

Chapter 2

The Opie Recordings: What's Left to be Heard?

Laura Jopson, Andrew Burn, Jonathan Robinson

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In 1985, Peter and Iona Opie published the third of their works relating to the play of schoolchildren: *The Singing Game*. Peter Opie had died before it could be completed. Iona Opie wrote the Preface, Introduction, and what text remained to be completed¹ after the editing of the transcripts and commentary she and Peter had built up over the years. She had also organized these materials in the elaborate filing system now archived at the Bodleian Library. An ambitious exposition, their work surveyed children's singing games across the UK, including clapping games as a subset, and explored individual verbal texts, variations and histories. A landmark contribution to the subject area of children's folklore, much of the book drew on a large collection of audio recordings made mostly by Iona Opie from the late 1960s to the mid 1980s. This collection was deposited with the British Library Sound Archive in 1998 and is now

¹ She writes: 'In the event, he died before the book was finished. I wrote the Preface, Introduction, and the remainder of the text.' Letter to Julia Bishop, 2012

entitled ‘The Opie Collection of Children’s Games and Songs’ (BL shelfmark: C898). It has been digitised and made available by the British Library as part of the project which the present volume describes. Offering a geographically and chronologically diverse collection of songs, the collection brings to life the material that fills the pages of *The Singing Game*. The audio archive consists of 85 open reel and cassette tapes recorded by Opie between 1969 and 1983. It is now fully catalogued and available online as streamed audio to the public at large.

However, the collection’s significance lies not simply in the chance to sample the songs included in *The Singing Game*. As this chapter will show, there is still much left to be heard in the Opie collection which has never been published. Themes such as the role of play in the inclusion and exclusion of children on the playground; the role of the media in children’s play; the question of transmission of games and songs; and the appearance and function of scatological and transgressive songs and rhymes during playtime, resonate throughout this archive of recordings.

This chapter will explore these themes in the light of recent research in childhood studies emphasising agency in children’s culture (e.g. James, 1993; Qvortrup, 2009); the importance of children’s media cultures in their play (e.g. Buckingham, 2000; 2007), and the form and function of children’s folklore (e.g. Bishop & Curtis, 2001; Grugeon, 1988).

THE OPIES’ METHODS

Before attending to the contents of the archive, we will consider what it reveals about the Opies’ approach to research and how this has determined the shape and extent of the collection.

The Singing Game (1985), while based partly on surveys completed for *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* (1959), also includes a different kind of field research. The Opies conducted the surveys largely with the help of teachers. They took the form of a written questionnaire and the children wrote their replies which the teacher forwarded to the Opies (who might then correspond and ask for more details or clarifications). The fieldwork for *The Singing Game*, by contrast, involved the use of sound recording technology and Iona Opie collected much of it at firsthand, travelling the country in search of her material, sometimes accompanied by fellow collectors of children's games such as Father Damian Webb and Berit Østberg. Interestingly, there is little indication from the recordings that Peter Opie accompanied Iona on these visits. On a few recordings in the archive, particularly those from the London area, Iona Opie makes reference to the fact that she is accompanied by her Norwegian friend who is presumably Berit Østberg, mentioned in the preface to *The Singing Game*. Opie explains that Østberg is also a collector of children's games and songs in Norway; little else is said about her, though we know she collected children's singing games in Trondheim in the late sixties and early seventies. Father Damian Webb can also be heard on a set of recordings from St Benedict's Roman Catholic Primary School, Garforth, Yorkshire where he taught (C898/12). He is heard discussing with the schoolchildren their singing games and songs and commenting on these with Opie. Webb's approach to the collection of children's games was facilitated by sophisticated audio-recording and photographic equipment. His substantial archives of photographs and audio recordings were given to the Pitt Rivers museum in Oxford on his death. Several of his photographs are used as illustrations in *The Singing Game*; and a selection is also used on the British Library website developed during our project (Figure 1). Digital copies of the sound recordings are available at the British Library as

the ‘Damian Webb/Pitt Rivers Museum Children’s Games and Songs’ (BL shelfmark: C1431).

