

Nostalgia in the Media Representations of Female Folk Singers

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Tämä artikkeli tarkastelee naisfolklaulajien nostalgiaa mediarepresentaatioita. Artikkelissa kiinnitetään erityistä huomiota siihen, kuinka laulajien esityskieli vaikuttaa heidän representaatioidensa muodostumiseen. Artikkelin teoreettisena pohjana on käytetty Astrid Erllin kulttuurisen muistin tutkimusta ja määritelmiä ja Svetlana Boymin nostalgia-analyysiä. Analysoimalla laulajien kuvauksia eri tekstilähteissä artikkelissa pyritään selvittämään mitä yhteyksiä folklaulajien representaatioilla on nostalgiaan ja kulttuurisen muistin eri tasoihin.

Keywords: cultural memory, folk music, folk singers, media representations, nostalgia

1 Introduction

Nostalgia has a central part in the construction of a folk singer representation, as well as with the imagery connected to folk singers. The artist types for different genres of music are constructed through and preserved on the collective level of cultural memory; in folk music these types are particularly persistent, even though the artists may not actively perform the stereotypical folk singer image. Thus, because of collective memory, if an artist is referred to as a folk singer it might bring to mind a long haired young woman, often alone on the stage playing the guitar and singing sad songs about lost love and heartbreak. This representation, constructed mostly during the 1960s folk revival by and for Joan Baez, Judy Collins and others, is still the prevalent public representation reserved for female folk singers.

This article discusses nostalgic representations of female folk singers in different media sources such as digital publications of magazine articles, interviews, and concert and album reviews. The singers' performance language is significant because it affects the way in which they are portrayed in the source material and thus has an effect on their representations. The singers studied are Julie Fowlis and Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh, who perform in Scottish Gaelic and Irish respectively. The English singers Kate Rusby and Emily Portman provide the comparative material. In the context of my research folk music is used as an encompassing term, covering the subgenre of traditional music, such as traditional Scottish or Irish music performed by Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh. Likewise, folk music also includes newer and older folk music material from the English and

American canon, as well as new songs inspired by older folk music material, stories and folklore, as written and performed by Rusby and Portman.

Both the English language and the minority language singers studied are described and referred to in equally romanticized terms, and all of the singers' music, voices and performances are 'mythicalised' in some way. Their voices are described as being "pure", "ethereal", "earthy", "haunting", "beguiling" and "luminous" (Leech 2012; McBride 2013; Thom 2006; Chilton 2014; Irwin 2011; Long 2005). Similarly, their performances are said to be "evoking a timeless mystical feeling" (Irwin 2009), having "green in the sound" (The Wounded Jukebox 2010), "weaving [...] new cloth from old tunes and bringing the present to the past" (Long 2005), or having a "contradictory yet seamless blend of the earthy and angelic, the sacred and profane" (Roden 2006). This shows that the genre of folk music and folk singers as a type of an artist are connected to, if not based on, remembering, memory and nostalgia. To be able to create "old stories with new skin" (Spencer 2010) requires remembering, individual and collective levels of cultural memory, and in the case of folk music, also nostalgia. Old stories and songs are remembered and recreated by the contemporary singers, whether they choose to sing the original versions or base new songs on the old stories.

1.1 Material

The research material consists of both printed and electronic magazine articles, interviews and reviews sourced from mainstream music and folk music publications and websites. In this article I have used five articles and interviews, seventeen reviews and four forum discussions and artist information pages published in the internet versions of *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, *The Scotsman*, *Exclaim! Magazine*, and *Pantagraph*, the webzines *Northern Soul* and *The Wounded Jukebox*, the music websites and blogs enjoythemusic.com, folkradio.co.uk, brightyoungfolk.com, allmusic.com, 67music.net, livingtradition.co.uk, last.fm, and juliefowlis.com, and the music review pages of amazon.com and bbc.co.uk. The research material time frame ranges from 2005 to 2015 and the text material used in this article was chosen on the basis of its relevance to the topic at hand, namely nostalgia. By analysing the descriptions used in the material of the singers, their performance and persona, the language, and the songs I aim to find out the connections that the representations of female folk singers have with nostalgia and the individual and collective levels of cultural memory.

1.2 On Nostalgia and Cultural Memory

Branching from memory studies, the concept of nostalgia offers important tools to discuss folk singer representations. Being both an intra-personal expression of self and an interpersonal phenomenon, it ideologises and mystifies the past but also creates new

pasts that never really existed (Wilson 2014: 19). Svetlana Boym (2001) states that we are “nostalgic not for the past the way it was, but for the past the way it could have been. It is this past perfect that one strives to realize in the future” (Boym 2001: 351). These definitions fittingly characterize the nostalgic connotations and representations of folk singers – that they attempt to recreate the idealized folk singer type of the past, but without the complications of the past era. Viewing and using nostalgia in this way in connection to folk singer representations provides a better understanding on what influences the construction of those representations.

