

CDSS Sings—“And When I Rise”

by Bob Walser

Long after midnight on Saturday night of the Youth Traditional Song (YTS) weekend last January, I heard Becky Wright lead “And When I Rise,” an enchanting call-and-response song. Sitting next to me was Suzannah Park who, with a twinkle in her eye, implied that there was an interesting backstory to the performance. Turns out that Suzannah was the source of Becky’s song by way of another singer, Mia Bertelli, and that Suzannah had noticed a bit of “folk processing.” Since all three singers were attending YTS, the following morning I recorded each of them singing the song wondering what changes had taken place in the context of oral/aural (and digital, as it turns out) transmission. Here are brief notes on the song and transcriptions of the three singers’ performances which, taken together, both shed light on and raise questions about song transmission among young singers in the early twenty-first century.

The words of “And When I Rise” are sometimes said to be based on a portion of the poem “Prayers and Sayings of a Mad Farmer” by Wendell Berry (born 1934), first published in 1971 (*Farming: A Handbook*, New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, page 67). Berry’s poem has thirteen brief sections of which the eighth runs:

“When I rise up let me rise up joyful, like a bird.
When I fall let me fall without regret, like a leaf.”

However, Samuel Lockridge, who also recorded the song, wrote by email that “[Berry’s poem] is widely considered to be the origin of the lyrics, but I’ve had the honor of meeting Mr. Berry a few times and he told me those lines were inspired by an old Buddhist mantra he once heard.”

The earliest recording of the melody I have found thus far is by Judith-Kate Friedman who included the song on her 1994 album “Count Me In,” first released as a cassette in 1986. Judith-Kate learned the song at meetings of the Federation of Ohio River Cooperatives, which she attended in 1981 or 1982 while a student at Oberlin. While preparing her cassette, Judith-Kate traveled to the Library of Congress to research the tune but, having no luck, issued the recording with the melody marked “Public Domain.” Judith-Kate modified the

When I Rise

Transcribed from the singing of Suzannah Park, January 2014
Beckett, Massachusetts

When I rise let me rise like a bird Joy-ful-ly, joy-ful-ly. And when I fall, Let me fall like a leaf With out re-gret so joy-ful-ly.

song from the way she learned it, adding “Joyfully” after “Without regret” which was the final line as she learned the song.

There are several references to the song and videos of performances available on the Internet, some associated with Plum Village centers for Buddhist practice (plumvillage.org), echoing the Buddhist connection noted by Lockridge. None, however, offer a clear link to any of the YTS singers.

For the moment, then, the song’s ultimate sources are still unclear. However, its present life in the world of Youth Traditional Song is open to view and to that we now turn.

A distinctive feature of the versions sung at YTS is an echo repetition that works beautifully for group singing. The song leader sings a line and the group echoes the line back. In this way only the song leader needs to know the song but anyone present who wishes to sing may easily participate. In addition, if the leader and group hold the last note of each line they sing, intermittent transient harmonies add to the beauty of the performance.

Above is a transcription of Suzannah Park’s version sung at YTS; Mia’s and Becky’s appear as web extras at <http://www.cdss.org/cdss-news.html>. Suzannah, the source for the other singers, lives in Asheville, North Carolina. She learned the song from her sister, Georgia Rose Armstrong Park from Boulder, Colorado who, according to Suzannah, may have learned the song through the Turning the Wheel dance community in Boulder. Suzannah’s song has just two verses, which can be repeated as desired.

Mia Bertelli, originally from New Mexico but now living in Marlboro, Vermont, learned “And When I Rise” from Suzannah. Mia is free with the structure, repeating phrases ad lib. The transcription represents just one possible realization of her approach to the song. In her words, “...I actually change it, most of the time every time I sing it. I used to just do...every call and response...like, ‘When I rise, when I fall, when I rise, when I fall,’ but then I really liked putting in the end pieces of ‘Joyfully, joyfully’ and mixing it up in the middle and then going back to that. So sometimes I just play around with it so it sounds a little different every time when I sing it.”

Becky Wright heard Mia sing the song then “brushed up on the words via the Internet” (email, May 2, 2014). She noted “I may have listened to a few other versions in the process, I think, though I’m not sure how much of the melodic changes between my version and Mia’s come from that ‘contamination’ vs. plain old folk-processing.”

As anyone who has done transcription is well aware, it is the transcriber who gets the most benefit from the process. Notation is a very rough tool for describing pitch and rhythm, let alone timbre or

other more subtle aspects of musical performance, with all of which a transcriber becomes intimately aware through repeated close listening. The decision of what to omit and what to include is ultimately the transcriber’s judgment call, but every detail represents a choice by the singer, conscious or not. But even with those limitations the differences between these three singers’ realizations of the “same” song are pretty remarkable. Mia takes Suzannah’s simple structure and deliberately mixes it up in performance, Becky brings in verses from other sources, and all three singers employ distinct melodic details to make the song their own, including specifying various details to include in the transcriptions when asked to review them.

I would like to sit down with each of the singers and ask them about the choices they made and how they think of this song and of themselves as part of the process of transmission—or as folklorists, performers and/or artists—but that is a bigger project than this brief article. In turn, it makes me think of the questions I would like to ask of Rees Baldwin, the crew of The Boys or any of the singers whose songs I have learned from archival recordings or a printed page. My impression is that the three singers represented here approach singing thoughtfully and purposefully but from these transcriptions alone I can only guess at the process and values that went into the choices they made. I can and will ask Becky, Suzannah and Mia, but for most of the singers whose songs I sing, I can only wonder.

Note: Thanks to Suzannah, Mia and Becky, and to Henry and Betsy Chapin, Judith-Kate Friedman, Samuel Lockridge, and Deirdre Murtha for sleuthing and help.

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Web extras: Transcriptions of Mia’s and Becky’s versions of the songs are posted with the online edition of this issue: <http://www.cdss.org/cdss-news.html> (scroll down to Fall 2014). Also posted are mp3 files of each singer performing “When I Rise,” as recorded by Bob Walser at the Youth Traditional Song Weekend, January 2014.