FIGURE 2.1 – Boys Playing Marbles, April 1968, England, Leyland. From Damian Webb. By kind permission of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

Sometimes in the company of these colleagues, then, and sometimes alone, Iona Opie collected traditional singing games and other songs from a range of childhood haunts including school playgrounds and council estates, inner city recreational grounds and country villages, including her own village of Liss in Hampshire, which provided the material for her sustained investigation of play presented in *The People in the Playground* (Opie, 1993). The locations are widely distributed, covering the West Country, the Midlands, the Welsh borders, the North-west, Yorkshire, Scotland and various sites in London. She writes of her efforts to complete the geographical picture of children’s play cultures:

It was only when we failed to find a contact in some corner of Great Britain, or in some offshore island, that I went off on an expedition with a tape-recorder: to Cape Wrath in the left-hand top corner of Scotland, to the Land’s End in Cornwall, to the westerly tip of Wales, and to the Isle of Wight. For the last of our books on school lore, *The Singing Game*, I also made special forays into the places where the older lore flourishes best, the depths of the cities, and there I found games like “There comes a Jew a-riding” which were believed to have quite died out. (Opie 1988).

The interviews and performances were collected on open-reel tapes and cassettes. The medium of each recording can be found by searching the British Library catalogue which provides the details. Opie writes self-deprecatingly of the technology in a personal letter:

Peter didn't even use a typewriter, and I made the playground recordings on a 12-guinea tape-recorder from Selfridges, with 3-inch tapes – nice little machine it was. (Letter to Julia Bishop, 1 January 2011)

When meeting with the children, Opie ensured that these were not formal or prescriptive interviews, but relaxed discussions amongst small friendship groups of children as they played and sung. Often letting the children hold the microphone or experiment with the recording device, she appears a welcome member of these gangs, casually discussing with the children songs and games, boyfriends and enemies. In this sense, her research method is characteristically ethnographic, featuring what today's qualitative methodology textbooks call semi-structured interviewing techniques, focus groups, and attention to discursive interplay between participants and to their cultural context. She speaks in an interview of being pleasantly surprised when *Lore and Language* was reviewed by Edmund Leach, who wrote 'the Opies have arrived as anthropologists', saying that they had never seen themselves in this way². Yet clearly Iona Opie's method in her fieldwork went far beyond a narrow focus on a textual corpus, and the recordings reveal how extensive her interest was in the cultural sources and contexts of the children's play. In this respect, she was in the vanguard of contemporary

² Cathy Courtney Interview with Iona Opie, 'Cathy Courtney Oral History Collection', British Library Sound and Moving Image catalogue, shelfmark C968/139/01-03.

developments in folklore studies, which by the 1980s had an academic presence in the UK, at Leeds, Sheffield, and the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh. Folklore studies in the UK in the 1970s and 1980s was also influenced by the European ‘folk life studies’ and by ‘folkloristics’ in North America, as well as developments in British social anthropology. The Opies would have been aware of these developments and were attendees at the Folklore Society centenary conference in 1978 which attracted innovative researchers from Europe and North America (Newall, 1980).

The lengthy accounts she elicits of children’s cultural practices also come close to the territory explored by today’s cultural studies researchers, interested in relations between sociocultural events, media and play. Good examples from the archive are a boy’s account of his interest in girlfriends in London’s Coram Fields (C898/26); children’s descriptions of their play in the country and park in Alton, Hampshire, and of their television viewing (C898/01); children’s favourite sweets and crisp flavours in Stepney Green, London (C898/29); problems encountered by children in Chelsea, London, when adults disapprove of their ball games (C898/67). Although the published work of *The Singing Game* can appear to privilege text over context, then, the archive reveals an intense interest in context, lived culture and the ‘webs of meaning’ which bind them together (Geertz, 1973).

The result of this intensely detailed research is a collection of recordings that add to the Opies’ published evidence of a distinct and fiercely guarded play culture. In a period in which social commentators and scholars alike were bewailing its apparent death,

Iona Opie countered that this tradition was in fact ‘a truly living one’ (Opie & Opie, 1998: vii).

