

Ian Croft celebrates the work of UK folksong's grande dame, Frankie Armstrong

In full voice

Hot on the heels of an eightieth birthday that attracted Zoom visits from ninety-six people, Frankie Armstrong was more than happy to return to Zoom – only her fourth of the day – to tell me about her new album, *Cats Of Coven Lawn*. She described how her birthday had “finished with a wonderful ceilidh”, which isn’t bad going considering she’s been registered blind since her teens.

Frankie Armstrong was born in Workington, Cumbria though the family moved to Hertfordshire when she was just four. “I always loved singing and my parents encouraged me,” she begins. “My mum was an artist and I thought that’s what I’d do too, because I always loved painting and drawing, but we’d also dance around, and sing round the piano, and I’d sing solos in the school choir.”

Then she found trad jazz. “On my fifteenth birthday my parents took me and a friend up to London to Humphrey Lyttelton’s Jazz Club in Oxford Street. They left us there in this fume-filled room, full of men in tweed jackets, and when they came back they could hardly see through the smoke. What amazing parents to do that. For my sixteenth birthday, I went with my boyfriend, who played washboard, up to Ken Colyer’s club.”

Meanwhile, a trad jazz club had started in the wilds of Hertfordshire. “It was once a month, and I went with some girlfriends to see Mick Mulligan and George Melly. The leader of The Stort Valley Skiffle Group, who I’d met before, came up and asked me to dance. We were jiving away, and I told him I’d enjoyed his band when I’d seen them. He said he was looking for a girl singer, did I know one, and without hesitating I said, ‘Yes, me.’

That started a fantastic music education. He was Mac Jones and he had the most fabulous blues, jazz and folk collection of records, especially for 1957. He had everything!”

Mac Jones visited Frankie at home to audition, “...to see if I could sing in tune.

The first three songs we put together were ‘Freight Train’, ‘House Of The Rising Sun’ and ‘The Glory Of Love’.

He had a lovely Gibson guitar, and a Martin, too. I owe him an immense amount – I was into early Presley and Fats Domino, but he exposed me to so much more.”

Frankie was still at school, age sixteen, when she joined The Stort Valley Skiffle Band. “The only paid gig was at a pub in town: the fellas got beer and I got orange juice – I hated alcohol anyway. It was great having a weekly gig – we attracted skiffle and jazz fans both. One day I was called into the headmistress’s office, and asked to confirm that I didn’t drink in the pub where I’d been seen singing. ‘Oh no, Miss, the only alcohol that has ever passed my lips is communion wine.’ The sad thing is, it was true.”

Frankie’s eye problems began at school with short-sightedness, but having left school it became clear that something else was amiss. “I was sent to Moorfields Eye Hospital to be checked up, strangely just a few weeks after I’d been there to sing at the nurses’ Christmas party. I was found to have six major eye conditions, and was in and out of hospital for the next year or so. I’d been going to train as a fabric designer, but when I needed to be at hospital a lot I gave up work.



Frankie, 1973. Photo: Tom Paley

It was a very uncertain future, but I was so encouraged by my parents that I coped with it. I fell back on my love of drawing and painting, and mum read to me. And I had the singing – like my life now, singing for health and well-being.”

Emerging from this time at home, Frankie started looking for work. “I applied for teaching and acting but my eyesight prevented it. The lady almoner at Moorfields got me into welfare work, and through her I went to London for a year’s training to work with the blind and partially sighted, and started going to London folk clubs. It was all so exciting – the trajectory from trad jazz to skiffle to folk that so many of us followed at that time. We became messianic about our own tradition without thinking any less of the other musics.”

At Catford Folk Club, she first came across Louis Killen. “I thought he was wonderful as a singer and with that great vitality that he put into his singing and playing. I went up and told him what a wonderful singer and player I thought he was and that started a friendship which became a relationship. He was so important. The skiffle group had turned into The Ceilidh Singers, and I had already started singing British songs. Louis got me really listening to British traditional singers, mostly source singers like Phoebe Smith, Sarah Makem, Jeannie Robertson, particularly Phil Tanner, and some revival singers like Ray Fisher. I remember my reel-to-reel tapes, and early albums by Shirley Collins.”

