

Gallery



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1. Morrissey Dancing Morris dancing. The trademark gladioli of this charming and very English man are akin to a Morris man's billet, and that move could come straight out of 'Shepherd's Hey'. So, the gap between The Smiths and Flowers and Frolics isn't a chasm after all.

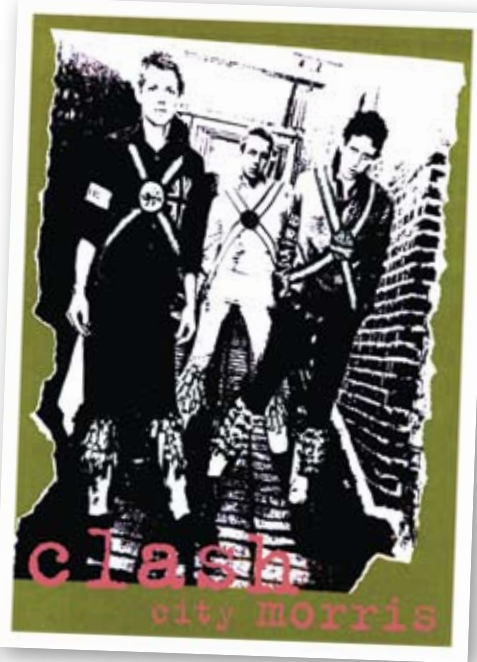
2. Clash City Morris The boys' threads have morphed; still bondage, but the bells and bandanas of the Morris. That hankie is comically disarming. Punk was always a laugh, and shared the same do-it-yourself ethos as folk.

3. A Yorkshire Garland Martin Carthy told David Owen that after one of The Imagined Village concerts someone buttonholed him saying "There's no place for a *sitar* on 'Scarborough Fair'; Sheila Chandra shouldn't be singing on that." Owen was horrified, so when he met Chandra, he took

this picture and adapted the traditional challenge of the white racist to create this visual riposte.

4. The Seeds of Love A seed packet of postcards of all the images here, and a few more good ones besides.

5. EFDSS That design on Johnny Rotten's T-shirt is the English Folk Dance and Song Society's motif, the construction created by the twists and turns of rapper dancers, held up by one hand as a finale. It encapsulates in an image the dance and its tradition: made of itself, interlocking, interdependent. The picture is screen-printed onto pages from 'Morris Dance Tunes' by Cecil Sharp, published in 1918. There's a challenge here, as cocky and amusing as the Sex Pistols were back in 1977.



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6. Sovay This caused some consternation at Cecil Sharp House, where some objected to the image – clearly of singer and fiddle-player Eliza Carthy – with a gun. "It's like a hip-hop album cover," I heard someone whisper, appalled. That is precisely Owen's point: in the song Sovay disguises herself as a highwayman and robs her lover at gunpoint to see if he truly loves her. He hands over his watch and chain but refuses to give up the golden ring she has given him. Just as well because, as she tells him the next day when she returns the watch, had he done so, she would have 'pulled the trigger and shot you dead'. It is, Owen notes, a 'ghetto fabulous, hip-hop, drive-by, bling bling, bang bang shooting kind of way' to test your man's commitment.

7. Hello, Folk Police? The most enduring folk cliché of them all, the singer with his hand cupped round his ear. This is, it must be said, a very effective way of hearing the note you're adding when singing close harmony with others, or just singing in a noisy environment. And it is not restricted to the folk singer – there are pictures of Elvis doing this. Now people have earpiece monitors... But anyway, Owen wittily subverts it by slipping a mobile into the hand of Ewan MacColl, who was notoriously prescriptive: no guitars; no singing in accents other than your own or even songs from traditions not your own. If there had been a folk police, MacColl would have shopped you for musical deviance. Yet he was himself his own invention – born Jimmie Miller in Salford, and the way he sang was as stylised as Pavarotti.

DAVID OWEN THE SEEDS OF LOVE

The Seeds of Love' was the first song collected by Cecil Sharp, who heard John England singing it as he mowed the vicarage lawn in Hambridge, Somerset on August 22, 1903. This bump-started the 'folk revival', Sharp going on to collect 4,977 songs and tunes. You might then expect David Owen's exhibition, at the home of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, to be a nostalgic homage to the rural idyll that moment conjures. But his work totally confounds this prejudice.