In this article I use mainly Astrid Erll’s definitions of cultural memory and collective memory. Erll defines cultural memory as an umbrella term that encompasses several cultural, social, cognitive and biological phenomena. According to her, this extensive nature of the term enables us to see the relationships and draw connections between “tradition and canon, monuments and historical consciousness” (Erll 2011: 99). Therefore, as a concept, cultural memory includes the concept of collective memory. Erll makes an additional distinction between *collected* and *collective* memory, drawing on Jeffrey Olick’s original discussion on the two categories. The former refers to “the socially and culturally formed individual memory” and the latter has to do with “symbols, media, social institutions, and practices which are used to construct, maintain, and represent versions of a shared past” (Erll 2011: 97–98). These two levels of memory interact with each other and create a memory culture, and therefore they cannot be viewed exclusively. Erll further specifies *collected* and *collective* memory as “cultural memory on the individual level” and “cultural memory on the collective level” respectively (2011: 98). This twofold distinction is useful in the context of this article, since both the individual memories and collective memories have a significant role in constructing and maintaining the genre conventions and representations of folk music and folk singers.

The construction of folk singer representations in the research material involves employing the imagery of the genre, choosing from representations that appeared during the folk revival of the 1960s and 1970s. The following example – sourced from an early 1960s *Time Magazine* article discussing Joan Baez and the 1960s folk phenomenon – illustrates the folk singer representations of the time:

- (1) Her [Joan Baez’s] voice is as clear as air in the autumn, a vibrant, strong, untrained and thrilling soprano. [...] The purity of her voice suggests purity of approach. She is only 21 and palpably nubile. [...] She sings Child ballads with an ethereal grace that seems to have been caught and stopped in passage in the air over the 18th century Atlantic. (“Sibyl With Guitar”, *Time* 1962: 3)

Baez and those that came after her are described and written about in pointedly similar ways and words. In fact, even the nostalgia aspect is present in the 1960s example,

though the nostalgia in connection to the 1960s folk singers at the time was directed farther away in history. Then the strived for folk singer model was the singer of the earlier centuries, perhaps the singer from the early modern period whence many of the Scottish, Irish and Anglo-American folk songs originated. Today the contemporary singers' representations recreate not only the so called original imagery of a folk singer, but also the idealized folk revival singer of the 1960s and 1970s. Fifty years may have passed but a folk singer is still keeping "everyone in thrall to the purity of her voice", exercising "haunting power" with her "deceptively innocent voice" (Nugent 2014; *Uncut Magazine* in *The Wounded Jukebox* 2010; Chilton 2014).

Thus, if a singer is perceived in a particular way, if her representations typify her as an artist of a certain genre of music – in this case, folk music – and not some other, this must mean that a collective agreement exists about what constitutes a folk singer. Moreover, because individuals remember as members of a group, and because they belong to many social groups, the way in which they remember and the contents of such memories are framed by membership within those groups (Kattago 2015: 4–6). This information, including both the individual and the collective level of cultural memory, is circulated through varied media sources. Not only dates and facts but also more group and society specific information, ideas and attitudes are learned and absorbed via the media (Halbwachs 1980: 64 in Erll 2011: 130). According to Erll, the media works as the connection "between individual minds and the collective frameworks of memory" (2011: 130). Memory on the collective level would not be possible without the aid of media and therefore, existence of, say, genres of music would also not be possible without the collective level of cultural memory. (Erll 2011: 113)

As Astrid Erll states, memory matter is not confined to one specific medium; rather, it is transmedial (2011: 141). Erll defines memory matter to mean "those images and narratives of the past which circulate in a given social context" (2011: 114). Therefore in this case the singer's image, her voice, song choices, and musical arrangements, her persona, opinions, and articles written about her all influence the way in which she is perceived and the way the representations of her are constructed. Also these different aspects trigger varied memory processes that further affect the representations. In *Media and Cultural Memory: Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory* (2009) Astrid Erll further discusses memory in terms of premediation. According to her, premediation is a cultural practice of experiencing and remembering, meaning that the media that already exist are used to transform new events and phenomena into more palatable and understandable images (Erll 2009: 111, 114). The media that already exist, in this case the conventions of the genre of folk music and folk music representations, are used to view and analyse the contemporary singers and to construct their representations in the media.

