

## ROWDY AND ROUGH: BRENDAN BEHAN SINGS SONGS FROM *THE HOSTAGE*

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2024.67.9>

**Abstract:** Although most well-known for his plays and prose, the Irish writer Brendan Behan also recorded a number of songs, some of his own composition and others either traditional or written by contemporaries. His best-known recording, *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads*, remarkably captures not only his voice, but also his wit and distinct *joie de vivre*. The collection from 1960 includes not only the songs themselves (with Behan still in fine singing form), but also his introductions and wry comments on a range of subjects. The article looks at the circumstances behind the recording, the actual songs included on the album, and Behan's ongoing commentary about a range of topics. The focus is on the first half of the recording which consists of songs from his play *The Hostage*, with an additional short discussion of one of his most well-known pieces, "The Auld Triangle," which serves as an ongoing leitmotif in his earlier play, *The Quare Fellow*.

**Keywords:** Irish folk music, spoken word, Field recordings, Brendan Behan, Irish politics, *The Hostage*

Brendan Behan was never reluctant to burst into song and entertain his usually captive audience, often in a pub. There are numerous accounts of his escapades in drinking institutions, not only in his native Dublin, but in a number of other countries.<sup>1</sup> The album *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads* from 1960, recorded in Dublin by the American husband and wife team Arthur and Luce Klein for their label Spoken Arts Inc., remarkably captures Behan's distinct voice, not only when singing, but also when providing often rambling introductions and asides. One of the finest descriptions of his captivating voice and delivery comes from Ulick O'Connor's poetic biography from 1970, based on first-hand

<sup>1</sup> See the numerous accounts in the edited volumes by E.H. Mikhail, *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 1 and 2 (London: Macmillan, 1982).

observation: "Singing played an important part in his repertoire. He had a splendid voice, a high tenor. As he sang, the tension and violence would disappear from his face and the sensitive human being came to the surface [...]."<sup>2</sup> Rae Jeffs, his British editor and the recorder of his last three books, provides an unforgettable picture of the antics which accompanied his singing. The following is her account of his visit to the London offices where she worked:

For the rest of the afternoon, he sang numerous folksongs and Dublin ballads, of which he had an unlimited repertoire. The entire office was agog to meet the cause of so much disturbance. They did not have to wait long, for Brendan, whisky bottle now empty, went into every room, hurling obscenities at the men and pinching the bottoms of any of the unfortunate girls who happened to be in the firing line.<sup>3</sup>

The Spoken Arts recording provides arguably the finest surviving testimony to this often underappreciated aspect of his creative output.<sup>4</sup>

The Behan family was not a stranger to song. Kathleen Behan, his mother, was the source for many of the songs Brendan learned as a child. Michael O'Sullivan in his fine biography of Behan states the following: "Music was a mainstay of the Behan household: Kathleen came from a family steeped in the nationalistic ballad tradition of nineteenth-century Ireland."<sup>5</sup> The family was also familiar with the so-called *sean nós* – "old way" – ancient singing tradition, which usually consisted of unaccompanied singing in the Irish language. His father Stephen was an amateur musician and is described, once again by O'Sullivan, as follows: "If he was not in the mood to read, Stephen played the violin for the children, making up in the gusto of his performance what he lacked in actual musical ability."<sup>6</sup> This is, of course, an extremely apt description of his son Brendan and his fondness for singing at the drop of a hat. His uncle on his mother's side, Peadar Kearney, composed the music (along with Patrick Heeney) and wrote the English lyrics to the Irish national anthem, "The Soldier's Song" ("Amhrán na bhFiann"). His

<sup>2</sup> Ulick O'Connor, *Brendan Behan* (New York: Grove Press, 1970), 94-95.

<sup>3</sup> Rae Jeffs, *Brendan Behan: Man and Showman* (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1968) 25.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are countless mentions of Behan's singing, there is no reference to the Spoken Arts recording in the biographies, in the autobiographical works, or in the volumes of *Interviews* compiled by E.H. Mikhail.

<sup>5</sup> Michael O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1999) ebook, Chapter 2.

