

Liz Nichol: A Tale of Longevity

By
Tony Hale
©2019

Liz Nichol is known to folk music audiences in recent times mainly from her collaborations with other musicians. But in the early days of the Folk Club she was a frequently booked solo artist at the Bedford Row Folk Centre. In fact, the records for 1972-3 show her to be one of the most heavily booked female singers. As there were some months on teaching section where she was too busy to sing a note in public, this was impressive.

Liz's interest in singing songs was nourished earlier than for most girls in the Folk Club's story. It was her older sister Ruth, then part of a social group of young people that included Dobbin from the Band of Hope, who extended a helping hand. Liz credits her sister in teaching her to play the autoharp and later encouraging her to sing in public. The autoharp was her first instrument and on it she showed enough dedication and promise for her father to invest in her next instrument, and a guitar was purchased for her 12th birthday.

"Songs were often taught to me by my sister or I picked them up from songbooks and records," she explained in 2018.

Or, they were self-written. In 1969, pigtailed and aged 16, Liz and Ruth co-wrote a now-lost song titled 'The Wahine Disaster' which told of the passenger liner's plight as it foundered on Barrett's Reef at the entrance to Wellington Harbour during the horrific storm of 1968. The loss of 52 lives on a newish vessel impacted deeply on the national consciousness. Expressing the moral indignation of a young person and seeking explanation, she recorded it to cassette tape and mailed the song off to CHTV-3's *Town and Around*.

At a time when established folkies were singing regularly on topical issues, CHTV-3 brought her in for an audition, taped a couple of versions and then told her to drop the final verse before they taped some more. The final verse was of course the point of the song, a challenge to the rescue delay and to a lack of rescue process.

This was an age when folk music was integral to the growing protest movement in New Zealand, and it seemed deeply ironic that such a protest against home-grown issues was unacceptable. Post broadcast, the promised \$20 (no less than \$141.54 in early 2019) cheque was reduced to only \$18.50 because of tax deduction. But with the higher figure her expectation, she was annoyed that the difference matched one whole week's pocket money. The two disappointments dimmed, but did not extinguish, her young enthusiasm.

With such musical beginnings behind her, what was now needed were role models and the best place in town to see folk singers in action was Bedford Row's Folk Centre. Liz explains,

“Listening to other musicians prior to my (later) performances was inspiring.”

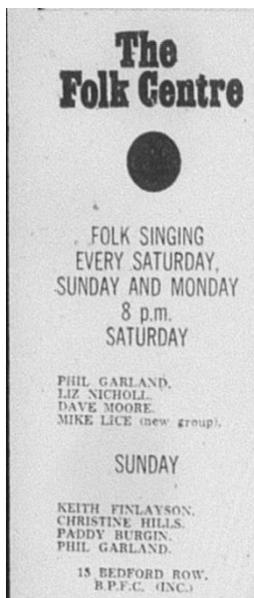
But the inspiration from listening had little impact on curtailing performance nerves. By 1971 she was at primary Teachers College after the first wave of folkies such as Paula Feather, John Allison and Mary Finch had moved through. Liz sought a low key venue at which to perform and hone her craft. Offering smaller audiences and less pressure was the Methodist Central Mission’s coffee house at 209 Cambridge Tce, by now named Weybridge. Liz appeared four times at Weybridge from the beginning of July, leading to her first Folk Centre booking at the end of September and says,



“I don't recall auditioning for Phil Garland but he may have heard me play at the Weybridge and once I started playing at the Folk Centre I got regular spots. I was paid \$2 for a 20 min spot ...and I got my name in The Press!

Liz's first performance at this venue. Christchurch Star, 1.7.1972.

“I found the formalised structure of the evenings to my advantage as the audience were super listeners and always applauded well. The feedback from other performers and audience was always encouraging. I tried not to play what other performers played and had to reach a high standard of musicianship to keep up with others. This created a platform for my music as it was quite a discipline learning all the lyrics! The Folk Centre provided a great experience for me and also provided a social scene where I could converse and compare my work with other performers.”