Three questions may be posed about this extraordinarily sustained research process. One concerns the nature of the research collaboration. Since Iona Opie conducted a good deal of the research independently of her husband, it may be that conventional assumptions about their partnership need to be re-evaluated, and her own distinctive role given a greater prominence. At the same time, her collaborations with Østberg and Webb could be considered in more detail. Webb, for example, was clearly more than just the provider of photographs illustrating the Opie publications, but a skilled researcher in his own right, whose approach to what today is seen as visual ethnography both complements and contrasts with Iona Opie’s greater reliance on language and audio recording.

Another question is about the theoretical basis of the research, its profound beliefs about childhood and culture. In this respect, the architects of the new sociology of childhood regard the Opies as pioneers, to be seen as predecessors of the approaches to childhood studies they advocate, with an insistence on the agency of the child and the self-sufficiency of children’s play cultures (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Corsaro, 2009). At the same time, James, Jenks and Prout label the Opies’ approach ‘the tribal child’, suggesting it displays an anthropological view which locates children’s culture as exotic and alien, productively signaling its autonomy, but in danger of romanticizing its nature and functions. To carry forward this question, the archive might be expected to reveal something of the ethnographic method: what is included, how it is treated, what kinds of interrogation are evident, what kinds of proto-interpretation might be implied.

A third, methodological, question might be leveled at the nature of the data Iona Opie collected, and how it was captured, transcribed, notated. As we have explained, her methods relied on field notes and analogue audio recording. The photographic illustrations for *The Singing Game* were provided by Damian Webb. The tunes for the songs, meanwhile, were transcribed and notated by a friend, Michael Hurd, of whom she writes:

Michael Hurd lived in this same village. He was a composer, and his main line was composing choral works for children, published by OUP. I knew I should print the singing game tunes. He lived just up the road, so he could take some of the tapes and write out the tunes ... It was just my luck that he was already a friend.
(Letter to Julia Bishop, 1 January 2011)

The question here, then, relates to the communicative modes which make up playground games, which of these are recognized and captured, and what prominence is accorded to them. Unsurprisingly, particularly in view of the scholarly tradition of folklore studies in which the Opies are most obviously located, considerable prominence is given to the words: the mode of language. Iona Opie can often be heard in the archive recordings asking children to repeat the words of the songs. We know from interpretive work in *The Lore and Language of Schoolchildren* and *The Singing Game* that scholarly attention to historical variation and poetic form is a preoccupation of the Opies' approach, albeit balanced by scrupulous attention to the immediate cultural context in which children disown any knowledge of the history or origins of their games and songs. She is also interested in the tunes, although she does not ask the children about variants of the tunes, or about alternative tunes. In the published work, there is less explicit attention to musical variation than to linguistic variation.

The other modes at work can be seen, in terms of multimodality theory, as communicative work such as gesture, action, gaze, proxemics (e.g. Finnegan, 2002; Bishop and Burn, 2013). Some of these are not, of course, noted by Opie, though her folklorist antennae are keenly directed at the actions specific to particular games, and these are noted in careful detail in *The Singing Game*. Again, she can be heard in the recording asking children to describe these movements. An example is a sequence of movements briefly described in *The Singing Game* in relation to a song that begins ‘Crackerjack, Crackerjack’:

... sung twice while the children in the circle bumped their hips into each other, and ended with the pantomime ‘The boys have got the muscles’ (‘everyone flexes their biceps’), ‘the teacher’s got the pay’ (‘stretch out hands’), ‘The girls have got the sexy legs’ (‘lift skirt showing off leg’), ‘Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!’ (‘jump up and down’). (Opie & Opie, 1985: 416)

In the recordings, this sequence is noted at the playground in London’s Coram Fields in relation to a song beginning Michelle, Michelle:

Children: Mi-chelle (boom-ba-boom-ba-boom-ba-boom)

Mi-chelle (boom-ba-boom-ba-boom-ba-boom)

Boys got the muscles, teachers got the brain

Girls got the sex, what else can I say?