<sup>6</sup> O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, Chapter 2.

brother Dominic Behan was a writer and prolific composer of folk songs, most well-known for “Liverpool Lou” and “The Patriot Game,” the latter of which tune was used by Bob Dylan for his classic song “With God on Our Side” and led to accusations of plagiarizing.<sup>7</sup>

Brendan Behan’s first memorable songwriting accomplishment was originally a poem, dedicated to Michael Collins: “The Laughing Boy,” written at the age of thirteen. Behan recycled the poem as a song in his play *The Hostage*,<sup>8</sup> where it is sung by one of the main characters, Pat. This song, translated into Greek, also amazingly became a leftist anthem by the composer Mikis Theodorakis.<sup>9</sup> “The Laughing Boy” was not included, however, on the album in question. “The Auld Triangle” (another song made famous, if not actually written, by Behan) seems to have been connected with his second extended stay in prison, this time in Mountjoy in Dublin in the early 1940s. The first referenced account of Behan singing the song was as part of an RTÉ radio programme produced by Micheál Ó hAodha in 1952 who, according to O’Sullivan, “asked Behan to compile a series of programmes of Dublin street ballads. This did not pose a challenge – he possessed an almost inexhaustible stock of songs learned from his mother and from his uncle and it gave him a paid forum for something he had been doing gratis in Dublin pubs.”<sup>10</sup> “The Auld Triangle” is included on the album and will be discussed further.

Another recording of Behan singing was actually made nine years prior to the more famous 1960 recording as part of a ground-breaking project by the legendary ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax. Lomax, as was his usual practice, did fieldwork making recordings around Ireland, arguably kicking off the interest in traditional Irish folk music.<sup>11</sup> There are fifteen tracks of Behan in all, mostly songs sung in English, one in Irish, a joke, and a long-winded introduction to one song. The only song which overlaps with the later recording is “Zoological Gardens,” with the Lomax recording being significantly longer than the later version. This particular

<sup>7</sup> Robert Shelton argues, however, that Dominic Behan’s tune in turn borrows its melody from an older English folk song, “One Morning in May;” see Robert Shelton, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (New York: Beech Tree Books, 1986), 213.

<sup>8</sup> Brendan Behan, *The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 1978), 168, 169.

<sup>9</sup> For more on the Greek phenomenon of the song in the 1970s, see the article by Damian Mac Con Uladh, “A Gael in Greece,” <https://damomac.wordpress.com/2021/09/02/who-was-theodorakis-laughing-boy/>. See also an interview with the author of the documentary film about this phenomenon: “Alan Gilsean in Conversation with Nathalie Lamprecht,” *The Irish Itinerary Podcast*, Episode 43 (25 May 2023), <https://www.efacis.eu/podcast>.

<sup>10</sup> O’Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, Chapter 10.

<sup>11</sup> For more information on the significance of the recordings, see the documentary by Declan McGrath, *Lomax in Éirinn* (Belfast: Aisling Productions, 2018).

recording with Behan was presumably made at Raidió Éireann and, amusingly, further labelled as “Bawdy and Fenian songs sung by Irish playwright and raconteur Brendan Behan.”<sup>12</sup>

Mention has already been made of the fact that Behan included not only his own songs but other authors’ tunes in his plays, namely in *The Quare Fellow* and to a much greater extent in *The Hostage*. There has been ongoing critical debate as to what role the songs played in the productions and as to whether they actually contribute to the plays or merely act as entertaining filler. The latter opinion has been propagated, rather flippantly, by the author himself when discussing the contribution and influence of the renowned English director Joan Littlewood on *The Hostage*: “Joan Littlewood [...] has the same views on theatre that I have, which is that the music hall is the thing to aim at for to amuse people and any time they get bored, divert them with a song or a dance.”<sup>13</sup> Maureen S.G. Hawkins has defended *The Hostage* from criticism by those who view it as a sell-out catering to an audience with a fondness for the stage Irishman. This defence includes support for the use of the songs, many of which are reproduced in Behan’s recording: “Thus, as in *The Quare Fellow*, song, music, and dance thematically structure the play, subtly establishing and developing its central theme: the doomed struggle of youth, love, and joy to survive in a death-oriented society.”<sup>14</sup> Hawkins further argues forcibly that “the songs and dances serve to characterize the dramatis personae at several levels ranging from the individual to the symbolic,” and provides a number of pertinent examples.<sup>15</sup> These considerations need to be kept in mind when discussing the songs included and sung on the Klein Spoken Arts recording, as Behan often launches into song without explaining the context or the background.

