conflict through the eyes of servicemen on both the British and Argentina sides, both united in a desire simply to go home. These songs critique histories of Devon that are often celebrated in local townscape (e.g. in road names and public memorials), challenging formal representations to provide a post-

colonial view of the county. Although Knightley's songs are firmly grounded in locality, they encourage the listener to look outward rather than inwards.

Whilst the preceding sections have emphasised Show of Hands' connection with the Southwest, it would be wrong to suggest that they aim to provide 'a voice' for the region or that, to use Halfacree's (2006) term, they represent formal, well established discourses of the locality. Their work is also valuable because it attempts to provide a range of viewpoints on rural life, as the next section explores.

5. Country Lives

It would therefore be naïve to interrogate SoH's songs with a view to discerning the extent to which they provide an 'authentic' voice or view of the countryside. Instead, their study provides an insight into particular visions of rurality, their emotive appeal to certain audiences and how they have, in turn, been used to strengthen particular rural and regional discourses.

Knightley himself recognises that story telling, rather than objective commentary, is at the heart of his work. Most of his original material is based on tales about different characters living, working or travelling through the countryside.

SK: "I'm always looking for stories or situations. For my new album I've got one about these guys who are sheep stealers .. OK so there they are ... what can we do with them? What will be the next scene? How can it end? And you just story-board the plot before the lyrics"

According to Beer, using songs to tell stories is a key folk-song tradition that gives the author room to express himself through the eyes of other people:

PB: *“what the traditionalist does perfectly is tell stories and a lot of Steve’s songs aren’t the normal ‘me obsessed’ songs, they’re story telling characters... There are characters in the songs and they are saying certain things... The type of song-writing he does allow him to be different people”*

While some of these stories that are beyond Knightley’s own personal experiences, accuracy, as opposed to authenticity, is important to him.

SK: *“I would speak to people like [name of farmer] and say does that sound right? ... I try and check with the people who know. It’s the same with anything historical I always speak to historians. Like the ‘Galway Farmer’⁹, I always check with people who bet about how many fences would be left. So I try and get it right”*

These songs are usually written in the first-person, enhancing the impression that they are ‘songs by’, rather than ‘songs about’, particular characters. This technique puts the listener inside the mind of the story-teller, intensifying sympathy and, perhaps, empathy for the circumstances of the character.

Knightley’s songs cover a diverse group of people including the contemporary rural poor and excluded (‘Country Life’), bored teenagers (‘Crazy Boy’, ‘Undertow’), members of religious sects (‘Witness’), fishermen (‘The Dive’) and their partners (‘Seven Days’), petty criminals (‘Red Diesel’), gamblers (‘The Galway Farmer’, ‘The Bet’), drug dealers (‘Poppy Day’), newcomers (‘Raining Again’), poachers (‘Longdog’) and sheep stealers (‘Transported’), the voluntary emergency services (‘The Shout’), emigrants (‘Cousin Jack’, ‘Suntrap’) and service personnel (‘Union

⁹ ‘The Galway Farmer’ is a song about an Irish farmer who wins a fortune on a bet at Cheltenham horse racing course.

Street'). There are original songs that trace the lives and words of historic characters such as 'The Preacher', 'The Keeper', sailors and wreckers ('Tall Ships', 'Tall Ship Story'), slave traders ('Bristol Slaver'), Roman Soldiers ('Cold Frontier') and revellers ('Widcombe Fair').

Certain people are privileged in Knightley's songs. There is certainly a tendency to speak for, or perhaps through, a character who is often an 'underdog'. Given that Knightley sings the songs, they are almost exclusively written about men and from a male perspective, although recent collaborations with Miranda Sykes and singer-songwriter Jenna Wilts have brought more female voices, literally and metaphorically, to his work.

Sometimes oppositional positionalities and visions of rurality are dealt with in different songs. Two views of rural gentrification are voiced in 'Red Diesel' and 'Raining Again'. 'Red Diesel' gives voice to a minor criminal who complains that 'there ought to be a law for keeping out the yuppies and the grockles¹⁰ (and the French)'. By contrast, 'Raining Again' deals with the semi-autobiographical experiences, hopes and aspirations of a couple moving to Dorset from London and captures some of the problems of achieving a bucolic vision of rural life.