2 Folk Singer Representations and Nostalgia

The concept of vicarious nostalgia partly explains the appeal of minority language singers such as Julie Fowlis and Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh and plays a role in the construction of their media representations. According to Svetlana Boym, vicarious nostalgia “gives us the [...] sensation of returning to where we have never been” (2001: 352–353). Boym explains how certain objects or things might trigger a nostalgic reaction in people even though they have no previous connection to them; usually, a feeling of nostalgia would require an earlier experience of a phenomenon, which, when remembered later, acquires nostalgic features. In the case of Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh Scottish Gaelic and Irish work as triggers for vicarious nostalgia, and therefore they initiate the construction of these singers’ representations.

The fact that these languages are minority languages – Scottish Gaelic has approximately 60,000 speakers and Irish from 40,000 up to 80,000 speakers (Pierce 2000: 1140) – limits the numbers of audience members who can readily understand what Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh are singing about. Nevertheless, this has no negative effect on the singers’ popularity; on the contrary, their uniqueness, commitment to tradition, otherworldliness and authenticity because of their choice of performance language are repeatedly praised in reviews and fan comments alike (“Julie Fowlis Artist Page”, www.last.fm; Lankford 2006; “Mar A Tha Mo Chridhe” and “Cuilidh”, www.thesession.org). The reviews and comments reveal that listening to songs in these minority languages evokes a variety of feelings and experiences in the audiences. They produce nostalgic reactions, and the “audience[s] normally immune to the charms of Gaelic crofters’ songs” are touched, their “DNA tingling when [they] listen to Irish and Scottish Gaelic” (Spencer 2011; guestbook comment, “JK” 2012, juliefowlis.com/guestbook/; my additions). Letting the audiences delve into cultures and imagined countries all but lost in time, the songs “are like beautiful messages from another world” and they “shimmer with a special charm even if you don’t understand a single word” (Radcliffe 2007, cited in “Is it Kate Bush or Björk? No, it's Julie Fowlis” *The Scotsman* 2007; Stone 2006). Understanding the song lyrics is beside the point because these artists “[make] it completely unnecessary to, as they say, “have” any Irish. [They] sing a whole emotional spectrum into the notes, making the song[s] bypass the brain and go straight for the soul”, leaving the listeners to draw their own interpretations of the song lyrics based on the soundscapes and musicality of the language together with the song arrangements (de Bie 2012, my additions).

These examples discussed above, drawn from reviews published on the internet by *The Guardian*, enjoythemusic.com, livingtradition.co.uk, and juliefowlis.com show how the language choice shapes the representations of the singers. Generally audiences and music critics are unanimously intrigued and enchanted by the minority language singers

and tend to give them rave reviews. In some cases the opinions are divided; for some the language is not an issue:

- (2) “Why? Is it important to know what she is singing about? Surely it is better just to appreciate the music and the sound of her voice.” (*user comment in response to a comment stating that Julie Fowlis needs subtitles*, www.thesession.org “Julie Fowlis on Jools Holland”, 2008)

Such listeners enjoy the arrangements of music, the sound of foreign words, the singers’ voices and the feelings that the songs provoke, and even find themselves singing along the recordings, regardless of whether or not they speak the language. Noticeably in the minority are others who would like to know what the song lyrics mean, find the names of the artists, their albums and songs unpronounceable – “Part of the problem in how to interpret her music is that even her name, Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh, hints at tradition, as does the album’s title” (Lankford 2006) – and are suggesting English language albums and predicting a mainstream success if the artists were to pursue that path. However, the opinions, whether for or against, shape the artists’ representations and reinforce the folk singer connotations, as well as the nostalgia markers attached to them.

The language issue is central in the research material concerning Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh; it is the instigator for the mythicalisation and the nostalgic experience of their music and themselves as performers. The attributes attached to Scottish Gaelic and Irish, and the nostalgic and romanticised reactions they induce, are applied to the singers by extension, thus affecting their media representations. Therefore, the performance language has symbolic value; combined with the songs and musical arrangements, not to mention the singers’ personalities, Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh’s music is not experienced rationally. The critics and audiences alike are charmed, enchanted, beguiled and fascinated, and the emotions, rather than strict rational analysis, are foregrounded. As the examples above show, tools of rational thinking are of no use here; not knowing the language makes understanding and interpreting the music a task in itself. Nostalgia and romanticism are used to make sense of the experience and the minority languages evoke a vicariously nostalgic reaction from the audience.

In the representations of the English language singers Kate Rusby and Emily Portman, the experience of nostalgia is present but it is debatable whether or not it is similarly vicarious as with Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh. Because of the language, the stories in their songs are accessible to a wider audience. In their part the songs help to construct the representations of these singers, though perhaps there are fewer opportunities for the listeners to imagine their individual interpretations of the songs, as they are able to do with Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh. Rusby and Portman differ from Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh in that they write their own material that nevertheless manages to pass as traditionally folky, meaning that the songs are accepted as folk songs, and arranged and performed in the agreed upon style of folk music.