Iona Opie: Now the words are – the actions that go with it are – Michelle – you clap your hands under your legs, that’s twice, under each leg, as it were – um, then you’ve got ‘the boy’s got the muscles’, you’re sort of clenching your

fists, like that, showing your biceps, you've got the muscles! (laughs). 'Teacher's got the brain'.... 'teacher's got the brains', you point at your head, um, then, um, 'girl's got the sex, you sort of raise your skirt up at the side and show your legs, and then, 'what more can you say', you get down on one knee and pray! I've never heard that one before. (C898/26)

Not only is this careful attention to detail consistent with the folklorist, it shows an attention to the physical modes of expressive movement. In general, then, while in the published work linguistic form and content, variation and change are explicit preoccupations, a good deal of attention is given to physical modes of play in the recordings. Music, by contrast, is notated but rarely commented on either in the recordings or *The Singing Game*.

If we include in the picture her research collaborations, we see, as well as the musical collaboration of Michael Hurd, the ethnographic contribution of Damian Webb, not just as an illustrator, but as a complementary researcher, documenting the visual landscape of children's games which we can only imagine as we listen to the Opies' sound recordings.

In certain ways, then, Iona Opie's work foreshadows future developments in the documenting and interpretation of the lives of children. In its cultural politics and its rejection of developmental approaches to childhood, it anticipates the theories of agency, culture and play elaborated by the new sociology of childhood, though its celebration of vernacular artistry bears little resemblance to sociology. Innovations which are genuinely pioneering can be heard in the audio recordings: the deferral to children's knowledge, the

delicate probing of cultural context and practice, the attention to action, movement and social function as well as the formal properties of language.

In the next section, we will look at three areas of content which the archive reveals, and which are not to be found in the publications.

THE OPIE COLLECTION: WHAT DOES IT REVEAL?

In the light of the account given generally in *The Singing Game*, we might assume that this animated culture was one in which tradition thrived, familiar melodies persisted and scatological rhymes were shunned in favour of loud and wholesome renditions of *A Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea*. Indeed, Opie describes the children represented here as a distant reflection of the ‘young people of the Middle ages’ in their singing games, games that boast one hundred and fifty years worth of history, and mild-mannered ‘buffoonery’ (Opie & Opie, 1985: 31).

An obvious question about the archive is whether it reveals broadly the same picture? Or does it demonstrate that the Opies captured something more, material that they recognised to be of significance yet due to the purposes of their own research, did not include in *The Singing Game*? In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider three areas of content that are under-represented in the published work, and which offer an expanded view of play cultures, along with the different challenges for us as we contemplate the play spaces of the early twenty-first century. The first of these areas relates to a central question of our project, how children’s play cultures relate to their media cultures (see Burn, chapter 1 of this volume; and Willett, chapter 5). The second explores the question of variation, using specific examples from the archive. The third looks at scatological and transgressive material from the collection.

The marriage of oral tradition and media cultures

Throughout *The Singing Game*, the Opies document instances in which references to children's experience of popular media appear. For example, we read that in Scarborough, two girls performing the song *Sunny Side Up* include a reference to 'Larry Grayson' who presented the British television show of the 1970s, 'Shut That Door!' The authors also provide a short list of pop songs that girls throughout the country used as clapping songs; and in the section 'Impersonations and Dance Routines' they cite three contemporary songs: Sandie Shaw's 'Puppet on a String'; 'Save your Kisses for Me', by the Brotherhood of Man; and 'Just One More Dance', by Esther and Abi Ofarim (Opie & Opie, 1985: 414). However, the songs and performances included as full transcriptions constitute a quite specific category. Some do indeed derive from popular cultural and media sources: but ones pre-dating this generation of children by a considerable margin. In the chapter in *The Singing Game* entitled 'Impersonations and Dance Routines', for example, the songs and performances included are all adaptations and transformations of older popular songs: 'She Wears Red Feathers' from 1952 (Opie & Opie 1985: 425); 'Sunny Side Up' from 1929 (Opie & Opie 1985: 429); The 'Tennessee WigWalk' from 1953 (Opie & Opie 1985: 432). Meanwhile, performances of the hits of the 1970s are omitted. The Opies explain this selection explicitly:

The song-dances in this section are the exception to the rule. They have taken root in oral tradition, and often words and movement have grown over the years. (Opie & Opie, 1985: 415)

Their focus, then, where it included media-derived material, was on texts which had stood the test of time, overcome the ephemerality which they saw as characteristic of media culture, and had become subject to the processes of oral transmission over decades which might seem to characterise folkloric material.

