



## Chris Coe

A big celebration was planned for the presentation of the EFDSS Gold Badge to Chris Coe on the 27th March 2020. I was delighted to have been asked to make the presentation. The 27th happens to be my birthday, and I thought what better way could there be to spend a birthday than among good friends celebrating Chris's life and work. Sadly, it was not to be. The rising tide of the Covid 19 virus put paid to that and many other events. Had I made the presentation, the following is roughly what I would have said.

I think it was in 1968, when I was running a folk club in Tooting, South London, that Peter Wood, a regular and friend from our sister club at the Fighting Cocks at Kingston, suggested that I should book this young couple (we were all young then) Pete and Chris Coe. He particularly told me about their exciting version of the Coppers' song 'Warlike Seamen'. I did book them and I was impressed by their performance. That was my first encounter with Chris Coe, there would be many more over the next 50+ years! Many people whose lives Chris has touched could have written this citation. I know that I share with numerous people delight and satisfaction in knowing that Chris has been awarded the Gold Badge of the EFDSS.

We think of a Renaissance person as someone who is skilled and well-versed in many fields of knowledge, skill, work, etc. Chris Coe is a renaissance woman: singer, instrumentalist, artist, designer, writer, teacher, dancer, actor, great company and an outstanding human being. Not everyone is aware of the range of Chris' achievements, which include qualifications in medical microbiology, fine art and being a skilled welder!

Chris got involved with the 1960s folk scene in and around Birmingham. She teamed up with Peter Coe and they became a successful folk club act and the duo went professional in 1971. That was a heady time, an exciting time, a time of discovery. There were thousands of folk clubs up and down the country providing work for performers, some of whom were discovering both a musical past they were not previously aware of and developing their own skills and potential.

It is as a performer that I first experienced the magic that Chris could produce. I thought two things about her were just outstanding. First her singing, particularly the intensive and exciting way she could handle narrative songs. Often at the end of hearing her sing I felt, "Well, that's about as good as it can get". Second, her hammer dulcimer playing. What a great sense of rhythm, what wonderful drive and phrasing, something that is equally true of her clog dancing. I had the experience of playing with her quite a bit and it was always exciting, she brought the best out of anyone she played with. The groups she has performed with sound like a who's who of the folk revival: Pete & Chris Coe, New Victory Band, Bandoggs, Chris Coe &

Maggie Holland, English Country Blues Band, Tiger Moth, Red Shift, Hooke's Law, Black Box Band, Chris Coe & John Adams and latterly, Annie Dearman.

But Chris's performance work extended beyond folk music and in particular she developed interest in drama and different forms of storytelling. I well recall the magic of some of her collaborations with John Britton and Deborah Middleton, combining words, sounds, song and movement. In 2001-2 Chris took a musical role in the National Theatre production of 'The Good Hope' which showed in London and toured afterwards.

If anyone disproves that hackneyed old saying that 'those that can do, do, and those that can't teach' it is Chris. Sometimes you get someone who is both a brilliant performer **and** can really do the stuff in terms of teaching; Chris is one of those. The testimonials to the quality of her teaching are legion. I guess Chris got into teaching through running workshops at festivals but her range is quite phenomenal. When I was working at Newcastle University her visits and classes were eagerly anticipated by students. At the same time, she was also teaching voice and music performance for devised drama at Huddersfield and voice and characterisation at Salford. Chris was one of the founders of the Ryburn 3 Step folk development group and has made significant contributions to various community arts organisations in terms of singing, dance, instrumental music and drama. Community arts projects with the likes of Northern Ballet Theatre and Chol International Arts gave her additional scope to use her visual arts skills.

No matter the project at hand Chris invariably used her own love and knowledge of our vernacular traditions as working material for devising shows and so introducing the group members to a performance genre and aesthetic usually new to them. Chris was particularly impressed with the way students responded positively to the experience of hearing vernacular singers for the first time.

What I think characterises her teaching is a combination of the setting of high standards, largely through example, together with an interactional approach which is very supportive of the learner. Lucy Farrell, one of the best of the younger generation of singers wrote to me: 'As a teacher Chris' lessons were insightful and significant and I continue to learn from her as I grow as a performer and human; her lessons continue to resonate'. Huw Evans from Chris' Ryburn singing group wrote about his luck in meeting Chris: 'she gave me a voice. Patiently and gently she led me from feeling that I'd a voice like a crow that smokes too much to understanding that, actually, I could sing. And that's a gift almost too precious to describe'.

If I just think about Chris in terms of my own life, I immediately get these warm feelings of times well spent, whether it was listening to her perform, playing with her or concocting events. Chris would regularly stay with Sheila and I when she came to Newcastle to teach. Then we had evenings full of good companionship (often a lentil and cheese loaf that Chris had cooked and brought with her). When Frankie Armstrong's visits coincided with Chris', you needed time to recover from the hilarity and good time we had.

The Gold Badge of the EFDSS is awarded 'to those who have made unique or outstanding contributions to the art or science of folk dance, music or song'. We

could convert the 'or's in the sentence into 'and's - for Chris has made both unique **and** outstanding contributions to dance **and** music **and** song and we could add drama. You only get one Gold Badge, even if you deserve it three times over.

Vic Gammon