Frankie and Louis Killen started singing together in 1963. “Though I got a job with the blind, I worked part time after a year so I had more time for singing and travelling around with Lou. We went all

over the country; sometimes I had to leave him to go back to work and that got me used to getting trains on my own, which became an important part of my musical life. I got good at being met off the train, and using a white stick.”

So she juggled working and singing, and soon began performing solo. “I’d been down with Louis to Exmouth, I think it was, and at the end, the organiser asked me to come back and do a solo gig. He asked what my fee was, and I had to think rapidly, and just halved Louis’ fee. Then Louis and I broke up, but we stayed friends. I started to learn the banjo, and tried it on one gig but finished up with the most dreadful headache. I tried guitar, and the dulcimer but it split my attention. I loved being absolutely wrapped up in the song, and attempting to use an instrument cut my energy and pleasure.”

Killen had suggested that Frankie should join The Critics Group. “I went down to meet Ewan [MacColl] and Peggy [Seeger] when they had been going a year or so. I immediately took to Peggy, though I didn’t find Ewan that easy, but acknowledged his willingness to get us young people really listening to source singers and different styles, and thinking about the history and background. I love Peggy, and I’m still in touch with her, but I was never totally embroiled in the Critics. Brian Pearson and I left before the bust up [which occurred, acrimoniously, in 1972]. We were pleased to have done it, but pleased to be out of it, and we all agree that we should never have stayed so long. To have done three or four years and then move on would have been better for everybody.”

During this time, Frankie met A.L. (Bert) Lloyd, another huge influence. “I was incredibly lucky to meet him. It was Bert who taught me what telling a story in song could be about. He was always so encouraging, and gave me

so much material. In fact, I’ve recently found some songs that Bert put on tape and sent me back then. A lot of my traditional repertoire was kick-started by Bert Lloyd. My first recording was as part of his album *The Bird In The Bush* (1966), and I’m quite happy with my singing on that – it’s fun to hear it again now, as I do occasionally.” One of Frankie’s songs on that album, ‘The Old Man From Over The Sea’, was recently covered by Lankum, who invited Frankie to sing it with them on stage. Have a look on YouTube, it’s great.

Her first solo album, *Lovely On The Water*, produced by Bert Lloyd, was released by Topic Records in 1972. “I’d been asked to make an album in about 1968 but I didn’t feel ready. To do a whole album, I needed a broader repertoire and more time to work on it. It’s a great selection of songs, and was recorded in one day by Dick Swettenham and Bert [Lloyd], with Jeff Lowe and Jack Warshaw doing the accompaniment. When I hear of people taking two or three weeks to make an album, well!”

The contrast between Frankie’s vocals on two songs, ‘The Brown Girl’ and ‘The Unquiet Grave’, respectively harsh and gentle, exemplified how she was starting to develop her natural voice techniques. “I already felt that I had to use the voice which told the story most appropriately. I’d already started on my own voice workshops, and was playing around with different vocal qualities.”

The Natural Voice Network, which sprung out of Frankie’s workshops in the 70s, became a big part of her life, and still is. “It started from Bert’s *Folk Music Of Bulgaria* [1964] which I played and played, trying to find out how they were producing those remarkable voices. In America in 1973, I met Ethel Raim who taught Balkan music classes and we became friends. I went to lots of her workshops, learning a lot of Balkan songs and how to teach them in two-, three- or four-part harmonies.



Lankum and Frankie, New Year's Eve, 2018, Bristol
Photo: Michael Armstrong



L to R: Roy Bailey, Frankie, Leon Rosselson, c. 1983.
Photo: Jini Rawlings

"Back in England, some friends who ran a folk club asked me to run a Balkan workshop. We invited friends and colleagues and there were about twenty-four of us in the upstairs room of this pub. I taught them some of Ethel's exercises and songs and we had a great time. At the end of it, they were really energised and wanted to come back next week. 'Next week' went on for three years and when I couldn't take it because of gigs others took it on.