By contrast, the range of material in the archive is striking. Again, the fundamental purpose of these interviews was to capture traditional singing games; not to document the children's popular media cultures. Nevertheless, the recordings demonstrate clearly that Iona Opie did take the time to capture, often in some detail, many instances in which children refer to their engagement with contemporary media. She asks them about their television viewing, finding Scooby-Doo, Blue Peter, Secret Squirrel and Adam Ant at Alton, Hampshire (C898.01). She explores their favourite pop songs and singers, finding a tribute to the 1970s Scottish boy-band the Bay City Rollers, sung to the tune of 'This Old Man', in Manchester (C898/69), asking children in Liss if they know the Bay City Rollers (C898/62), and recording children in Poole, Dorset singing the Bay City Rollers' 1975 hit 'Give a Little Love' (C898/80). She probes their transformations of films, finding a game based on Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang in Bedford (C898/09). An example of her interest in media culture as transgressive practice can be found in a discussion with a group of boys in Liss, Hampshire (her own village) about the popular 1970s US television series Kung Fu (C898/22). She asks why the programme is considered dangerous, who the central character (Caine) is and how he moves and fights, and why. Later in the recording she discovers that the boys also exchange Kung Fu trading cards, and that these have been banned by the school.

Particularly notable is the number of pop songs heard on the recordings. When asking the children what their favourite singing or clapping games are, girls often suggest

a song that is topping the charts at that time. However, this distinction between songs from media cultures and those from the traditional stock of playground and street songs is not made by the children. In that moment, the song is an undifferentiated part of their culture.

A good example is contained in an interview with children in Coram Fields, a public park and playground in London's Bloomsbury, in July 1974 (C989/26). Opie asks a group of girls if they have any singing games that they enjoy playing. Having sung the often-heard singing game *When the War Was Over and Josephine was Dead*, the girls excitedly ask if their friend can sing 'Mama', and one of them reassures the interviewer: 'she does sing that in the school playground', in fact she stands on the bench and sings it to 'all the people'. The girl then begins to perform Lena Zavaroni's *Mama, He's Making Eyes at Me*, and the other girls join in on the chorus. The song, (words by Sidney Clare, music by Con Conrad) was first published in 1921, and was recorded by many artists before Zavaroni. It is a good example of the complex cultural histories of popular music, accompanied by even more complex oral hinterlands of fan performance, including playground routines. How do we know, then, that it is Zavaroni's performance which these girls are adapting? In fact, their rendition is quite an accurate presentation of Zavaroni's hit record, which opens with a single introductory "Mama!", followed by a descending scale in the accompaniment. The girls mimic this closely, the soloist singing the song, the others singing the accompaniment in between lines, in chorus.

Having sung this the girls then move on to sing the skipping game *Salt, Vinegar, Mustard, Cider*. The fact that 'Mama' had won Zavaroni the TV talent show 'Opportunity Knocks' is not mentioned, nor the fact the song was released as a record in 1974. Instead, it appears in and amongst their regular singing and skipping songs. Nevertheless, as

indicated above, it does clearly adapt the cultural resources of Zavaroni's hit record, and these continue through the performance: the use of a characteristic vocal break, of exaggerated vibrato, of the choral representations of the accompaniment and "shoo-wop" section. This engagement with media culture can be seen under Bishop et al's category of *mimesis* (2006). However, as Bishop et al emphasise, it is important to note that mimesis here is more than simply copying. It involves a claim to particular forms of cultural capital; it involves complex forms of musical mastery, including accurate rendition of difficult intervals in the melody, syncopation, modulation (the girls accurately produce the key change midway through the 'shoo-wop' section), and the production of a powerful vocal style. As Marsh argues (2008), these features suggest a musical sophistication considerably greater than orthodox systems of music education allow for. However, the other important factor here is context. The song has become appropriated by these girls, incorporated into their repertoire, and used to delineate, even compete over, cultural roles such as soloist and chorus. Similar performances were noted in the contemporary playground we studied in this project. In chapter 5 of this volume, Willett considers performances of pop songs in terms of performativity, where the stylistic nature of the rendition also has the social function of performing aspects of identity, group membership, and shared cultural affiliation. Opie's work here anticipates the category we have called 'cultural rehearsal', exhibiting iterative practice both for the moment and for future performance. The difference is that the iterative events we witnessed emerged from forms of repeat listening more typical of digital media (CD, DVD, i-pod, YouTube) than the TV performances these children may have seen, and even the analogue records and cassettes they may have listened to.

