

Dave Bulmer – died Aug 2, 2013, aged 62 years

Dave Bulmer came from South Shields, Tyneside and spent much of his adult life in Yorkshire. His interests in folk music go back to the 1960s when he was a pupil at South Shields High School and helped run the school folk club, although he played the accordion since the age of seven. The school club often featured the guests who were booked at the nearby Marsden Inn folk club, so as a teenager he would have seen some of the best musicians around at the time.

His personal development as a musician followed that of the typical folkie, but he probably dug a bit deeper than most. He was among the early group of enthusiasts who travelled to Ireland to attend various Fleadhs and there he met and made friends with some influential musicians.

Dave was at home in a session environment and throughout all his working life he still played regularly in his local pub. He also played for traditional dances, mainly in the North of England and together with John Doonan played in folk clubs throughout the UK. In those early days of interest in Irish music from people in the folk clubs and festivals, Dave was often asked if he had music for the tunes he was playing, as not much was available at that time. Initially he would give people photocopies or handwritten copies of tunes, but soon these were assembled in a simple spiral bound format and published in four volumes under the title Music Of Ireland. These were extremely useful and accessible sources of tunes for many players in Britain and Ireland at a time when you had to hunt out Irish tune books in obscure editions in hard to find outlets. They were a labour of love which made it possible for many to share the 'latest tunes' in sessions far and wide. Now that we have professionally produced books, easily available at the click of a mouse, it is easy to overlook this pioneering work which helped open up the music to a wider playing audience.

Dave 'distributed' these books as he travelled and was reaching an audience newly interested in traditional music. At that time there was little in the way of formal 'distribution' for folk music. Concurrently, Bill Leader was enthusiastically recording traditional musicians, particularly with his 'grey label' Leader series, but had few options to reach that specialist audience. He asked Dave if he would also take around some of his LPs on his travels. Dave then effectively became the first distributor for Leader / Trailer and this would lead later to him establishing C M Distribution. The music business at that time was very much London focussed. Dave believed strongly that the 'centre of gravity' of folk music was in the north and that the business side should also be in the hands of musicians rather than business people in the wider music industry. His success in distribution brought competitors and Dave's passion probably contributed to his view that it was 'him against the rest'. His business

methods have been the subject of controversy, much of it ill informed, some probably justified. He did it 'his way', but to be fair to him, he did it.

His passion showed again when he bought the rights to the Leader / Trailer catalogue from the liquidator after the label Bill Leader created, with similar passion, had gone bust. Going bust has been the story of most small record labels, but the prominence of Leader / Trailer in the folk world, a big fish in a small pond, attracted criticism from others who took a different view of the material to Dave Bulmer. The label was close to Dave's heart, not necessarily for the 'folk stars' who were on the label, but rather for the recordings of people like Martin Byrnes and other 'masters of Irish Music' who were very much in Dave's blood. Dave saw himself as the saviour of those more obscure releases, material that might have been lost if the label had been cherry picked by more commercial operators. Some others saw the situation differently and much has been said about Dave over the years - you will not need to look too far to find criticism of some of his business dealings.

But it would be unfair to focus only on Dave's detractors and we shouldn't underestimate those who had no direct issues with him. While he could be at times abrupt and abrasive, he would often stand up for the people and things he believed in – music being one of the most paramount for him. He didn't attempt to flatter anyone's ego. He said things bluntly, as he saw them, and in response to, "Why hasn't my album sold lots of copies, surely it must be down to your lack of promotion?" he is likely to have answered, "Maybe it isn't as good as you think it is."

Many people respected his musicianship and enjoyed his company. He mixed with the main players of the music business, taking folk music to international trade fairs such as MIDEM. Although he moved easily in business circles, he was probably one of the few record company executives who were actively playing music. Ronnie Simpson from Lismor Records who knew him at that time said: "He was not always the most popular folkie at the festival, but he was passionate and knew his stuff and fought for the rights in folk music. He would wear his usual denims, sweater etc. and carry his box around too for any impromptu sessions. He is a very difficult man to debate or discuss. I do believe he had the music at heart but equally he thought that 'he was that heart and his way was the right and only way.'"

My reading of the situation is that Dave dug in his heels in the face of attack and continued to do what he genuinely believed was the right thing. If you look through any LP collection of folk music, you may be surprised at how many of these were distributed by C M Distribution. He did a job that was needed at the time.

Dave Bulmer was in many ways a modest man. He had experience of the star driven commercial music scene, but his interest was in community music making and he didn't see publicity and hype as being necessarily in the interests of the tradition.

On a musical note, the first release on the Celtic Music label was of a group called Iona. You had to read deep into the sleeve notes to discover that the band's members were Dave Bulmer, George Ormiston, Tony Wilson and Gordon Tyrrell. He didn't hype the release and I suspect not many people have a copy. Publicity wasn't his style; his first love was the music.

It probably isn't widely known that Dave Bulmer also acquired the rights to material from a number of small record labels who had recorded other aspects of British culture including various recordings of Brass Bands. Dave wasn't a collector in the sense of a Cecil Sharp or a Peter Kennedy, but he had amassed a vast amount of material in his stores. Whatever his motives, this collection does include material which might otherwise have been lost. Let us hope that at some stage in the future it will become widely available and that future generations will be able to listen to it and be grateful for the contribution Dave has made.

Our thoughts are with his wife Ruth and his family.

Pete Heywood