One of the best examples is the song 'Country Life' (Figure 3), which was released on an eponymous album in 2003 and became something of a break-through recording for the band that has brought their work to a wider audience. The song examines rural poverty and social exclusion from the experiences of an extended family and was in part born of a frustration that English rural areas lacked a meaningful musical voice:

¹⁰ Westcountry slang for tourists

SK: *“Cities in England have got their voices ... The only countryside music bordered on a joke, like the Wurzels”*

However, Knightley does not claim to speak for rural people or to be presenting ‘an authentic’ rural voice. *Country Life* is a story told by a particular character, in this case an angry young man:

SK: “What a lot of people don’t immediately understand is that in a lot of these songs you are singing in other people’s voices. I don’t have a brother who had a chain saw accident ... You adopt a character; that is a disenfranchised young guy who can’t live where he was born. Of course he’s going to be angry. .. They are not supposed to be carefully balanced ... it’s a three minute song ... You can’t have a verse like ‘on the other hand it has to be said..’ It’s not what happens in songs”

‘*Country Life*’ also uses different musical styles to engage the audience. The recorded version uses a full band including bass, drums and harmonic and is loud, bluesy and angry. By contrast, the version performed on stage (usually with three musicians) is set to a catchy, almost jaunty tune reminiscent of a country dance that alludes to bucolic pastoral tunes. This juxtaposes with darker lyrics and increases the song’s dramatic intensity, enforcing the words of its principal character. More recently, Knightley and Beer have been playing a slow, unamplified version of the song that is melancholic and reflective in style. This re-working of the song encourages audiences familiar with the faster versions to re-appraise and re-engage with the song:

PB: "Nothing is fixed. When often we've got bored with songs we'll re-invent them a few years later. Maybe change a key, bring it down, change the instrumentation or whatever. Nothing is set in stone."

Thus the recorded versions of their songs act as markers for the band, but one that is like a buoy, liable to move with changing tides, rather than fixed like a boundary stone. These shifting styles emphasise the ability of music to convey myriad emotional experiences (Kong, 1995) that provide multiple, performed representations of the countryside (Cloke, 2003b)

The lyrics of the song are carefully constructed with a high degree of wit and verve (for example, 'grass' refers to marihuana, rather than the ground cover more traditionally associated with the rural economy), resulting in some memorable attacks on the forces that are widely understood to contribute to rural exclusion, be it incomers ('one man's family pays the price of another man's vision of country life'); industrial farming ('where agribarons, CAP in hand, strip this green and pleasant land') and class ('Landed gentry, county snobs: where were you when they lost their jobs? No one marched or subsidised to save a rural a way of life').

On the face of it, 'Country Life' appears to challenge the widely held, often formal, image of the countryside as idyllic (Bunce, 2003), yet it presents a more complex, multi-layered representation of rurality (Halfacree, 2006). 'Country Life' is the well-known title of a conservative UK magazine that advertises lavish rural homes and covers the lifestyles and concerns of landed rural society (see Agg and Phillips, 1998). By contrast, Knightley's song quite blatantly disrupts and challenges established and establishment views of rurality (especially with the lines about 'Landed gentry, county snobs' and second home owners).

Figure 3: The lyrics of the song 'Country Life', written by Steve Knightley.

<p>Country Life (Knightley)</p> <p>Working in the rain cutting up wood, Didn't do my little brother much good. Lost two fingers in a chainsaw bite, All he does now is drink and fight. Sells a bit of grass hots up cars, Talks of travel never gets far, Loves his kids left his wife, An everyday story of country life.</p> <p>And the red brick cottage where I was born, Is the empty shell of a holiday home, Most of the year there's no-one there, The village is dead and they don't care. Now we live on the edge of town, Haven't been back since the pub closed down. One man's family pays the price, For another man's vision of country life.</p> <p>My old man is eighty four, His generation won the war, He left the farm forever when, They only kept on one in ten. Landed gentry county snobs Where were you when they lost their jobs? No-one marched or subsidised To save a country way of life.</p>	<p>Silent fields, empty lanes, Drifting smoke, distant flames Picture postcard, hills on fire, Cattle burning in funeral pyres. Out to graze they look so sweet, We hate the blood we want the meat, Buy me a beer I'll take my knife, Cut you a slice of country life.</p> <p>If you want cheap food well here's the deal Family farms are brought to heel, Hammer blows of size and scale Foot and mouth the final nail. The coffin of our English dream, Lies out on the village green, While agri-barons CAP in hand, Strip this green and pleasant land, Of meadow, woodland, hedgerow, pond What remains gets built upon. No trains, no jobs, No shops, no pubs. What went wrong? Country life It's a little bit of country life</p>
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Consequently, these discourses have been challenged by more conservative elements of the media. An article in *The Financial Times* commented that ‘Show Of Hands draw defensive lines. Theirs is a bucolic vision, however ironic and defeated; they are anti-metropolitan and anti-urban’ (Honigmann, 2007). Similarly the *Daily Telegraph* described their song as ‘flawed’ for its implied criticism of the Countryside Alliance’s marches.