Not a great deal is known about Arthur and Luce Klein, the husband-and-wife team, who made the 1960 recording.<sup>16</sup> They founded their company Spoken Arts

<sup>12</sup> The Lomax Digital Archive, “Field Work: Ireland 1951 and 1953: Brendan Behan,” [https://archive.culturalequity.org/field-work/ireland-1951-and-1953/brendan-behan-651?f%5B0%5D=contributor\\_grid%3A3666](https://archive.culturalequity.org/field-work/ireland-1951-and-1953/brendan-behan-651?f%5B0%5D=contributor_grid%3A3666)

<sup>13</sup> Brendan Behan, *Brendan Behan’s Island: An Irish Sketchbook* (London: Hutchinson, 1962), 17.

<sup>14</sup> Maureen S.G. Hawkins, “‘For All the Outcasts of This World’: Song and Dance in Brendan Behan’s *An Giall* and *The Hostage*,” *Irish University Review* 44, no. 1 (2014): 118. For a more detailed discussion of the use of songs in *The Hostage* see Michael Pierser, “‘A Dance for All the Outcasts’: Class and Postcolonialism in Brendan Behan’s *An Giall* and *The Hostage*,” *Irish University Review* 44, no. 1 (2014): 92-115.

<sup>15</sup> Hawkins, “‘For All the Outcasts of This World,’” 121.

<sup>16</sup> I would like to express my thanks to James Deutsch from the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage and from Folkways for directing me toward further information about the Kleins and Spoken Arts Inc.

Inc. in 1956. They were collectively known as Luce Arthur Klein and pioneered the genre of the spoken word. Their self-stated mission was “to encourage a revival and reevaluation of the importance of the spoken word.”<sup>17</sup> Their albums cover a range of genres, time periods and cultures, but the vast majority focus on literature. They usually enlisted actors<sup>18</sup> to read the texts of older deceased authors, but also occasionally recorded living writers. They displayed a definite enthusiasm for Irish literature and culture, having included recordings of the poetry of Yeats, Joyce and others. The Klein archive is currently part of the Yale University Library.

Released in 1960, their recording with Behan was entitled *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads* or alternatively *Brendan Behan Sings Songs From “The Hostage” and Irish Ballads with a Commentary*. The record was reissued by Arran Records in 2008 with the sub-title *Songs, Anecdotes, Jokes, Diversions, Contradictions, Seamlessly Strung Together*. Little is known about the recording, apart from the information contained on the back cover which actually includes a quote from Behan directed at Luce: “‘You know Luce,’ he told me. ‘I’m a great liar about many things in my life. But I never lie about poetry or literature.’”<sup>19</sup> The Kleins also relate in the back cover text of a day trip around the environs of Dublin which inevitably ended up in a pub, where, not surprisingly, Behan launched into song:

Then Brendan began to sing for a public quietly drinking at the bar and for a group of fair-faced children outside pressing their noses against the window panes. He sang from his enormous repertoire including many Napoleonic hymns – in his own Irish translations – seasoning them all with the peculiar brand of commentary which – as you will soon discover on this record – is uniquely his own, uniquely unorthodox and uproariously funny.<sup>20</sup>

The sound engineer for the album was Peter Hunt and the recording was made in his studio on St. Stephen’s Green in Dublin.<sup>21</sup> Hunt was an Englishman who recorded a number of traditional Irish musicians including The Chieftains. The dearth of information about the recording would seem to indicate that this was not a greatly planned out, organized event, but rather fairly spur of the moment. Behan and the producer probably did not do much preparation or editing. This

<sup>17</sup> “Spoken Arts Collection,” Yale University Library – Historical Sound Recordings, <https://web.library.yale.edu/music/hsr/spoken-arts/home>.

<sup>18</sup> The legendary Irish actress Siobhán McKenna was among them.

<sup>19</sup> Brendan Behan, *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads*, Spoken Arts SA 760.

<sup>20</sup> Behan, *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads*.

<sup>21</sup> For more about Hunt’s studio, see a review by Geoff Wallis, “Seoltaí Séidte / Setting Sail,” <http://www.irishmusicreview.com/seoltai.htm>.

recording therefore would be fairly close to what Behan would have sounded like in a pub and much of the fun and entertainment is in the banter in between (or even in the middle) of the songs.<sup>22</sup>

The record does not have any formal introduction, but begins with a seemingly random opening, which apparently dates back to Behan's time in Paris and is his garbled version of part of a poem "They Don't Speak English in Paris" by the American poet Ogden Nash:<sup>23</sup>

Well, I don't know what to say, except,  
I absolutely must decline  
To dance in the streets with Gertrude Stein  
And as for Alice B. Toklas  
I'd sooner Shakespeare and a great big box of chocolates.<sup>24</sup>

Behan consequently provides another obtuse statement, which does not clarify all that much: "I'd really be... with Gertrude Stein, she was asked when she was, she said when she was dying, what is the answer? And she said what is the question?" Obviously aware that the recording is being made for an American audience, not necessarily accustomed to an Irish accent, Behan provides the following humorous disclaimer: "You might find it a bit hard to understand me. It's not so much the Irish accent, it's the fact that I've lost my... I used to talk nicer when I had me teeth, now I haven't got so many. So, I mean, you needn't think it's your imperfect hearing."

