

# DAZZLING DAUGHTERS

## Eliza Carthy & Nancy Kerr talk to Philip Freeman

DAUGHTER of Martin Carthy, the most talented and influential English folksinger of them all, and Norma Waterson, of the legendary Hull singing family, Eliza began partnering Nancy Kerr five years ago. Nancy is the daughter of Sandra Kerr, associated with folk song as far back as Ewan MacColl's Critics Group, and of outstanding Northumbrian piper Ron Elliott. We met after their *Taplas* gig in Cardiff.

Both Eliza and Nancy grew up finding that the music in their family life, and the access to the wider world it gave them, were far more influential on them than the incomprehension they faced at school. Eliza remembers trying to convince her school chums that her father wasn't a vicar, and re-tells it even now in a way that conveys her puzzlement, while Nancy says: "I always felt odd at school anyway, whatever I was doing. I was the weird kid."

They were children of two worlds. Eliza remembers the house always full of musicians. Lots of lovely, lovely people coming to stay. I had a really cosy home life as far as music was concerned. People sitting round the table and eating and singing – and getting pissed! It would make anyone want to do it. Whitby Festival was a Mecca you just looked forward to all year. All these wonderful people, and their children, descending on the town".

"My parents didn't take me to gigs and my dad was away a lot. One thing that galvanised my interest was when he and Dave Swarbrick started doing things together again, and Dave started coming to stay. I really liked what the two of them were doing together. I started to get close to him and feeling a lot of pride in what he was doing, whereas before he was something I'd had to explain."

Nancy, too, grew up in that other world. "I didn't really take my music to school. I was just more tired than the other kids because I spent the weekends with my mum, at benefit gigs or playing in sessions."

The dangers of bullying, inevitable for anyone who is different, were kept at bay in part by success. Nancy had an early triumph with the fiddle. "I remember winning the novices' competition at the Alnwick Gathering. I must have been

eight. The school went mad, and they said 'Wow! – what do you do?' and they started to sit up and take notice. I played in the school assembly and they said 'Don't You want a piano accompaniment? Where's your music?'. It was the first time I showed them what I did, and what my music was."

"When I was about twelve or thirteen, it started getting fairly important for me. That's a really scary age, when you're being forced to conform but, by then, I was used to not conforming. So when I told people I wouldn't be in school as I was off to Germany, they'd say, 'Holiday?' and I'd say, 'No, I'm working – I sing in a band'. Then they'd say, 'With guitars?' and I'd say, 'No – unaccompanied.' They had no idea you could do it. There was a shock thing and that's really good. I'd say I sing traditional songs and they'd have no preconceptions. Then they'd say, 'Do you

get paid?' and I'd say, 'Yes!' and they'd go, 'Wow, that's really great!'"

Eliza found something similar. "Me mum and me aunty Lally and her daughter Marie formed a band with me called the Waterdaughters, and we went to Canada and played at the wonderful, wonderful Vancouver Festival. There were big stages, and there were lights, and we were playing in front of 30,000 people and I thought 'Right, that's it! I'm going to leave school and be a folk musician."

What exactly she would play was unclear at this stage. She already played piano and had tried mouth organ, mandolin and whistle, while still singing. She had a fiddle from her grandfather, but didn't play it.

So what made her take it up?

"Nancy. Me mum always gives a party at Sidmouth, and Nancy was there, in the kitchen. I kind of knew who she was and kind of didn't, but Sandra was there so I made the connection."

"Me mum said 'Here darling, go and stay with Nancy, she's nice, and take your fiddle.' Me mum's always wanted me to play the fiddle and I think her and Sandra had been plotting. We went to a ceilidh and Nancy sat there and played for three, four hours and I just thought it was great that she knew so many tunes. I picked up the fiddle from then on". Nancy had always loved the fiddle, despite her music teachers, and had been playing from an early age. "I always loved the look of it, and the sound. I loved the way I made small gains when I practised."

But there were early battles with music teachers, one from Rothbury of all places, who had little patience with traditional music. "He got very cross with the way I held my bow. There was a struggle between the strict classical regime and the music I was hearing about me all the time. There was a time when I couldn't bear to take the fiddle out of its box. It made me upset to look at it."

Yet her parents insisted she carry on. To keep her motivated they would creep up in the night and play Willy Hunter records.

Who were Eliza's influences?

"Chris Wood – without any doubt. Dave Swarbrick's a lovely player but he's never given me a lesson in my life. Chris gave me what might be called the fatal push. He said, 'See that fiddle, see that voice. You may as well try it. Play the tune and sing over the top.' I was singing *Seventeen Come Sunday* and I was trying to work it out. Chris was a great help, he was



Eliza Carthy

Photo: Keith Hudson

a fabulous help. He really inspired me."

Wood is one of the few brilliant musicians to have emerged in the 1980s – a very flat time for folk music – and Eliza has sympathy for musicians who were around then but never had the praise heaped on them that the current crop enjoy.

The emergence in the '90s of a whole bunch of bright, talented youngsters – the so-called Folk Brat Pack – probably owes a lot to the fact that it largely comprises the offspring of established folk musicians, who gave them the room to learn. Eliza is also conscious of the debt they owe to folk club organisers.

"It's not like being wrapped up in cotton wool, but you do feel very, very safe as far as being on the road and staying at their houses. We stay with people we've known for a long time; they look out for us and we look out for them and they take good care of us. You don't get many crazies or people who'll put you in any danger. We have really stomped the circuit these last few years and we couldn't have done it without that support network."

That friendliness can, however, topple over into an unacceptable familiarity – a lack of respect. Some people feel they have a right to say anything and some comments are hurtful. Eliza and Nancy have their own stage style, which they've thought about a lot. Perhaps it's not everyone's cup of tea. But that's no reason to assume they don't know what they're doing. Then there were complaints that surfaced, when they weren't working together, so they worried over them without being able to do much about it.