Yet, ‘Country Life’ has perhaps re-enforced many widely-held views about the countryside. In the 1990s academic work into the representation of rurality suggested that a rural myth or idyll dominated media and public perceptions of the countryside (Short 1991, Bunce 1993). However, ‘Country Life’ was released shortly after, and inspired by, the 2001 Foot and Mouth Outbreak in the UK. This crisis was seen by some to mirror wider turmoil in the countryside: ‘If the nightmare of foot-and-mouth disease has served any useful purpose, it is, perhaps, to have brought the desperate plight of those who live in the countryside to a far wider audience.’ (*The Times*, 23 July 2001, pp. 2).

Knightley’s song, far from disrupting a rural idyll, reinforced the view of the countryside in crisis and, consequently, has been used by groups seeking to promote this view of UK rurality. For example, the Commission for Rural Communities used an acoustic version of the track in its video ‘Hidden Voices’ that aimed to reveal the problems caused by rural poverty (Commission for Rural Communities, 2006) and it has also been used by geography teachers to introduce their students to rural issues (Rawding, 2007). The song has therefore been read and used in different ways to different audiences (Johnson, 1986) to support what they see as ‘wrong’ with rural life.

However, Knightley's recent song 'Raining Again' (2007) takes a self-deprecating side-swipe at 'Country Life' with the protagonist saying they are 'sick of some folk-rock band banging on about country life'. Knightley reminds us that he is not an advocate for the ills of the countryside but, primarily, a song-writer with a story to tell:

SK: *"I was on 'Farming Today' one morning and the guy suddenly said well this is just a rant ... well, yeah it's a song .. . you can't deal with property rights that go back to the Magna Carta"*

But themes of decline¹¹ and escape are a constant presence in other songs. 'The Cold Heart of England' and the jovial but edgy 'Yeovil Town' portray decline and crime in market towns. 'Undertow' tells of the aspirations of two teenagers to escape the winter tedium of their small Devon seaside town by travelling to sunnier coastal idylls in other parts of the world. Similarly, the duet 'Seven Days' starts with a fisherman lamenting that 'it's the North Devon winters that drive us all to sea'. Indeed, the sea is an essential part of Show of Hands' vision of rurality, given its historic and contemporary importance to 'rural' life in the Westcountry. 'Tall Ships' spins a story of villages forced by starvation to wreck passing merchant ships, their 'decks piled high' with food and stores. The song has a lilting refrain that, if it does not celebrate wrecking, certainly reinforces the presence of this activity in the stories, legends and myths of the Southwest and thereby the allure of the rebellious 'other'.

¹¹ Some songs celebrate rural areas. 'I Promise You' enjoys the outdoor life offered by a Devon summer and the 'The Oak', written for a west Devon tree-dressing ceremony and sung almost as a ritualistic chant, praises the enduring qualities of that tree and its place with the life, myths and spirituality of rural England in general. Both songs draw upon the seasons to celebrate almost mystic visions of nature and woodlands.

However, much of Show of Hands' audience are middle class people who are more likely to sympathise, rather than empathise with the experiences in Country Life. In one press interview Knightley notes that when he plays songs about rural deprivation he is 'well aware of the irony that we're singing to an audience, some of whom will be going back to their second homes' (Hannaford, 2007, p.15). So it's 'us' who may be 'the English who live in 'our' (i.e. *their*) houses'. And few in the audience would *really* want to be tangling with a lethal drunk in a late-night chip shop in 'Yeovil Town'; consorting with Terry in 'Red Diesel'; thrilling to a 100 mph joyride car with 'London plates' (in 'Undertow'); or bundling sheep into a rusty trailer and towing it perilously with a clapped-out Land Rover (Transported). Yet, the lyrics of these songs may confront audiences with certain contradictions between their own personal lifestyles and backgrounds (and even to an extent their value-stock and moralities) and those of the protagonists in the songs.

