Shirley Collins looks back over her distinguished career as an icon of English folk with Martin Aston, ahead of this special performance to celebrate Heart’s Ease.

‘Time is a bit of a nonsense at the moment,’ ventures Shirley Collins MBE, referring to the stop-start nature of life under COVID-19, before the UK’s third tranche of lockdown ensured that her streamed Live At The Barbican show in February had to be postponed.

But as Collins points out, she has experienced worse. In her teens, the country faced the polio outbreak, ‘and you couldn’t go to school or visit anyone,’ she recalls. And there was the small matter of WWII. Collins’ family were evacuated, bombed out of their house, and Shirley and sister Dolly were machine-gunned by a German plane. ‘Mum said, if we saw one to dive under a hedge, so we did,’ she recalls. ‘But the dreadful thing about the pandemic is that you can’t see or feel it coming.’

One wonders if anyone will be writing songs about the pandemic in the same way that people did about the dramas of everyday life in centuries past – love, death, lust, betrayal, pressganging, witchcraft, worker’s rights, murder, and beyond. Even after WWII, Collins’ own life has seen more than its fair share of drama, as detailed in her two memoirs: America Over the Water, about her trip to the American South in 1959 with the song collector Alan Lomax; and the self-explanatory All in the Downs: Reflections on Life, Landscape, and Song, plus one documentary, The Ballad Of Shirley Collins, which told the story of how a young Sussex girl emerged to become the undisputed grand dame of traditional English folk, only to effectively disappear, abandoning recording and performing for 34 years - from 1980 to 2014.

Collins first played the Barbican in 2017, in support of her 2016 album Lodestar; her return to the venue is in support of Heart’s Ease (2020), which she has been unable to perform live until now. Given how Collins stopped performing back in 1978, it’s perhaps surprising that she is missing, ‘the lovely warmth of a live audience,’ but then her decision to leave music was born out of necessity.

From 1959 to 1978, Collins released a series of peerless, pioneering albums, under her own name or in collaborations with Davy Graham, sister Dolly, David Murrow’s Early Music Consort, and her second husband Ashley Hutchings and his Albion Band. All were distinguished by Collins’ uncannily toned soprano, simultaneously fragile and forthright, and wholly unaffected. ‘A folk voice should just be a conduit for the song,’ she once said. ‘You want no sheen, just the song.’

But that fine instrument was blunted by a traumatic divorce from Hutchings, after which Collins was diagnosed with dystonia (an affliction of the vocal muscles), and unable to sing, Collins disappeared from the scene. Fast forward to 1996, and her surprise guest appearance on the track ‘The Starres Are Marching Sadly Home’ by Current 93, the avant-rock/folk collective led by David Tibet, whose Durtro label had released the Collins compilation Fountain Of Snow in 1992. Tibet managed to persuade Collins to sing on further Current 93 records (in 1997, 1999, 2006 and 2007), but she turned down his persistent requests that Collins, “join in,” on stage as well. ‘People had given up on me - I had too,’ she admits. ‘Eventually, I got so fed up with David asking that I said yes!’

At the Union Chapel in 2014, Collins and her friend/accompnistan Ian Kearney (formerly of The Oysterband) performed two numbers: the traditional lullaby ‘All The Pretty Little Horses’ which she had sung on record for Current 93 and the song she is perhaps best known for, ‘Death & The Lady’ (first recorded in 1970 for the Shirley and Dolly Collins album Love, Death & The Lady).
According to the Quietus review, ‘Her voice has changed from her heyday, being more of a throaty moan as she approaches her eighth decade, but it still carries the emotions of her lyrics through the hall with unbridled power.’

‘As we walked off,’ Shirley recalls, ‘Ian said, “I think we got away with it!”’. In many ways, performing again is even better now, because I value it more. And I bring the audience with me, from those who are just pleased I’m back doing something, to a younger crowd. One young person at the Barbican show [in 2017] was shouting “Shirley, Shirley!” like I was a rock star! But they like the songs as well.’

The song choices of Lodestar, The Guardian wrote, were ‘bold and bloody,’ the mood, ‘shivery and dramatic.’ The album, with Ian Kearey as musical director, included a re-recording of ‘Death & The Lady’, with Kearey’s eerie guitar contrasting with Dolly’s original sombre piano. Most notably, Shirley’s voice, though it can’t recapture the form and tone of her youth, had still recovered much of its commanding presence.

Heart’s Ease, again with Kearey directing, was less definably ‘bloody’ but no less passionate, with a strong focus on family: the quintessentially lilting ‘Sweet Greens And Blues’ was written by Collins’ first husband Austin John Marshall, about a couple adjusting to their new life as parents whilst the chillier ‘Locked In Ice’, written by her late nephew Buz Collins, about a ghost ship in the Arctic Ocean. It’s Collins’ favourite song on the album. ‘I find it so haunting,’ she says, ‘And in a way, it represented what I’d been. For 30 years or so, I felt that I wasn’t my true self, just drifting like the little lost ship.’

Finally, Collins gets to play these songs live, and more besides, with Kearey leading the band. Though the set list has yet to be finalised, Collins expects to open the show with the 17th century ballad ‘Awake Awake (Awake Sweet England).’ ‘It was prescient in many ways,’ she says. One line is “dreadful days draw near…” I think of what we’re going through, with COVID and Brexit. It’s like a forewarning.’

But as ‘Sweet Greens And Blues’ maintains, ‘If we don’t make it this year, let’s see what next year will bring,’ says Collins. That’s what I particularly love about folk music: it deals with every aspect in life: and inside your head and getting outside and needing to interact with others.’

Performers

Shirley Collins vocals
Ian Kearey guitar
Pete Cooper fiddle
Dave Arthur melodeon, guitar, banjo
Pip Barnes guitar, voice
John Watcham anglo concertina
Glenn Redman dancing

Produced by the Barbican