He proceeds to sing the first song from *The Hostage*, more or less sticking to the order of the songs in the play. He does not sing them all, but does include the most memorable. At times, he seems to be referencing a list of the songs or the text of the play itself in front of him. The first song, "On the 18<sup>th</sup> Day of November," is sung by Patrick, "an ex-hero and present-time brothel-keeper"<sup>25</sup> in the first act of the play. Behan's version on the recording slightly differs from the lyrics in the play. The underlined text, following the slash mark, is from Behan's sung version:

<sup>22</sup> I would like to thank Matthew Sweney for assistance with transcribing Behan's, often difficult to understand, banter on the recording. Some of the words of his conversation were not, unfortunately, successfully deciphered.

<sup>23</sup> Ogden Nash, "They Don't Speak English in Paris," c. 1935, <https://www.poetrynook.com/poem/they-dont-speak-english-paris>.

<sup>24</sup> Behan, *Brendan Behan Sings Irish Folk Songs and Ballads*. Further references to the album are not footnoted.

<sup>25</sup> Behan, *The Complete Plays*, 129. Further references to the play are provided in parentheses in the text.

On the Eighteenth day of November,  
Just outside the town of Macroom,  
The Tans in their big Crossley tenders,  
Came roaring / They hurtled along to their doom.  
But the boys of the column were waitin  
With hand grenades primed on the spot,  
And the Irish Republican Army  
Made shit of the whole mucking lot / Made ... of the whole bloody lot.<sup>26</sup>  
(133)

In the play, Meg, Patrick's "consort" (128), is not all that impressed: "You stand there singing about them ould times and the five glorious years, and yet you sneer and jeer at the boys of today. What's the difference." (133)

Behan introduces the next song with an explanation, again perhaps for a less knowledgeable American listener, as to the accent he will assume: "Now... let us continue, with the man said. I'll have to sing this song in an Oxford accent. If you haven't any idea of my Oxford accent, well then shortly you will." "The Captains and the Kings" is sung by the character Monsewer in Act 2 who owns the building and is a 'Hibernofile' originally from England. Although an Irish nationalist, he launches into this jingoistic song when conversing with the captive English hostage about cricket:

I remember in September,  
When the final stumps were drawn,  
And the shouts of crowds now silent  
And the boys to tea were / have gone.  
Let us, oh Lord above us,  
Still remember simple things,  
When all are dead who love us,  
Oh the Captains and the Kings<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> I have placed the printed version from the play first throughout the article, while Behan's alternative lyrics from the album are underlined and follow after the slash. When underlined lines appear on their own, they have been included in the sung version, but are not part of the play.

<sup>27</sup> The refrain of the song is always repeated twice; however, for brevity's sake, I have only listed it once.

We have many goods for export,  
Christian ethics and old port,  
But our greatest boast is that  
The Anglo-Saxon is a sport.  
When the darts game is finished  
And the boys the game of rings  
And the draughts and chess relinquished  
Oh the Captains and the Kings,  
And the draughts and chess relinquished  
Oh the Captains and the Kings.<sup>28</sup>  
On the playing-fields of Eton  
We still do thrilling things,  
Do not think we'll ever weaken  
Up the Captains and the Kings!

Far away in dear old Cyprus,  
Or in Kenya's dusty land,  
Where all bear the white man's burden  
In many a strange land.  
As we look across our shoulder  
In West Belfast the school bell rings,  
And we sigh for dear old England,  
And the Captains and the Kings.

The verse above parodies Rudyard Kipling's classic colonialist poems, "The White Man's Burden" and "Recessional." The title of the song itself is taken from the second named poem by Kipling: "The tumult and the shouting dies / The Captains and the Kings depart."<sup>29</sup> The song continues with a mocking reference to one of the hallowed English institutions, the public boarding school:

In our dreams we see old Harrow,  
And we hear the crow's loud caw,  
At the flower show our big marrow  
Takes the prize from Evelyn Waugh.  
Cups of tea or some dry sherry,  
Vintage cars, these simple things,

<sup>28</sup> The six underlined lines here are added on the recording.