Christchurch Star, 30.9.1972

Liz’s songbook incorporated skiffle, the social concerns of the time and old ballads freshened-up through the American folk revival. Only a few survive in current repertoires: ‘The Red-winged Blackbird,’ ‘Catch the Wind,’ ‘Colours,’ ‘It’s All Over Now Baby Blue,’ ‘The War Drags On,’ ‘Big Yellow Taxi,’ ‘Blowin’ in the Wind,’ ‘Tomorrow is a Long Time,’ ‘Geordie,’ ‘The Little Girl of Horoshima,’ ‘All My Trials,’ ‘Gone the Rainbow,’ ‘Donna Donna,’ ‘The Weight,’ ‘Ain’t Nobody’s Business,’ ‘San Francisco Bay Blues,’ ‘Rock Island Line,’ ‘Matty Groves,’ and ‘The Quiet Joys of Brotherhood’.

To these she added an instrumental autoharp version of ‘The Call of the Bellbird’, a song first learned by many primary schoolchildren in New Zealand (including the author) off the radio c.1963, sung by the Australian Webb Brothers. The trio had copyrighted the song in 1953, recording it on rhythm guitars and bass and the release remained popular on both sides of the Tasman Sea.

If this popularity was due to the romanticism of the lyrics and the bird’s name, then each country’s public believed the song to be about their own land, not having knowledge of the other. That two related birds share the same name but voice quite different calls and live in different countries, was only discovered by the author in researching this matter.

At Bedford Row, Liz heard other artists involve the audience in call and response songs and others with simple choruses. This is quite a different skillset to delivering self-contained songs. It needs confidence and genuine warmth and empathy. She tried it and grew to relish interactive *a cappella* songs like ‘Wild Mountain Thyme,’

“It was very heart-warming hearing everyone singing. No one seemed to sing out of tune and harmonies blended like colours in a rainbow. It was a perfect way to end a set as it seemed to bring everyone together.”

Audience involvement was, of course, also a productive way to draw an encore. Liz’s tastes were quite cosmopolitan, ranging from commercial folk to bluegrass to British trad. Naturally, local artists were followed who sang from the same songbag: fellow autoharpist and protest singer Jae Renaut, banjo player Clive Collins, Jose Feliciano specialist Dave Morrison, Mary Finch, Simon Marks, blues mama Rosa Shiels and flutist/singers Paula Feather and Pene Evison.

Liz adds, *“I remember going to see Tony Hale, Phil Garland and his band and Christine Smith. My guitar style improved with all the new songs I learnt and these songs I still remember to this day.”*

She was booked 11 times at the Bedford Row Folk Centre by Phil Garland between September 1972 and September 1973, averaging about once a month. Phil could pick artists on the rise and a chord had certainly been struck with both club management and audiences.

The Club’s move to Oxford Tce in early 1974, however, introduced changes. The clubroom atmosphere, with its cosiness, toasted sandwiches, wall posters and bar, seemingly permanent, became exchanged for the impermanence of the single club night performance, sound system trucked in and out and with no food or late night convivialities. Liz reminisces, *“It was much nicer performing at the Folk Centre rather than the Foresters Hall, as it had a lot more character.”* Perhaps due to a mixture of changed venue and work responsibilities, her performances at the Folk Club reduced and in 1975, after a year in the classroom, she began her OE.

On her return and into the 1980s, family commitments consumed most of her time but Liz never stopped playing, shifting her focus from soloist to bands involving family members. Even so, many people are unaware of the connection between Liz and her younger musician brother, Ken, the original mandolin player with the bluegrass unit, Rural Delivery. Liz recalls,

“Ken was an outstanding musician. I taught him to play the autoharp and guitar when he was about 14 years old and he taught himself to play the mandolin.”

They were very close and Liz remembers fun times playing together in back country hoedowns and barn dances. His talent was such that a single band could not give him full expression and so he played widely in different bands. Once he mastered scales and a bag of licks, he could fit easily into any band on either mandolin or guitar with little practice.

Liz continues, “*We always laughed when we played with Ken as he was so much fun but I remember always having to stand on the left side of him when we performed as he was pretty deaf in one ear!*”

With a 5-string banjo playing husband, Liz neatly combined family life with a new-found interest in bluegrass music. She swapped fingerpicking for flatpicking and rhythm, and took on lead vocals in the family band for about 10 years. Her then husband Andy Ensor provided the banjo drive, brother Ken’s mandolin chops stretched into lead breaks and the sound was completed by Lois Middlemiss on back-up vocals. Son Mike joined the band on drums once he turned 10.