Eliza is still baffled. "We had complaints that we were flippant on stage and that we were performing because we enjoyed it. We like to have a nice time on stage. I like to see a person's personality, a healthy, bright attitude on life. My fiddle needed re-setting up and was taking a long time tuning. We were trying to lighten the burden. We like to have a show and make jokes. People think that means we aren't treating it seriously."

Nor does Nancy understand it. "We're not coy, but we're not offensive. We don't insult anyone."

Another problem arises from them being young women. That leads to responses from men that aren't always welcome. Nancy points to the fact that the whole performance bit is very sexy, but that doesn't give people the right to invade your body space, to touch you. It means



Nancy Kerr

that the music is often ignored.

Nancy says: "I get people come up to me after a gig and talk to me for half an hour about how I look. I say, 'Hello, I play tunes.'" Perhaps the most revealing time was when she toured with Steafan Hannigan. "Everyone spoke to him but everyone photographed me."

Eliza even gets her frocks reviewed in *Folk Roots* and feels the music is almost ignored as a consequence. "It's worrying when what we look like gets more attention than what we sound like. If we go on stage people complain about what we look like if we haven't made an effort."

Despite her frustration, she is fairly philosophical about it. "Women sell things. Women have always sold things. Women stand next to cars."

Nancy seems to feel it more, but she is, in any case, more ambiguous about performing. "I feel uncomfortable on stage. I feel disconnected from the audience. It's almost voyeuristic. Big gigs are great, but I'd much rather play in someone's kitchen."

Eliza had another problem with the strange relationship between audience and performer, when she spent six months touring with Waterson : Carthy.

"I spent most of the Australian tour thinking I was doing a really bad job. As a performer, I need people to tell me if I'm doing it right, but people were very reluctant to come up and talk to me, because my parents were there. They would go up to them and say 'Your daughter's great!' but not to me. So I was doing the best I could, but was thinking 'isn't it good enough?'"

Because of the Waterson : Carthy tour, and Nancy's problems with the aftermath of glandular fever, the Cardiff gig was the first they'd done together for a while, but it was a corker – their closeness married to a freshness caused by the lay-off. A particular joy was the very first outing of *Sheffield Park*. It featured two superbly matched voices and the sounds of their new instruments from Mid Wales fiddle maker Tim Phillips, a viola for Nancy and a five-string fiddle for Eliza. She had found the song when looking for another track for her forthcoming solo album.

They have, of course, a massive repertoire from their respective families and they unerringly pick the best. Sometimes they're attacked for doing songs everyone knows, but as Nancy says, isn't that the point of tradition, making your own mark on a common heritage? They both love singing and like all good singers, Eliza knows what technique is for.

"Storytelling is the most important thing and words are the most importance conveyance of the emotion. I'm not into creating moods. It's false. It's an insult to your intelligence. Be happy. Be sad."

Nancy, too, likes subtlety. "There are ways of pointing things up and that's one reason decoration exists. You don't have to slap on an echo-ey synth to be scary."

After five years together, there are signs of new directions. Eliza has been working with Waterson : Carthy and has just finished the solo album, which is due out in the new year. Nancy's thoughts are more on going back to college. Not surprisingly, each of them is following in parents' footsteps.

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## SOME FOLKS DO

*Some folks play on Tim Phillips fiddles.*

**Nancy Kerr**; a violin and viola.

"...I love it...I love it..."  
(such a true romantic!)

**Eliza Carthy**; a five string violin.

"...it's perfect...just right for the job..."  
(a Yorkshire lass forsooth?!)

**Catriona McDonald**; a violin.

"...brilliant..." (forever effervescent!)

**Annbjurg Lien**; a violin. "...it's got more soul..." (just the tip of an iceberg!)

**Bonnie Phillips**; an half size violin.

"...it's a nice colour Daddy..."  
(well, she's only eight!)

To all my customers, without whom...  
Thank you.

**Tim Phillips** Tel. 01686 624536

## Dazzling Daughters

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"I see my mum, who wears hundreds of hats – teacher, writer, performer – and I really like the idea of that."

Nancy has already completed a BTech in Performing Arts, using music in just about everything she did, and gaining fifteen distinctions. Now she wants to go back to college – something she'd deferred so she could go on the road. Now she's re-thinking.

"I've been quite ill and I think I'd like to go and study at somewhere like Bretton Hall. Unlike Eliza I'm not really cut out for this sort of life. The good bits are

smashing, but they don't really make up for the bad bits, like not knowing where you're going to sleep, the uncertainty, the travelling, the sheer physical hard work."

Eliza is certain she wants to carry on gigging. With Nancy possibly going back to college, does this mean a split? Eliza is sure it's not over yet.

"Waterson : Carthy, me and Nancy and the Kings of Calicut are touring as a package next summer, or perhaps as a charabanc! I do a lot of stuff, but it's very fragmented. Nancy's my day job, and the other things are about giving me another day job. We've done too much work to give it up. As long as Nancy wants to, then

I want to work with her."

The hype will probably abate when the next sensation comes along, but there's little danger of there not being an audience for these two, wherever there are people who love music.

● *Dates are still being added to Eliza's album tour. Those confirmed are: Hale End FC, London (1 Feb), MAC, Birmingham (2), Chestnuts, London (4), Processed Pea FC, North Humberside (6), Rockingham Arms, Wentworth, (9), Wyeside Arts Centre, Builth Wells (11), Stables Music Club, Hastings (18), Islington FC (22), South Hill Park Arts Centre (24).*

Dec 1995/Jan 1996 #73