<sup>29</sup> Rudyard Kipling, *Collected Verse* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1907), 219.



So let's drink up and be merry  
Oh, the Captains and the Kings.

The verse above rather randomly mocks the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, in all probability in connection with his most well-known novel *Brideshead Revisited* from 1945, some of which is set in Oxford. The following stanza is rather enigmatic, while the final one below consists of satire on English colonialism and makes the embedded racism more than clear:

I wandered / stumbled in a nightmare  
All around Great Windsor Park,  
And what do you think I found there  
As I stumbled / wandered in the dark?  
'Twas an apple half-bitten,  
And sweetest of all things,  
Five baby teeth had written  
Of the Captain and the Kings.

By the moon that shines above us  
In the misty morn and night,  
Let us cease to run ourselves down  
But praise God that we are white.  
And better still we're English—  
Tea and toast and muffin rings,  
Old ladies with stern faces,  
And the Captains and the Kings.

(191, 192, 193)

The play clarifies the intended response by providing the following stage direction: "*The two I.R.A. men have been listening horror-stricken to the last verse of the song.*" (193) On the recording, Behan provides an explanation concerning the origin of the song: "I wrote that song in six minutes... It was the first time I actually wrote with drink on me, with the assistance of a bottle of whiskey. My manager actually was threatening me with a .45 revolver if I didn't finish it quick. Actually I did the job in six minutes." As is often the case with Behan, one never knows how seriously to take his explanations.

The romantic ditty "I Will Give You a Golden Ball," which is originally a duet between the English captive soldier and Teresa, "the skivvy, a countrygirl" (128) in Act Two, is prefaced on the recording by a lengthy rant about so-called Gurd

cake, which does not seem to have any particular relevance to the tune. Behan claims to have taken the original song and “dressed it up a bit,” which could be a reference to the lines added on the recording:

I will give you a golden ball,  
To hop with the children in the hall,  
If you’ll marry, marry, marry, marry,  
If you’ll marry me.

I will give you the keys of my chest,  
And all the money that I possess,

I will give you a watch and chain,  
To show the kids in Angel Lane, / To show the children in the lane

I will give you all kinds of gold  
as much and more as your hands can hold<sup>30</sup>

I will bake you a big pork pie,  
And hide you till the cops go by,

But first I think that we should see,  
If we fit each other, / If we fit together.

(199)

Behan ends the song abruptly and draws attention to the play, only to seemingly make reference to a text he has on hand to jog his memory: “There’s some other songs on this thing.” This is followed by a lengthy confusing introduction, interrupted by Behan blowing his nose with great relish:

Well this is a song that I got this from a man who was a, excuse me please if I blow me nose. You never heard anyone blowing their nose on a record before, I can tell you that! (*Blows nose.*) That’s what they call the national catarrh. I’ll tell you this much – if you have any idea of coming over to Ireland, stop where you are... unless you’ve got very good nostrils.

<sup>30</sup> The two lines on their own are once again added when sung on the recording.

It is beyond the present author's capacity to verify the accuracy of Behan's claim, but the inclusion of this bodily function is nevertheless amusing. He continues with his introduction, only to go off on yet another tangent:

This song anyway I got from a man called – I hate these when people say, “I got this song from... some place in the States...” But in actual fact I did happen to get these songs – I'm a little bit genuine... eh, to the extent that I just heard these songs from. And I was in the places just naturally I didn't go around chasin' up citizens to do these things I just heard them in their natural 'habitat.'

His rambling account does at least provide a glimpse as to where Behan culled his songs. His confusing explanation even makes reference to his uncle Peadar Kearney eventually: “I got this song from a man called Tom Osborn in the Wicklow Mts, and anyway, this fellow used to sing this song and my uncle wrote very good songs about the Trouble and toil. But this is a genuine ballad that was written by someone that felt like it.” Finally, Behan provides yet another self-deprecating poke at his lack of singing skill, which of course has the exact opposite effect on the listener: “If you don't want to hear the lot of it. It seems to me it goes on for a few years... I've got to sing it, you may think it's tough having to listen to it. But you can switch it off, and start at some more interesting point, the usual way with things like that...” He consequently launches into the next song, “Who Fears to Speak of Easter Week,” with great verve and enthusiasm, which is sung by Meg in Act Two of the play:

