

# LINEN

## Les Barker A Peculiar English Poet

by Tom Nelligan

A performance by English poet and songwriter Les Barker is utterly unlike anything else you're likely to see at a folk club or festival. Or perhaps would want to see, if you're afraid of dachshunds, troubled by horrible puns, unsettled when the English language is stretched to surreal limits, or otherwise humor-impaired. On stage, a slightly built, tousle-haired man with a perpetual grin will read engagingly clever and very silly rhymes about subjects like sexually challenged glow worms, lonely lemmings, and misdirected Greek adventurers, while the audience rocks with laughter and shouts back chorus refrains. If he's accompanied by his semi-all-star backing group, the Mrs. Ackroyd Band, you can also expect wonderfully funny parody songs that suggest what might have happened if Dr. Demento had been an English folkie.

There's another, less well-known aspect of Barker's work, as well, a series of penetrating and often angry songs about the way people can mistreat each other that have been powerfully recorded by some of the leading figures in English folk music, including Martin Carthy, Norma Waterson, and June Tabor. Whether about environmental disasters, African famines, or rampant militarism, his serious songs are often fierce, always deeply humanistic, and full of frustration that powerful people can cause so much pain.

Such are the two sides of a man who cheerfully describes himself as "a peculiar English poet." He grew up in Manchester, where he worked as an accountant for 18 years while discovering his true calling. "I wrote a poem while I was in college taking economics," he recalled. "Several years later, I handed this poem to my boss, who was in a folk group, and he started performing it. I went along to the club to see him

perform, and I got bullied into doing something. And it just grew." Around 1974 he began delighting audiences in English folk clubs with his offbeat humor, reading poems and parodies while accompanied by a small shaggy dog named Mrs. Ackroyd. Ten years later, he became a full-time writer and performer, with 62 self-published booklets of poetry and 13 albums to date. The albums, both comic and serious, are on the Mrs. Ackroyd label. "The dog started the label," he insisted. "I just helped out. I had to do the paperwork because she couldn't hold a pen."

The titles of his poems give a pretty good idea about what he does. There's the alternative perspective on the Titanic tragedy called "Have You Got Any News of the Iceberg?," the saga of a circus performer of limited talent called "Cosmo, the Fairly Accurate Knife Thrower," and the observation on physics and anatomy called "Dachshunds with Erections Can't

Climb Stairs." About the last, Barker deadpanned, "That's a really nice one to do at North American festivals like Old Songs, because you've got somebody doing signing for the deaf, and it's a really good one to do with a signer." About his poems in general, he said, "I'd say you probably don't want to be listening to this kind of thing. It's not good for you."

But a lot of people disregard his advice, and through steady touring in the U.K., and in recent years in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, he has built a loyal following who are dedicated and knowledgeable, who shout out requests and often lines from poems like they're part of the show. "It's a real culture shock," he said with a grin, "to see an entirely sober audience all sitting about three feet from you and all gazing intently and concentrating heavily. I'm not used to people concentrating on what I do."

Where do his ideas come from? "They just arrive out of nowhere as a general rule. It's when I'm out shopping, or driving the van, or lying in the bath, and the idea arrives. I just have to develop it and tidy it up and cross out the bits that don't work and type it. It's like any other job, really — your brain learns how to do it without you consciously thinking of it."

Although he doesn't sing himself, Barker started writing parody songs around the same time he started doing poetry, and a folk club comedian named Bob Williamson began performing them. "And so the parody side of it immediately blossomed," he explained. "There was an outlet for it, and so I just carried on doing it."

In Barker's mind, "Hard Times of Old England" becomes "Hard Cheese of Old England," a salute to dairy products sung with utter earnestness by Martin Carthy. The gospel song "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" becomes "Will the Turtle Be Unbroken," a tale of a reptile in peril. The cowboy song "Get Along Little Dogies," by dividing the second word of the title, becomes yet another contemplation of dachshunds. "That's partly June Tabor's fault as well," Barker demurred. "She's an expert on the creatures, and we exchange ideas now and then."