In the articles and reviews published in *hearthmusic.com*, *brightyoungfolk.com*, *telegraph.co.uk*, *northernsoul.me.uk*, and *folkradio.co.uk*, Rusby and Portman are described to have “deeply ancient” or “haunting” voices (“CD Review: Emily Portman’s UK Folk Roots”, *www.hearthmusic.com* 2013; Chilton 2014), and they are said to have created “magical world[s]” or “mistily atmospheric” arrangements, full of “mysteries and whispers of the other world” (Horowitz 2012, my addition; Holland 2014). These descriptions are markedly similar to the ones used about Fowlis and Nic Amhlaoibh, though in their case such attributes are usually chosen in reference to their performance language, performance and general musical arrangements, whereas with Portman and Rusby the above quotes refer to their songs specifically, as well as their performance and the qualities of the music.

Although my study concentrates on the representations of the contemporary female folk singer and not so much on the contents of the songs they choose to perform, the songs and the stories they tell are part of the nostalgic representation of the singers. In her article “The Literary Representation of Memory” (2010), Brigit Neumann states that

Allusions to legends, fairy tales, myths, and other stories of dubious historical authenticity suggest that fact and fiction intermingle in cultural memory and that these fictions should thus be treated as cultural documents in their own right as they shed light on what is actually remembered as culture’s past. (2010: 338)

The songs, therefore, work as memory triggers, and even though they are largely fictional they too have their share in shaping the cultural memory and how phenomena such as folk music, folk singers or a certain culture are perceived and remembered. The “fact and fiction” – meaning the generally accepted history and traditions of a given culture, and the folklore and beliefs preserved in the cultural memory – construct the past and affect also the nostalgic representation of the folk singers studied here. As Julie Hansen (2015) remarks, “memory is linked to both identity and the imagination and therein lies the potential of fiction to help us understand the past and define our relation to it.” (Hansen 2015: 198) Then, because of their song repertoire, one singer is described as performing “weird folk”, another is typified as taking joy in melancholy, and yet another is dubbed the national figure-head for the young, modern Gaelic speaker, who is not afraid or ashamed of her cultural heritage (Craft 2013; Nugent 2014).

The representations of Rusby and Portman projected in the articles and reviews are two-fold: on one hand the singers are linked to the mystical, the ancient and even the pagan in the British and English tradition and culture. On the other hand they are connected to cozy, traditional and homey Englishness, being described as “reliable and comfortable as a chair by a roaring fire”, with “green in the sound [...] [and bringing] with it images of sweeping hills and brushes of cool wind” (Long 2007; *The Wounded Jukebox* 2010). The latter type of representations especially evokes nostalgia, regardless of whether or

not the recipient experiencing it has English connections. The coziness and the links to tradition construct a more general nostalgic ideal of rural, simple life when people had time to sit by fires, telling stories and singing old songs.

Nostalgia is therefore an end product of the singers' performance and representation. It is the answer and experience provoked by the singers' performance – either live or recorded – and by those connotations preserved in the cultural memory in connection to the genre of music and its supposed requirements. Also the cultural and traditional connotations connected to Scotland, Ireland and England on the individual and collective level of cultural memory influence both the construction of the singers' representation and the nostalgic experience – vicarious or otherwise – of them by the audience.

3 Conclusions

This paper has suggested that contemporary folk singer portrayals are projecting an image of a pretty folk singer, with slightly mystical tendencies and a suitably affable ethnicity. Such representations are recreating the past but without the complications of that past era. The articles, interviews and reviews on the singers consistently utilize the descriptive imagery of folk singers that was already in use during the folk revival of the 1960s and 1970s. This points to a strong connection to cultural memory and a tendency to nostalgise the folk singers and folk music as a genre.

The concepts of cultural memory, both on the individual and the collective level, and nostalgia are central to a discussion of media representations of folk singers. A certain type of music is identified as folk music and a certain type of singer is deemed to be a folk singer because of cultural memory, because of a collective agreement on the basis of that preserved idea. The contemporary folk singers are described in markedly similar terms as folk revival era folk singers, and the singers' song repertoires link them to the tradition and history, whether they perform Gaelic crofters' songs passed on by word of mouth, or write their own material, using traditional songs and stories as their inspiration. The singers' choice of performance language opens up yet another nostalgic avenue, making the listeners often vicariously nostalgic of a time, place and country to which they may have no previous connection. The varied nostalgic connotations linked to folk singers are only one part of their media representations and those other facets, such as authenticity, ethnicity and locality, remain to be examined in the future.

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