Who fears to speak of Easter Week  
That week of famed renown,  
When the boys in green went out to fight  
The forces of the Crown.  
With Mausers bold, and hearts of gold,  
The Red Countess dressed in green,  
And high above the G.P.O.  
The rebel flag was seen.  
Then came ten thousand khaki coats,  
Our rebel boys to kill,  
Before they reached O'Connell Street,  
Of fight they got their fill.  
They had machine-guns and artillery,  
And cannon in galore,

But it wasn't our fault that e'er one  
Got back to England's shore.  
For six long days we held them off,  
At odds of ten to one,  
And through our lines they could not pass,  
For all their heavy guns.  
And deadly poison gas they used,  
To try to crush Sinn Fein,  
And burnt our Irish capital,  
Like the Germans did Louvain.

After the line "Like the Germans did Louvain," Behan provides a wry comment: "The Anglo-Saxons make great contribution to culture, don't they." The next verse of the song is even more hard-hitting in its depiction of injustice:

They shot our leaders in a jail,  
Without a trial, they say,  
They murdered women and children,  
Who in their cellars lay,  
And dug their grave with gun and spade,  
To hide them from our view.  
Because they could neither kill nor catch,  
The rebel so bold and true.

(203, 204)

Meg concludes the song in the play, breaking the fourth wall with the comment, "The author should have sung that one." (204) Behan, of course, did exactly that at times, among other shenanigans, as part of the performances.<sup>31</sup> This elicits a response from Pat, "That's if the thing has an author." (204) His remark is followed by a self-referential mocking back-and-forth between the English Soldier, an Irish Officer, and Pat:

SOLDIER. Brendan Behan, he's too anti-British.

OFFICER. Too anti-Irish, you mean. Bejasus, wait till we get him back home. We'll give him what-for for making fun of the Movement.

<sup>31</sup> See the account entitled "His London Appearances" by Donal Foley, which relates of Behan's eccentric involvement in the performances of the play in London, in E.H. Mikhail, *Brendan Behan: Interviews and Recollections*, vol. 1 (London: Macmillan, 1982), 136-41.

SOLDIER [*to audience*]. He doesn't mind coming over here and taking your money.

PAT. He'd sell his country for a pint.

(204)

The introduction to the song "I Am a Happy English Lad," which brings Act Two of the play to an end, consists of a long ramble, with Behan even losing track of what he is talking about. The English soldier sings the song at the conclusion of Act Two:

I am a happy English lad, I love my royalty,  
And if they were short a penny of a packet of fags,  
Now they'd only have to ask me.  
I love old England in the east, I love her in the west,  
From Jordan's streams to Derry's Walls,  
I love old England best.

I love my dear old Notting Hill, wherever I may roam,  
But I wish the Irish and the niggers and the wogs, / But I wish those  
bleeding Nigger boys  
Were kicked out and sent back home.

(206)

The song is followed by an anecdote about an Indian doctor having recently given Behan an injection. No clue is provided as to where this took place. This prompts, however, some comments about skin colour and prejudice, with Behan also providing a joke at his own expense in reference to his pigmentation and also his, one assumes, alcohol induced red complexion: "He's a coloured man, in a sense we're all coloured something. I, if you could only see, I happen to be coloured a bright red and that's not me politics." This leads into a discussion of relationships between different races: "Well, this Indian fellow said to me, did I believe in mixed marriages. And I said to him, all marriages are mixed, they're all between men and women, at least mine is." Although somewhat jarring to a twenty-first century listener, I would interpret this as Behan's attempt to ridicule the absurdity of racism and those who condemn 'mixing' of the races.

This is followed by some political discussion involving an explanation of the significance of the General Post Office during the Easter Rising. Behan mentions Vladimir Lenin with the dry comment that he hopes the record will not be smashed at the mention of his name. He then amusingly imitates a female Irish

accent when relating an anecdote about a rebel's wife trying to visit her embattled husband at the GPO in the midst of the fighting, and once again makes reference to the recording being designated for an American audience.

The following song "Don't Muck about with the Moon" from Act Three is sung by the devout "social worker" (128), Miss Gilchrist. Behan sings it with great exaggerated sentiment, especially the refrain:

I love my dear Redeemer,  
My Creator, too, as well,  
And, oh, that filthy Devil,  
Should stay below in Hell.  
I cry to Mr. Khrushchev / Eisenhower  
Please grant me this great boon,  
Don't muck about, don't muck about,  
Don't muck about with the moon.