Liz in the 1980s

Calling themselves Mountain Dew and the Dogtuckers, a nod to Andy’s employment as a shepherd and their home near the Canterbury foothills, they performed at John and Deirdre Grenell’s Whitecliffs festival for 10 years in a row.

“*We just loved and enjoyed the beautiful blended harmonies and happy bouncy bluegrass tunes, meeting up with other musos annually and having great long jam sessions in the artist quarters,*” Liz remembers.

The Dogtuckers regularly ran barn dances in the Oxford district in the 1990s. For larger events they would sometimes be the support act for the Coal Rangers country band at Coopers Creek, some 10km from Oxford near the Canterbury foothills, with the townies staying over and enjoying country hospitality.

Then, in 2004 at age 42, family life changed forever as Ken Nichol was tragically killed in a car accident. An obituary in *The Press* mirrored the respect of his fellow musicians. Nick Jackman recorded some of his music and with the help of Dave Mitchell and Barry Clubb and some of his other friends they produced his CD *Legend*, sales of which helped pay for his funeral.

Life had to continue and country hospitality proved therapeutic. Liz has always embraced this, especially house concerts where musical friends, having travelled respectable distances and imbibed beyond the legal road limit, will sleep over. In fact, Liz likes nothing more today than to sing. Her vast repertoire, ability to remember lyrics and easy-going manner make her a stalwart of many a singalong session.

With family grown up, a third phase of Liz’s musical life has been marked by the turning of the Millennium and for a decade, or at least until the earthquakes rendered the venue unusable, Liz would venture bi-monthly to the Arts Centre’s Saturday market for solo gigs, selling on breaks copies of her solo CD *Sunday Sun*, engineered by Graham Wardrop in 2006. Down the track she contributed songs to a late 2010 compilation CD *Merging Landscapes*, by various Canterbury singer-songwriters.

A second great tragedy has fuelled her most recent CD, released in 2018 after six years of heart-wrenching gestation. Her eldest son, Mike, who had played drums in the family band as a youngster, took his own life in 2012, aged 32, surely the worst thing that can happen to a mother. This memorial children's CD was recorded with her students from Burnham School, engineered by Arnie van Bussel and dedicated to Mike. The CD, *King with a Crown*, was named for a song Liz wrote in the immediate aftermath and she performed it with her youngest son James at the funeral. Liz found writing so soon very healing.

Her teaching background gives Liz her organisational skills and the confidence and ability to work with other musicians. In a shared situation she operates an 'us' rather than 'them and me' relationship. There can be leadership on show but the front line is marked by equality. Thus, a trio that performed intermittently over five years (Liz, Tracy MacKenzie and Jane Dobson), while named Soul Charge, came across firmly as a



Soul Charge, 2014.

threesome. The photo was a promo for a Folk Club concert in September 2014. Playing soulful country, blues and contemporary covers, with instrumentation mainly from Liz's guitar, vocal arrangements were in the capable hands of Jane, who for a time, directed and scored arrangements for the Women in Harmony choir. Their most recent outing was at Liz's SuperGold Card party, May 2017, marking her retirement from full-time work.

A solo gig at the Harvard Bar in Wigram in early 2016, which the author attended, shows the inclusive side to this musician. Noting other musos there, Liz unhesitatingly invited some to join her once hurried discussions on song structures, harmonies and instrumental breaks were



completed. The musical results were laidback and fun with some musicians meeting for the first time.

Away from solo work and band-leading, Liz's inner confidence and relaxed manner allow her to happily slip into a support role, as in this nicely captured moment with John Grenell and Jennie Apirana at the March 2017 Whitecliffs Quick Fix Festival.

Photo: Dave Mitchell

In recent years, Liz has played in various band line-ups. She has found enjoyment in tribute concerts such as 2017's tribute series *The Last Waltz*, commemorating 40 years since Bob Dylan's backing band last performed. This musical happening was substantial enough to inspire international, national and even local tribute bands to form, some to tour.

The local tribute band, organised by Nigel Spiers and Steve Krenek, had one sold-out performance at the Shirley Working Men's Club before finding its way to the Folk Club's stage the next year on 2 April, 2017.

Local folk musician Eileen Reid had enthused, "*(A) Wonderfully dynamic and authentic representation of the original show,*" after attending the 2016 concert.