"We went beyond the original Balkan into other types of songs, like shape note, and started to improvise. I got close to the acting world, and found out how the body-breath-voice concept works. I learned on the job, did some teaching in Australia and Europe, and it became a major part of my life and income. I found myself to be a voice teacher, bringing together traditional singing styles and theatre voice-freeing techniques. I trained other people and we became an organisation which now has 750-odd members, who between them work with several thousand non-auditioned choirs and singing groups."

Frankie is now President of the Natural Voice Network. "To sing with all your heart, mind and body, using a method that takes care of the voice, and is healthy, flexible, and appropriate to the song – it generates such a good feeling."

Two strands, relating to the women's and peace movements, have been dominant in Frankie's work over the years. She collaborated with Sandra Kerr

and Peggy Seeger within The Critics Group to produce *The Female Frolic* (1968), and later with Sandra, Alison McMorland, and Kathy Henderson on *My Song Is My Own – Songs From Women* (1980).

"Then in the 80s, I started singing with Leon Rosselson and Roy Bailey. For maybe eight years, we toured all over including the US and Canada, doing many of Leon's songs. He wrote a script for *Nuclear Power No Thanks!!?* with poetry and song, and *Love Loneliness Laundry* about gender was just fantastic. I am very sad to have lost Roy, particularly having worked with him again on the *Anti-Capitalist Roadshow* [in 2012]. Leon and I are still in touch; he's bright enough though not performing. I've been very lucky with all the people I've collaborated with."

In more recent times Frankie, worked with Sarah Harman and Shanee Taylor, recording the album *Darkest Before The Dawn* (2004). "That was lovely but they moved away and we were too far spread out for rehearsing, though I do still teach with Sarah. Then Pauline Down and Laura Bradshaw came into my life and we started working as Bread And Roses. Laura runs the choir for refugees and asylum seekers that I'm a support worker for. We started for International Women's Day about four years ago – the first time we sang together in concert people said how amazing we sounded, and we'd only been working together for two weeks. We mostly sing locally for events or benefits, but we're so busy we don't do much."

A few years ago, Frankie met Ben Webb from Brighton band Bird In The Belly. "Ben knew of me because his dad had my albums, and he's one of the most creative people I've ever known. He'd also met Debbie Armour and Alasdair Roberts and wanted to make an album with the four of us [working as Green Ribbons] to celebrate unaccompanied song. We spent one weekend together, made the album

[also called *Green Ribbons*, 2019] and we had good reviews. That was when Ben said I should do a solo album – and I agreed as long as I could include my friends."

Her friends included the other members of Bird In The Belly – Laura Ward, Adam Ronchetti and Tom Pryor. "I fell in love with them all, and they have taken me to their hearts. I was amazed by the amount of work that Ben put into the CD. This was the first album of the eleven I'd done which didn't have a record label involved and I didn't realise how much work went into it.

"Ben was prompting me to write things for this and that, and he was doing loads. 'Admin is my rest,' he said. We recorded it in 2019. I went down to Brighton with Pauline and Laura [Bread And Roses] and Brian Pearson, and we got most of it done in a few days. I had to fit in Martin Simpson, and then I went down to Brighton again to help with the mix. After that, lockdown happened, and the album *Cats Of Coven Lawn* eventually came out in January 2021."

The album itself is a real mixture. As Frankie says, "All life is there. Pauline leads on the Sami song, 'Yoiks' – I love that singing, and teaching those songs. 'A Life Lived Well' came from Lindsey Williams, one of the members of the [Natural Voice] Network. I'd asked the Network for women's songs and this was one of the lovely songs I got. Ben wrote 'Marcy's Guesthouse' just for me – his writing is so strange and evocative, and he was petrified I'd hate it. He was so relieved that I loved it."

Title track 'Cats Of Coven Lawn' is an unusual traditional ballad. "Ben knew that I loved cats, so he did an arrangement with some silly meows, including a real cat. Originally, Ben had wanted me to do a solo album, but I thought I was past all of that, though I loved doing a collaboration with all my friends." Needless to say, gigs to promote the album remain in the air. ♦

Green Ribbons, from left: Frankie Armstrong, Debbie Armour, Alasdair Roberts, Ben Webb, 2019