I am a little Christ-ian,  
My feet are white as snow,  
And every day, my prayers I say,  
For Empire Lamb I go.  
I cry unto Macmillan,  
That multi-racial coon,  
I love him and those above him, / I cry unto de Gaulle,  
But don't muck about with the moon, / Please grant me this great boon,  
Don't muck about, / Don't muck about with the Sahara,  
Don't muck about,  
Don't muck about with the moon. / Don't muck about with the Sahara.  
(222, 223)

This song, once again, comes to an abrupt close, with alternative lyrics added making reference to Charles de Gaulle and seemingly randomly replacing the reference to Khrushchev in the play with Eisenhower. One possible explanation could be to express Behan's general contempt for world leaders, both on the left and the right. He himself, however, discourages taking the names too seriously with the following statement upon concluding the song: "I couldn't get any rhyme for Sahara. Neither could you. What do you think we are, Jesus or something?" Behan does not further comment on the lyrics, but Meg in the play certainly does, with the following acerbic words, thereby undercutting the high sentiment of the song: "Get off the stage, you castle Catholic bitch." (223). Meg never neglects to

refer to the pious, but somewhat floozy, Miss Gilchrist as a whore, along with other unsavoury insults.

“We’re Here Because We’re Queer” is a parody of the World War I song “We’re Here Because We’re Here,” which, in turn, took its melody from the tune of “Auld Lang Syne” by Robert Burns. The war song merely repeats the one line over and over, but has pathos in its simplicity, capturing not only the nonsensical nature of war, but also the fact that those who will pay the greatest price are the working-class soldiers, who have little if nothing invested in the outcome. This version is included in Act Three and is sung by the LGBTQ characters: Rio Rita, Mulleady, and Princess Grace. Behan makes mention of the controversial nature of the lyrics in his introduction: “This little song I never hoped to get past the Lord Chamberlain in London, but, however, I succeeded.”

When Socrates in Ancient Greece,  
Sat in his Turkish bath,  
He rubbed himself, and scrubbed himself,  
And steamed both fore and aft.  
He sang the songs the sirens sang,  
With Oscar / Swinburne and Shakespeare,  
We’re here because we’re queer,  
Because we’re queer because we’re here.

The highest people in the land  
Are for or they’re against,  
It’s all the same thing in / at the end,  
A piece of sentiment.

From Swedes so tall to Arabs small,  
They answer with a leer,  
We’re here because we’re queer  
Because we’re queer because we’re here.

(224, 225)

Behan sputters out at the end: “Or queer or here or queer or whatever it is... So that, my friend, is that!” In the play, Princess Grace has an almost identical comment: “The trouble we had getting that past the nice Lord Chamberlain. This next bit’s even worse.” (225) There has, of course, been a great deal of critical discussion concerning Behan’s sexuality.<sup>32</sup> Regardless of his orientation, however,

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, O’Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*.

the author's boldness in giving a voice to LGBTQ characters in *The Hostage* was something almost unheard of at the time, especially in Irish literature. I would therefore strongly disagree with Hawkins' statement that the song appears "to have been inserted just for such 'fun.'"<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, the song can be read as a defiant proclamation of queer dignity and pride, a refusal to remain silent and in the closet.

The above-mentioned song is the last of those taken from *The Hostage* and which were (mostly) written by Behan himself. Most of the songs on the second half of the recording are so-called patriotic songs dealing with Irish politics. Several Irish-language songs are also included.

"Bonfire on the Border," written in 1937 by Brian O'Higgins, kicks off the second half and is followed by a discussion of race labelled "Paddy's Supper" on the recording. Behan first puns on the meaning of race, beginning to discuss horse races he has seen, and consequently provides an account of his first prison sentence in England and his solidarity with other prisoners, despite their different racial and religious backgrounds.

This is followed by "Down by the Glenside" which was written by his famous uncle Peadar Kearney and included in the American film *Rio Grande* from 1950. The song leads Behan into a long diversion about Irish-American history, specifically about the Irish fighting on both sides in the U.S. Civil War. The following song, "God Save Ireland," is sung to the tune of the classic Civil War song "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp." A discussion of Fenianism follows which moves into the song, referenced earlier as having been included on the Lomax recording, "The Zoological Gardens." Behan claims that the next song, an unusual version of "Home on the Range," was the favourite tune of American President Delaney Roosevelt.