Although it would be wrong to claim that Knightley's work represents the voice, or indeed voices, of rural England, they are one answer Philo's (1992, p.199) oft-cited call to engage with 'specific *'stories'* that 'other' people in 'other' places tell themselves' (our emphasis). Often, though, his characters do not conform to the 'off the hip' lists of 'others' that are oft-discussed by academics. In this sense, as this section has demonstrated, his songs have the ability to foreground some of the 'other others' (Cloke 2006) who are still neglected in academic discourses.

6. Conclusions

Music, including folk music, means many things to many different people. In this article we have attempted to provide a reading of Show of Hands' work to

demonstrate how music has the potential to convey a myriad, multiple meanings to various audiences with an emotional directness than eludes other media.

It has noted that Show of Hands' music and style incorporates different playing traditions so that it is hybridised rather than unique to the Southwest. Despite this their songs and the band have close associations with the Southwest due to the skilful song-writing, musicianship and performance. Interestingly the local detail of their work appeals both to those who know and love the region as well as those well outside. Their music demonstrates that regions and regional identity are porous and transcend formal boundaries (Hudson, 2006). Two areas can be identified for further investigation.

First, more attention can be given to the performance of folk music and its meanings within and beyond its immediate performance spaces. The genre is associated strongly with live performance and communal participation, often in a public performance space (Kassabin, 1999; Morton, 2005; Revill, 2004). Why, as we noted earlier, do English people enthusiastically sing songs about Cornish nationalism and for how long do these sentiments remain after they are performed? How far do the evanescent emotions in a four minute song generate more enduring imprints? There is scope to use performance theory (Thrift, 2007) to examine how playing, listening and dancing to folk music embodies emotions and ideals, if only on a temporary basis.

Second, this paper has demonstrated the work and music of Show of Hands. The readings of the songs have reflected our own, admittedly enthusiastic, interpretations of songs as well as the voices of the performers filtered through our interviews and writing. We accept that these are personal responses to songs. It

must be remembered that commercial music, even folk music, is a product that is consumed according to personal taste and cultural norms that are in turn influenced by the music 'industry' and available recording, performance and audio technologies. Song-writing reflects the experiences, emotions and subjectivities of the song-writer, whilst the performance of songs reflects technical and musical abilities of performers as well as sound and recording technologies (Kong, 1995). To evaluate fully the impact of folk music on wider discourses of rurality, it will be important to examine the complex network of technological and performance spaces that are enrolled into the production and performance of folk music. A greater focus on these networks has the potential to reveal more about the importance of music and locality but also, and perhaps more significantly, the place of rural localities and traditions in an increasingly globalised countryside (Woods, 2007).

To conclude, Show of Hands' music is able to convey diverse perspectives and emotions associated with country lives that have been interpreted and enrolled into different, sometimes competing, discourses of the countryside. Do they provide a 'realistic' portrayal of rural life or a voice for rural people? Probably not, but this is to miss the point. Knightley's songs are stories, based in specifically imagined rural localities that have themselves become entwined into the stories that other groups and people tell of rural areas (this paper in a case in point).

The point is not to try and distinguish authentic and fake; to date much research on folk music has been too closely focused these issues and has missed the excitement of the genre. Categorising folk by place may be 'dreadfully functionalist' (Connell and Gibson, 2001) but the music itself is exciting. Rather than worrying about style and where it comes from, it is valid both to appreciate it as performance and to reflect how it conveys different ideas and emotions about rural places.

What, therefore, does music tell us about rurality if, as we have established, it is not describing the 'reality' of country life? Instead, it provides us with a complex, shifting and hybrid view of reality. Contemporary folk music is both rooted in place but separated from it; it can strengthen or oppose existing discourses and create new ones; it is variously interpreted, enjoyed or loathed by different audiences at different times in different places. And it is all of these things at once. Yet this is not problematic. Rural areas, it has been recognised, are simultaneously diverse, hybrid and multi-layered. Places, meanings and realities are enfolded into each other (Cloke 2003 and Halfacree, 2006). Music provides a window into these complex ruralities. Music and rurality cannot be understood by trying to unfold and categorise these strands but, rather, should be appreciated for what they are: various, mysterious, indefinable and subjective.

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