

# art<sub>east</sub>: music

The Cambridge Folk Club is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

As **Piers Ford** discovers, a versatile approach to folk music has ensured its successful survival

Anyone searching for signs of creativity and independence in the modern music scene should visit the Cambridge Folk Club, which celebrates its 40th anniversary this year with a typically varied programme of international, national and local performances.

Since it was formed in 1964 by Ken Woolard, who also founded the Cambridge Folk Festival, the Club has determinedly avoided the limitations of a prescribed musical genre. As a result, world famous singers and musicians have willingly graced its intimate stage (its current home is the Unicorn Pub in Trumpington), while Open Stage nights allow amateurs to perform in front of an appreciative and discerning audience.

"If there's a quality that defines the Club's success, it's the versatility and broadness of our definition of folk music," explains Anne Ryan, Programme Co-ordinator. "We'll allow anything from across the musical spectrum, as long as the performance is unplugged. We used to have a lot of trouble getting people to come and perform on Open Stage nights but there's now a great demand for spots. It's a lovely development and a manifestation of a major change in the way folk music is perceived."

The Club operates on a voluntary basis and while Anne admits negotiating artists' fees is a challenge, its reputation and the quality of the audience are very attractive to international performers who don't regard themselves as too big to play in an intimate environment. "I enjoy the idea of bringing in international role models who will help to encourage local artists to explore their own talents," she says.

Paul Simon once sung here. Stalwarts of the acoustic music scene, like Christine Collister and Kristina Olsen, make regular appearances. Cambridge group The Broken Family Band follow the release of their nationally acclaimed debut album with a gig on 13th February. Blues singer Helen Watson, whose roots are in the folk club circuit of the 1960s, performs on 27th February. On 12th March, Brian Willoughby (The Strawbs) will join forces with the American singer/songwriter Cathryn Craig

for one of their famous collaborative evenings. And on 22nd October, Martin Carthy and Norma Waterson—for many people the godparents of modern British folk music—are sure to attract a sell-out crowd.

All of these performers represent in some way the marriage of folk music with modern interpretation and influences. As Anne explains, the revival of interest in 1960s folk music has nothing to do with nostalgia and everything to do with reinvention. The days of the stereotypically earnest performer with a centre parting hunched over a guitar are long gone.

Familiar songs are being re-presented in completely different styles and guises. And a new generation of singer/songwriter is using the traditional genre of the folk song as a framework for its own original material.

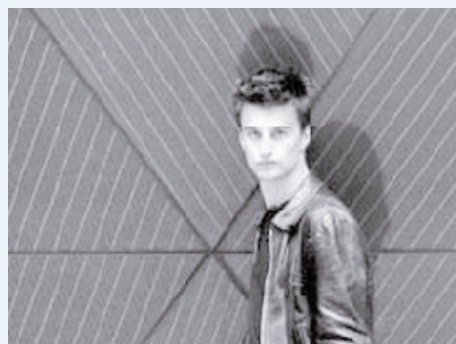
Anne says Kirsty McGee (6th February) and another regular Jim Moray are prime examples of this new breed of artist, confident and clear about the broader influences and modern technologies that colour their work. They are part of an exciting crop of musicians from across the spectrum that is now offering hungry audiences something more substantial than a staple diet of commercial pop music.

"We are getting the packaged deal all the time from the commercial music business," says Anne. "Everyone wants to be the same and they're all copying one another. There's a lack of originality that we don't find on the live acoustic music scene, where there's a hell of a lot of individuality because there has to be. It's no longer enough to perform arrangements of traditional tunes. You need to have a strong sense of originality if you're a singer/songwriter, and if you sing an old song, you have to give it a fresh brush stroke."

It might not suit corporate record producers to recognise that, but it makes the role of the Cambridge Folk Club in fostering talent even more compelling. Several musicians and singer/songwriters have come up through the Open Stage nights.

This creative and supportive environment lures back regular performers who travel considerable distances for their spot. The best might graduate to a support slot on guest nights, and there is a quarterly Show Case in which the most popular and talented acts are invited to perform.

"People come to the Club for many reasons," says Anne. "Someone like Brian Willoughby, of course, will bring in Strawbs fans, but there will also be people interested in seeing a rock artist come and play an acoustic set. The main thing is that they will hear something intimate, and see the performer



On stage: performers at the Cambridge Folk Club (from top) – Cathryn Craig, Helen Watson, Jim Moray, Kirsty McGee and Last Night's Fun

up close rather than as a dot on a huge stage. And of course they'll enjoy a very high standard of musicianship and along the way, hear things that are different!" **ae**

*The Cambridge Folk Club, The Unicorn, Church Lane, Trumpington. Telephone 01223 262775.*