The earlier referenced song "The Auld Triangle" is introduced as follows: "Well, and this other song was written by a person who will never hear it recorded, because he's not in possession of a gramophone. He's... a... pretty much of a tramp." This seems, of course, a rather absurd disparagement, in light of Behan's own less than traditional lifestyle. Richard Parfitt gives Behan credit for writing the song, something the author himself dismissed a number of times, acknowledging the authorship of Mr Dick Shannon who Behan also instructed any royalties be sent to.<sup>34</sup> Although inaccurate about the authorship of the song, Parfitt does adroitly describe the way Behan made it his own: "Behan's combination of self-mocking and bitter despondency captures the melancholy of prison life. He performed the song as a traditional, unaccompanied ballad with a low-pitched,

<sup>33</sup> Hawkins, "For All the Outcasts of This World," 124.

<sup>34</sup> O'Sullivan, *Brendan Behan: A Life*, Chapter 10.



harsh voice and lower, longer notes end-weighting each line, consonant with the bitter lyrics.”<sup>35</sup> The text below is a transcription of the version sung by Behan on the album, who interrupts the song after the first line in the second stanza to explain for the American listener that a “screw” is another word for a warden:

A hungry feeling, came o’er me stealing  
And the mice they were squealing in my prison cell  
And that auld triangle, it went jingle jangle  
Along the banks of the Royal Canal

To begin the morning, the screw was bawling  
Get out of bed and clean up your cell  
And that auld triangle, it went jingle jangle  
Along the banks of the Royal Canal

Oh the screw was peeping, and humpy Gussy lay sleeping  
As he lay there weeping for his girl Sal  
And that auld triangle, it went jingle jangle  
Along the banks of the Royal Canal

Up in the female prison, there are seventy women  
And I wish it was with them that I did dwell  
Then the auld triangle, could go jingle jangle  
All along the banks of the Royal Canal  
All along the banks of the Royal Canal

The song with some slight variations and some added material occurs repeatedly in Behan’s play *The Quare Fellow* from 1954. It opens up the play, sung by an anonymous prisoner, only to be viciously cut off by the warden who demands silence: “The screw is listening as well as peeping, and you’ll be bloody well weeping if you don’t give over your moaning.”<sup>36</sup> The song also opens up Act Two and is once again shouted down by one of the wardens. We are informed by one of the other prisoners that the singing is coming from solitary. Yet another verse of the song brings Act Two to a close. Finally, the verse about the female prison serves as the conclusion to the play as a whole at the end of Act Three. “The Auld

<sup>35</sup> Richard Parfitt, *Musical Culture and the Spirit of Irish Nationalism, 1848-1972* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2020), 150, 151.

<sup>36</sup> Behan, *The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 1978), 40.

Triangle” has become a standard in Irish folk and pop music, having been covered by a wide range of artists including The Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, The Dubliners, and The Pogues, to name but a few.

An Irish language song follows entitled “An Chuileann (The Fair Maiden),” followed by “Says Herself to Meself (Haste to the Wedding)” and yet another Irish song “Preab San Ol (Drink Heartly).” The album comes to a close with the irreverent, bawdy song “In Glendalough Lived an Old Saint,” which Behan interrupts mid-song with a comment and a burst of laughter. He ends the recording with the abrupt, whimsical statement: “That’s the lot. There you have it.”

The recording is remarkable in several respects. Behan takes bold positions on a number of progressive issues: colonialism, racism, homophobia. The album sleeve by Luce Arthur Klein contains the following insight into Behan’s only seeming foolishness, describing his “humor which might seem to attack anything and anybody, but only comes from his deep and compassionate realisation of human frailties.” There is a great deal of seriousness and wisdom behind the superficial buffoonery.

The recording also provides the listener with a front seat for his voice and remarkable presence. The Irish poet Anthony Cronin, Behan’s one-time travel companion, captures his friend’s style and antics based, of course, on first-hand observation: “According to what was needed by the song, the lips would curl, the eyes flash and roll and the tiny, sensitive hands clench or unclench in passion, or reach out in mock unavailing yearning and despair.”<sup>37</sup> This is a fine accompanying image as one listens to the recording in question.

Behan’s renditions, in the Spoken Arts recording, of the songs included in his play *The Hostage* also hint at possible alternative interpretations and provide insight into the logic behind their inclusion in the play. His ongoing banter also, at least occasionally, provides insightful additional perspectives on their meaning and relevance. Brendan Behan’s singing and songwriting was an integral part of his creative output and has been largely neglected in critical writings to date. The recording consists of the closest approximation to what it would have been like to spend time with him in person.

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