

Jack Langstaff—Recipient of CDSS Lifetime Contribution Award 2005

by *Jerry Epstein*

The Country Dance and Song Society is pleased to announce that this year's Lifetime Contribution Award is going to John Langstaff of Cambridge, Massachusetts, founder of Revels, Inc. and a much-loved singer and teacher. The following tribute is taken from Jerry Epstein's letter to the CDSS Awards Committee and is printed here with permission. Details of the awards ceremony will be on our website later this summer.



(Jack Langstaff will be at Folk Music Week this summer, August 27-September 3, for the first time since 1970. Space at the week is still available as of late May; see www.cdss.org/programs/2005/pw-folk-music.html for the latest.)

I think it would be near impossible to find another person in the United States who has influenced more people in the traditional arts of both dance and song than Jack Langstaff. I think Pete Seeger might be the only competition.

Jack was born in 1920 and grew up in Brooklyn, New York. His parents were both singers and knew a great many traditional songs (mostly English) through Cecil Sharp's books and other collections his father had. Jack was a singer from a very early age and was featured in concerts as a solo boy soprano. At age twelve he changed schools where he had a remarkable teacher, Carol Preston. As fate would have it, she was May Gadd's roommate* and was involved in all of this folkie stuff long, long before it was fashionable. In 1934 she determined to go down to the White Top Festival in the Carolina Mountains, which was one of the hottest things in traditional music at the time, and she decided for reasons no one knows to take Jack with her. For reasons also unknown, Jack's parents said to go ahead.

That event is the reason that there are Revels productions across the country and the reason there is a Folk Music Week and an Early Music Week at Pinewoods (both of which were started by Jack around 1950). That is the reason there are a long list of children's books involving traditional music and singing games, and morris and sword dance, and mummers plays, and traditional music and dance in the fifteen Revels productions all across the country. That is the reason that thousands of teachers over at least two generations have learned in workshops and books how to use traditional music and dance in the education of children.

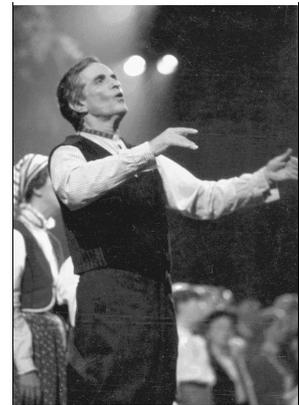
It was an overwhelming experience for Jack. There were many now famous people there: John Powell (the composer and pianist with whom Jack later worked); the composer and pianist George Pullen Jackson with his shape note singers; Richard Chase, collector of the Jack tales; the great banjo player Wade Ward. But most of all he heard the mountain people sing their own songs. Unaccompanied, of course, which Jack had never heard: "At first I could not imagine that someone with an old cracked voice could get up in front of people and sing like that. But by the second or third verse I was hooked."

Carol Preston took him to Pinewoods for the first time that same summer. He learned morris

and sword and country dancing from Gay, from Maud Karpeles, from Lily Conant and others. He remained lifelong friends with Gay, Maud, Lily and with Douglas Kennedy whom he first met around 1940. Jack met Frank Warner in 1941 through his mother and was immediately interested in the material Frank and Anne were collecting. Jack brought Frank to the first Folk Music Week staff in 1950, and urged CDSS to present Jean Ritchie in her first public concert in New York around 1949. Jack is the most supportive person imaginable to get other people to pursue worthwhile things and to enlarge their knowledge and ability. He is (again, along with Pete) utterly egoless, and has never in the thirty-eight years I have known him put his ego in front of anyone.

Jack began recording folk songs on 78s in the late 1940s, and these are being reissued now by Revels. As near as I can ascertain, and I have made some inquiries of people who would know, Jack was the first to issue commercial recordings of solo unaccompanied folk songs except for some Edison cylinders issued by Percy Grainger in England in 1908. It is really astonishing, as unaccompanied solo songs were utterly unknown (and considered freakish) in the 1940s. It has been suggested that maybe Ewan MacColl in England was first (Jack's were also recorded in England); someday I hope to find out.

Around 1950 and again in the early 1960s, Jack was living in England (one summer with Ralph Vaughan Williams) and working for the British Broadcasting Company. In the early sixties he had a regular TV show called "Making Music with John Langstaff," where he did folk songs and games with a group of (highly selected) children. Those programs were widely seen. I had an experience about twenty years ago where I brought Jack's recording "The Seeds of Love" to play on BBC Nottingham on Roy Harris' radio show. As it started, I saw the engineer's jaw drop to the floor. He remembered when he was in kindergarten and three times a week they would wheel in this big TV and "Making Music" would come on. He remembered the (unforgettable) voice as soon as he heard it.



In 1958, Jack sang, along with Bob and Ron Copper, at Cecil Sharp House for the sixtieth anniversary of the Folk Song Society. (Vaughan Williams cut the cake.) Jack and Bob Copper did not meet again until 1999 when I was able to bring them together for the conference on "100 Years of the Folk Revival." I asked Jack to introduce Bob as the keynote speaker. Jack had a copy that his father had saved of the first Folk Song Society Journal from 1898. In it, Kate Lee describes the finding of Bob Copper's grandfather and great uncle, and Jack read this to Bob sitting on the stage. It was an overwhelming moment.

Through the 1950s, '60s and '70s, Jack's main career was as a concert singer (Purcell, Schubert, Brahms, etc.), but he always included traditional songs on his programs, and in those years he did so much teaching and organizing for the groups that were later to join CDSS.

Jack Langstaff, perhaps along with Pete Seeger, is the most important living link to the first generation of the folk revival. In the areas of interest to CDSS, I think there is no question that he is the most important living link.

* May Gadd, also known by her nickname "Gay," was CDSS's director for many years.

Folksinger Jerry Epstein has known Jack Langstaff for nearly forty years and has interviewed him several times; currently, he is, with Gerret Warner, working on a video of Jack. Jerry will be Jack's accompanist at CDSS's Folk Music Week at Pinewoods Camp in late August 2005.

Photo credits: top, George Mattingly; bottom, Roger Ide; courtesy Revels, Inc., and used with permission. This article appeared in the CDSS News, issue 185, July/August 2005.