Hear Ye advised, 'When this musical show was performed in October 2016 the tickets were oversubscribed and wait-listed for seats, so be there early to assure yourself of a seat.'



Screenshot from video: Leanne Crothers

Liz was asked to select a Joni Mitchell song for the original concert, and chose to stay for both with 'Coyote', one of two songs Joni sang in the film. It is truly challenging with swirling jazz rhythms over which Liz deftly delivered lyrics part sung and part spoken and that were themselves distinctly off-beat. The song's mid-range pitch ideally suited her voice. The photo shows Nigel Malthus on drums, Richard Stewart on bass guitar and Nigel Spiers on keyboards (obscured) accompanying her. Liz also doubled up for the rest of the Folk Club's concert on backup vocals with Mary Dunne from Molly's Remedy.

Although these photos show Liz at the microphone fronting bands or in solo mode, the focal point for her is always the song and never the personality. Music gives her as much as she gives of herself. These days she does very little public unaccompanied singing because the pleasure is in sharing the musical moment with other musicians. Others sense this and invite her in.

Long after the family bluegrass band called it quits, Liz purchased an upmarket Deering Sierra banjo. Enjoying the challenge of not only Earl Scruggs' fingerpicking style but also the syncopated frailing style, it has extended her repertoire and given her another option when singing as a front person.



A serene moment at a family wedding, March 2018.

Involvement with major concerts continued into 2018. Invited to be part of celebrating 125 years of Women's Suffrage for a September concert at the Folk Club, she played alongside Mary Rushton, Kirsten Bone, Judy Smitheram and Argene Flack. Liz reports it was a five-strong set of beautiful songs with awesome rhythms and harmonies in front of a discerning audience, such gigs demanding careful preparation over simply relying on experience.



L-R: Liz with Deering banjo, Mary Ruston, Kirsten Bone, Judi Smitheram and Argene Flack.

Women's Suffrage Concert, 23.09.2018. Photo: Chris Flack

When offered a place in a Saturday era concert for the 50 year anniversary of the Christchurch Folk Music Club to be held in November 2018, Liz regretfully declined, it clashing with a prior commitment. It seemed she would miss out on revisiting an important part of her younger musical life. On the actual weekend Saint Cecelia, the patroness of musicians, seemed to smile down, the weather turned and tennis was cancelled. Liz was back in her era concert singing Doc Watson's 'Deep River Blues', a song in keeping with the



Liz with Eileen Reid, 26.11.2018. Photo: Warren Watson

times. By now there was also a Sunday morning concert so she and Eileen Reid got to twin on Townes van Zandt's 'If I Needed You'.

She reflects, "The whole weekend was a blast from the past. Catching up with old friends and meeting new ones. One of the highlights for me was having a banjo workshop with Paul Trenwith from The Hamilton County Bluegrass Band.

"Thank you, Tony Hale for this awesome opportunity with Paul. It was an excellent weekend, well-organised and researched.

Everyone thoroughly enjoyed themselves and it was much better than losing at tennis!"

In 2019, this busy, music-making grandmother is more active than reflective. Liz in middle-age still has her voice, her wide musical tastes and adaptability. These, allied to her calm nature, continue to project her appeal into a wide range of performance situations, and the invitations keep coming: she partakes in a Celtic music jam session at Finnegans Bar in Prebbleton most Friday nights and that group is about to leave on a northern South Island tour. But as a new adventure looms, another continues.

The nurturing part of Liz has led her to tutor at the Malvern School of Music in Darfield, 20km west of where she lives. For the last eight years, she has taught singing, guitar and now, beginner 5-string banjo. Students learn theory and instrument technique and there is a yearly public concert for performance experience. The two male banjo students have been

with her for one year and can also claim a lesson with Paul Trenwith, something they will remember for years to come.

Musing on her current musical life, Liz writes,

“Music and performance for me is an important part of my life and the music scene is always changing. I thoroughly enjoy attending local house concerts, BBQs and parties and love seeing my music students excel in concerts that I organise. I always seem to be meeting and playing with new musicians and am still asked to play as a solo performer and also in bands. Now I can relish singing and playing to my grandchildren and passing on my skills. The music in my life adds a forever changing colour and a vibrancy I treasure.” □