

Topic Records 80th Anniversary

Start time: 8pm

Running time: 2 hours 40 minutes with interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Martin Aston discusses the history behind the world's oldest independent label ahead of this collaborative performance.

When Topic Records made its debut in 1939 with Paddy Ryan's 'The Man That Waters The Workers' Beer', an accordion-backed diatribe against capitalist businessmen who underpay their employees, it's unlikely that anyone involved was thinking of the future – certainly not to 2019, when the label celebrates its 80th birthday.

In any case, the future would have seemed very precarious in 1939, given the outbreak of World War II, during which Topic ceased most activity (shellac was particularly hard to source). But post-1945, the label made good on its original brief: 'To use popular music to educate and inform and improve the lot of the working man,' explains David Suff, the current spearhead of the world's oldest independent label – and the undisputed home of British folk music.

Tonight at the Barbican (where Topic held their 60th birthday concerts), musical director Eliza Carthy – part of the Topic recording family since 1997, though her parents Norma Waterson and Martin Carthy have been members since the sixties and seventies respectively - has marshalled a line-up to reflect the passing decades, which hasn't been without its problems.

'We have far too much material, given it's meant to be a two-hour show!' she says. 'It's impossible to represent 80 years – you're talking about the left-wing leg, the archival leg, the many different facets of society - not just communists but farmers and factory workers - and the folk scene in the Fifties, the Sixties, the Seventies... up until now! But it's a fabulous burden to be given.'

The concert will partly mirror the label's new compilation, *Vision & Revision: The First 80 Years Of Topic*, where artists from label luminaries Peggy Seeger, Martin Carthy and Martin Simpson join a gaggle of younger folk – many of whom have never recorded for Topic, such as Chris Wood, Olivia Chaney and Sam Lee – to pick one song to cover from Topic's extensive back catalogue. 'We were overwhelmed by the response from everyone we asked, it was spectacularly heartwarming,' Suff recalls.

'Anne Briggs and Martin Carthy's debuts, June Tabor's *Airs And Graces*, Nic Jones's *Penguin Eggs*, Norma Waterson's *Bright Shiny Morning*; these are just some of the iconic and influential records released by Topic that are an inspiration to me,' says Olivia Chaney. 'Topic is home to the old and the new, from traditional singers and music to all the interesting stuff in between that's harder to categorise. So much wonderful music has been kept alive for younger generations to discover.'

So it was for older generations too. 'My first exposure to Topic was an album of sea songs, which was very odd and different from what I imagined a folk song was,' recalls Martin Carthy. 'They were much grittier and actually about real people. I realised how incredibly varied and beautiful the songs were when I started to sing them myself. And there is always more to discover.'

One source that continued to give is Topic's epic anthology *Voice Of The People*, first launched for the label's 60th birthday. It now stands at 30 volumes, gathering English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh traditional music drawn from the label's archives and private collections, in line with the 'educate and inform' doctrine taken by the label's founders, The Workers Music Association, under the wing of the British Communist Party.

Topic was carried along on the backs of two legendary pioneers: Ewan MacColl (who made his Topic recording debut in 1950), and A.L 'Bert' Lloyd, whose first Topic release featured two bush ballads he'd learned in Australia, and was appointed Topic's artistic director in 1958. Bill Leader was another prominent Topic presence, a member of the Workers Music Association who became Topic's production manager. 'But in order to survive,' Suff notes, 'Topic had to act like a commercial record label as well as an archive and museum. It's never had any special status or grant aid, or been part of an Arts Council conversation.'

Topic's 'commercial' activities have only enriched its coffers, from releasing the first Waterson Family album *Frost And Fire: A Calendar Of Ritual And Magical Songs* in 1964 to last year's *When All Is Still* by Rachael McShane & The Cartographers. 'In a sense, Topic's success has been a measure of its failure too' Suff muses. 'If we'd made more of a fuss, or had a hit record, it's possible that EMI would have hoovered it up, the way Blue Note - which also formed in 1939 - was absorbed into a major. To me, Topic is extraordinarily successful. If a family set up a corner

barbican

hop manufacturing nuts and bolts and was still doing it eighty years later, that would be remarkable. In a world where record labels come and go, that's even more remarkable.'

Even in the current age of downloading and streaming, Topic has held its own, reissuing over 300 items with downloadable sleeve notes so fans can access the important minutiae, whilst the information is preserved for future generations. All that fantastic source material and its interpreters, young and not-so-young, comes to life tonight. For example, Martin Carthy will be singing with Eliza and Ewan Wardrop ('he's a great dancer too!' says Martin), and taking on Ewan MacColl's 'Champion At Keeping 'Em Rolling'. Olivia Chaney, Lisa Knapp, Sam Lee, Alasdair Roberts, Spiro, Chris Wood, Marry Waterson, Gerry Diver, Emily Portman and all-female Morris dancers Boss Morris will also be present, plus, 'a few surprises', Eliza promises. Altogether, she says, 'Everybody at the gig are heavily influenced by the people I want to represent, like Louisa Killen. Sheila Stewart, Dick Gaughan, Margaret Barry, Ewan MacColl, Bert Lloyd, The Watsons, the Copper Family, Peggy Seeger, Dominic Behan...'

Indeed, a fabulous burden to be given. The problem is, Topic continues to ensure, and prosper. And no doubt it will continue in the same vein. After all, the subtitle of Vision & Revision is The First 80 Years Of Topic. So, here's to the next 80!

Produced by the Barbican

Performers

Eliza Carthy Music Director, Voice, Fiddles

Martin Carthy Voice, Guitar

Norma Waterson Voice

Marry Waterson Voice

Saul Rose Melodeon

Ewan Wardrop Ukelele, Step Dance, voice

Alasdair Roberts Voice, Guitar

Olivia Chaney Voice, Harmonium, Dobro

Emily Portman Voice, Banjo, Concertina

Lisa Knapp Voice, Banjo

Gerry Diver Fiddles

Chris Wood Voice, Guitar

Sam Lee Voice

Bernard Butler Electric Guitar

James Keay Piano

Alex Vann Mandolin

Jon Hunt Guitar

Jason Sparkes Acordion

Jane Harbour Fiddles

Mark Rodgers Melodeon

Alex Merry Dancer

Rhia Davenport Dancer

Katie Watton Dancer

Josie Wickes Dancer

Clare McLeod Dancer

Mila Harris-Mussi Dancer

Zoe Rodgers Creature

Freya Tate Creature

David Suff Master of Ceremony

More on Topic Records:

Topic Records: Folk In Focus

An absorbing exhibition of iconic photographs from the Topic Records archive focusing on the seminal artists who've helped shape contemporary folk music as we know it.

Visit cecilsharphouse.org for more information



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