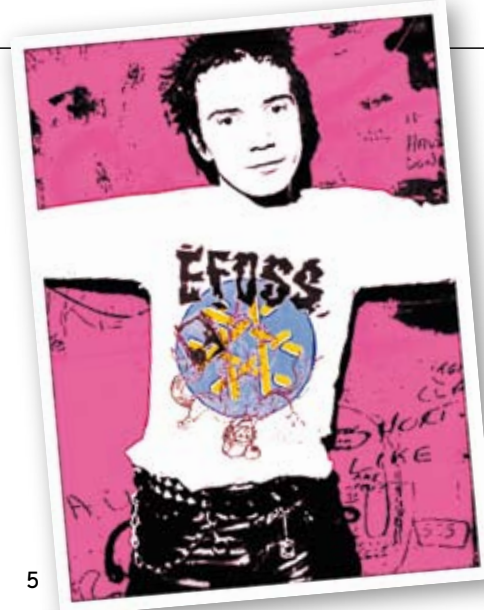
In his manifesto – this is the kind of exhibition that has a manifesto rather than a catalogue – Owen argues that folk songs have survived for centuries because each generation interprets them anew. In the way that The Imagined Village and Bellowhead transform 'Flash Company' or 'Scarborough Fair', so Owen, as a modern visual artist, brings the aesthetics and techniques of contemporary art to the drama and imagery of the old songs. He references ballads of murder such as 'The Oxford Girl' with the kind of image familiar from the covers of Raymond Chandler novels. And he manipulates iconic pop images in such a way that new, ironic light is cast, not just on the folk tradition, but on popular culture too. *The Seeds of Love* is visually exciting; it makes you think and it makes you laugh. That's rare for an exhibition of contemporary art.

Julian May

The exhibition at Cecil Sharp House in London runs until December 21
www.theinkcorporation.co.uk



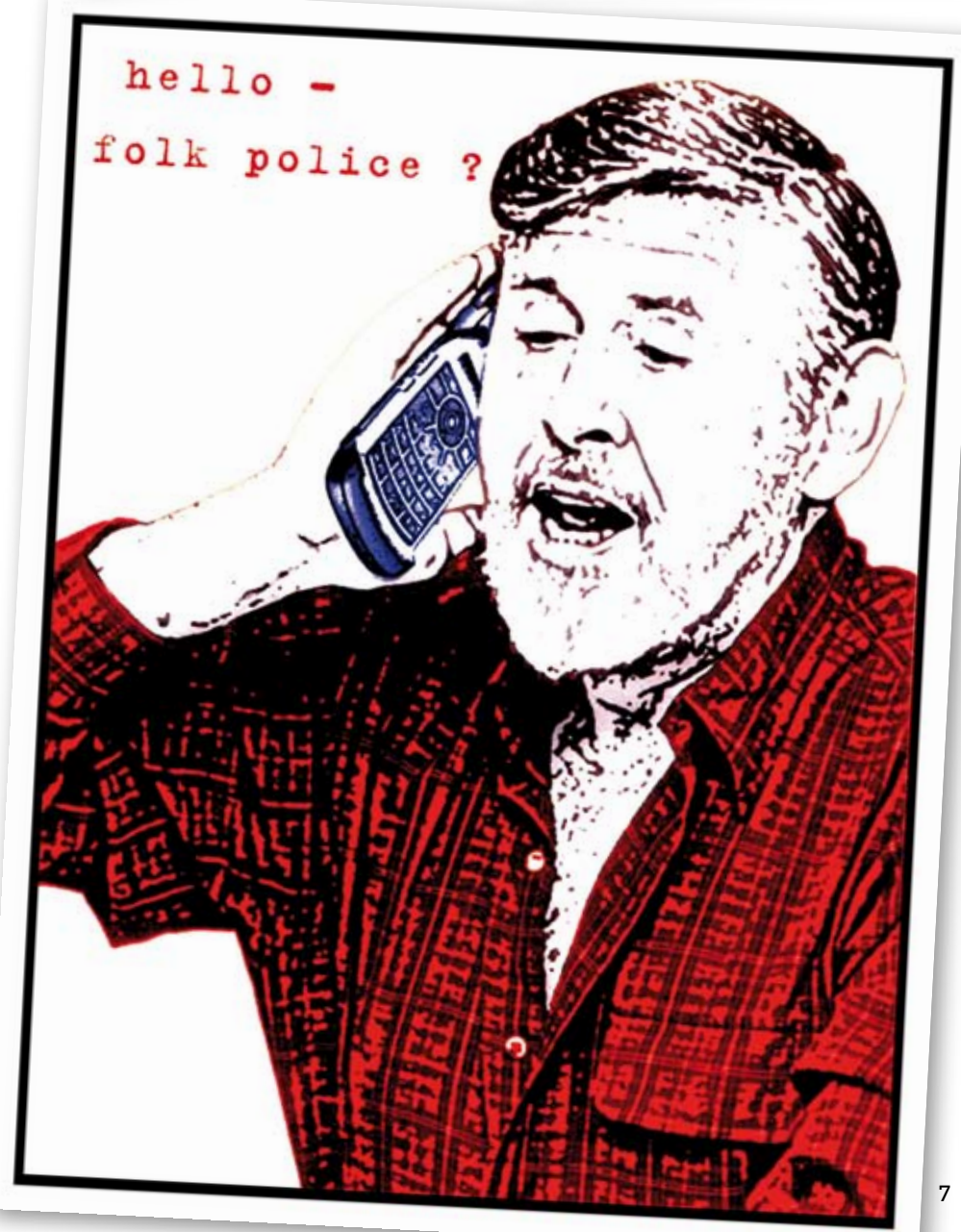
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