

Closer to Home

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An article by Hazel Young

Some of my favourite circle dances have been inspired by music created closer to home - by musicians in the UK. I love folk music, and English folk music at it's best has both incredibly beautiful melodies and simple effective poetry. At the same time I've had a long-term aversion to the Morris Dance music which often characterises our native dance tradition: I find the rum-ti-tum-ti melodeon style very uninspiring. Which is why a truly imaginative melodeonist called **Andy Cutting** has been such a breath of fresh air in English folk music. Cutting is a melodeon genius, and his recordings with **Blowzabella**, **Nigel Eaton** (hurdy-gurdy maestro), **Chris Wood** (supreme fiddler and singer) and **Karen Tweed** (accordionist par excellence) amongst others, represent a new renaissance in English folk music.

Blowzabella in particular were a powerful force in instrumental folk music in this country, the ultimate ceilidh band, and an inspiration to legions of musicians ever since : hundreds of bagpipers and hurdy-gurdy players have taken up these instruments because of the example of Blowzabella's Jon Swayne and Nigel Eaton. Blowzabella still re-forms occasionally for French dance events, but don't seem to record together anymore. The circle dance repertoire includes several dances to Blowzabella music : the loud and lively '*Last Chance Bourree*' for example from the appropriately named CD *Wall of Sound* (Osmosys OSMO CD 005). Also from Wall of Sound is a raucous '*Kopenitsa*', and a track called '*Finnish Scottish*' to which Rosey Fagg choreographed the popular and equally lively '*Jack In The Green*'. Rosey Fagg created another popular dance called '*The Ice House*' : this time the source of the music was **Nigel Eaton** and **Andy Cutting's** CD called *Panic At The Café* (Beautiful Jo BEJOCD27).

One of my favourite Andy Cutting tracks has inspired a great new couples dance choreographed by Mike Dennison. It's called '*Organdi*': the tune is lovely and the playing is exquisite. It has been recorded by **Andy Cutting** and **Chris Wood** on the CD *Lusignac* (RUFCD 04, track is '*Florinda/Organdi*') and by **Andy Cutting** and **Karen Tweed** on a compilation of Irish music *Across the Waters* (Nimbus CD NI5415) - here the track is titled '*Untitled/Organdie*'.

Another band in the Blowzabella genre are the **Eelgrinders** from Devon. They play bagpipes made by Jon Swayne (piper with Blowzabella) and their repertoire is a mix of French dance music, medieval music and their original compositions which often sound like familiar established English folk tunes with a long history. Together they create a new blend of English folk music. The first Eelgrinders CD *Aquamarine* (EELCD001) prompted Celia Bain to choreograph a whole suite of new circle dances : '*Droneless*' in particular has become a firm favourite down my way. Coincidentally the same piece of music has inspired a very different Rosey Fagg dance '*The Cat Came Back*'. The Eelgrinders often play live for dancing - so if you enjoy French dance music and the Eelgrinders are down your way, take the opportunity to enjoy the Bal.

I have also been very fortunate on several occasions to be able to dance to the wild Balkan sounds of a band from Leeds called **Caravanserai**. Alas, I believe they have disbanded (I do hope someone will correct me). In addition to memories of a band who were dynamite on stage, Caravanserai have left us with three excellent recordings. They played Balkan music (including Klezmer and Gypsy music) with considerable verve and authentic drive. On their first cassette *Panic* (SAMIZDAT001) they recorded a fast '*Al Sadenu*' which completely transformed my approach to the dance! The second cassette *Pig* (SAMIZDATCA002) contains a frantic '*Lazbar*' which is an absolute circle dance classic (track is called '*Topadarsko Oro*' : it contains an Irish reel in the middle!!). The tape includes excellent versions of '*Pajdusko Oro*', a slow '*Misirlou*' and '*Kalamatianos*', while their third cassette *Shock Horo* (SAMIZDATCA003) features memorable and very danceable versions of '*Makedonsko Devojce*', '*Mari Mariko*' and '*Simcho-Na*'.

Finally, a band called **Outback** were based in the UK, but were a mix of Australian didgeridoos (Graham Wiggins), a guitarist with dancing fingers (band leader Martin Cradick), African drums and a celtic fiddle!! Stefan Freedman created a joyful dance also called '*Outback*' to the track '*Baka*' from their first CD *Baka* (Hannibal HNCD 1357), and Rosey Fagg was similarly inspired by their global dance mix to choreograph two wonderful dances the '*Australian Fire Dance*' (from the Baka CD) and '*Walkabout*' from their second CD *Dance The Devil Away* (Hannibal HNCD1369). But my favourite Outback inspired dance is from June Watts and it's called '*Salmon*'. Again the music and is from *Dance The Devil Away* (track title '*Desert Rain*') and the music and the dance together take you on a journey : a lifecycle, the eternal cycle of birth, life, death and birth again. Great music and a great dance that reminds us all yet again how circle dance can inspire us and how deeply it can touch us.