"I'm completely non-musical," he claimed, "I just find these nice tunes and count the number of notes and write some-

thing like the same number of syllables. Parodies are an extremely satisfying thing to write, because you're doing something like a three-dimensional crossword puzzle. As well as trying to get the words in the song that you're writing to rhyme, you try as far as possible to rhyme them with the words of the other song beneath it, and it's fun."

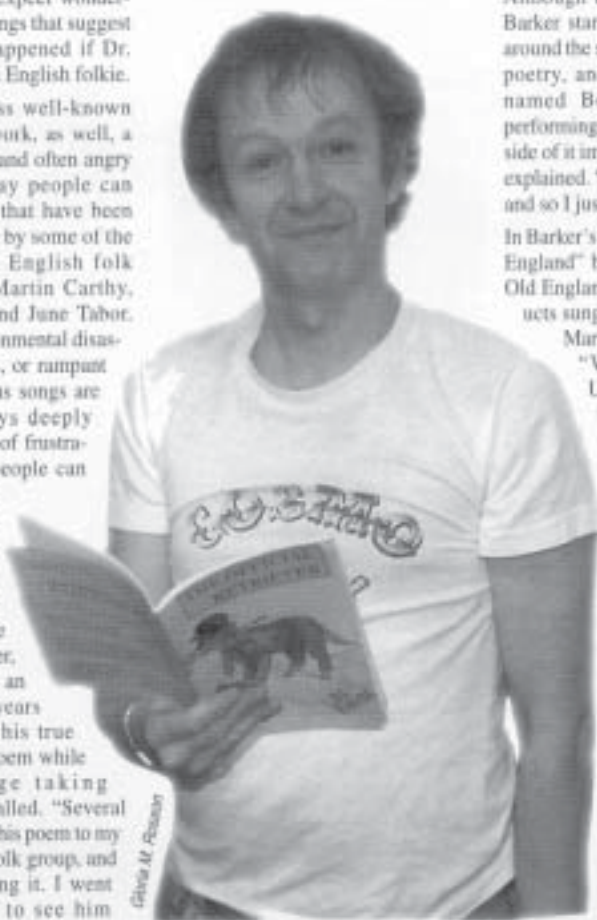
And he's had no trouble finding great musicians like Carthy and Tabor to record them. "Most people are just dying to have a go at doing something silly. The great tradition of the Mrs. Ackroyd Band is that we take something really stupid, and we do it in a thoroughly professional way. So the idea is to get people that are really good at music and get the songs done properly."

Then there are his serious albums, with his lyrics set to traditional tunes or melodies contributed by friends. *The Stones of Collanish* is a folk opera, a story of a young couple who lose and find each other set to Shetland Islands tunes, while *Some Love* and *The Wings of Butterflies* are collections of anti-war, anti-corruption, pro-humanity compositions. "I think if you're going to be serious you might as well do it properly," Barker observed. "There isn't a lot of point in telling the world about your latest love affairs. If you can write a nice song, fair enough, it's entertaining, but it's not something the rest of the world needs to know as a general rule. Whereas a lot of the major issues are things that are worth a bit of public debate. So I just write down my opinion; somebody puts a tune to it and goes and performs it properly for me."

Barker has two more CDs scheduled for release this summer, a live recording of new comic poems called *Axovertherapy* and a collection of serious songs called *Alex of the Dog*. "It's basically a lot of nice slow tunes that I've written words for," he says. Tabor is again among the singers this time, as is longtime collaborator Allison Younger, along with Steve Gillette and Cindy Mangson, Chris Leslie, Eileen McGann and David Knudson, Steve Tilston, and Artisan.

Meanwhile, he continues writing and touring, visiting North America several times each year, bringing his humor and spreading laughter at folk venues, arts centers, and First Night celebrations. "If you do this thing for any length of time," he concluded with a smile, "then I suppose you learn that certain things work, and so you keep doing them. I've just cultivated an appearance of stupidity!"

web site: [www.mrsackroyd.com](http://www.mrsackroyd.com)



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