Another example appears in an interview in the London Borough of Dulwich, in May 1976 (C898/27), in which Opie asks a group of girls what songs they use when ‘Chinese Skipping’ (also known as ‘American skipping’, ‘Elastics’ and ‘Dutch skipping’). One of the girls asks Opie: ‘can I sing a song?’ and the children begin to perform Gary Glitter’s *I Love You, Love Me Love* (Glitter/Leander, 1973). Although the children are not skipping to this song, some can be heard playing ‘Chinese skipping’ in the background. Having sung this, one of the schoolgirls then prompts her friend: ‘Georgie, that Mamma Mia one’ and the children launch into an enthusiastic rendition of Abba’s *Mamma Mia*.

Traditional singing games and the ‘new’ pop songs therefore appear to co-exist contentedly alongside one another. It is also clear, if we consider the recent data gathered in today’s playgrounds during our project, that the pop song references are not always as ephemeral as the Opies suggested. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that Abba’s ‘Mamma Mia’ has returned, this time prompted by the film musical; while references to pop stars of longstanding celebrity such as Michael Jackson suggest a popular cultural tradition of some longevity (Willett, chapter 5, this volume; Bishop and Burn, 2013).

While the archive includes this rich range of performances directly drawing on children’s engagement with the pop hits of the time, the selection made for the section of *The Singing Game* entitled ‘Performance’ largely omits contemporary pop songs, as we have seen, and instead includes performances of songs at some historical distance from the children. These songs have worked their way into children’s play cultures by circuitous routes from their origins in pre- and post-war film, musical and stage, appearing in the playground decades later, their provenance completely opaque to children of the 1970s. By contrast, the provenance of songs by Gary Glitter, Abba, The Bay City Rollers

and Lena Zavaroni would have been transparent to these children, and part of their media cultures, even if the purposes and qualities of their immediate use overrode such provenance. The selection for publication, then, exemplifies the Opies' concern that immediate media culture, while important and vital, was somehow less durable than songs and games which seemed more folkloric.

Nevertheless, something about this culture obviously seemed worth recording to Iona Opie as she conducted her fieldwork. In the act of researching, her ambivalence is revealed starkly in a moment from 1970 in Ordsall, Salford. Two girls ask if they can sing a pop song, and she replies 'I'd rather not hear a pop song – it's not what I'm collecting, you see'. She immediately relents, however, and records performances of 'Big Spender' and 'One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, Rock' (C898/39). In spite of the concern about ephemerality, and perhaps the kind of cultural distinction one might expect of researchers of the Opies' social class and generation, there is a sense that these performances were evidence of children's perennial appropriation and transformation of adult popular culture. The existence of these recordings offers the researcher a rich resource with which to explore the relationship between the media and the playground. Perhaps Gary Glitter's, 'I Love You, Love Me Love', enjoyed only a brief spell of popularity and the children at Coram Fields soon stopped singing Lena Zavaroni's hit, but the frequency with which these songs appear suggests that they represent something more than an ephemeral enthusiasm. As Sutton-Smith notes in his review of *The Singing Game*, the children's play culture seems almost to have 'taken on the character of modern mass media culture with its cycles of fashion and popularity' (Sutton-Smith, 1986), something that the recordings corroborate.

Something of the same sense was evident in our ethnographic studies. Certainly the hybridizing of contemporary media texts and what we have referred to as residual or sedimented texts is clear. At the same time, however, the mediascape (Appadurai, 1996) of children in the twenty-first century is different from that of the 1970s in certain ways; though there are also similarities. Both groups of children enjoyed pop songs, listened to them on TV, radio and film, and learnt to perform them. Both generations enjoyed TV talent shows. However, in the interval the rise of the music video and MTV has taken place, and the variety of media platforms on which children might access this material has expanded considerably, allowing for more intensive, varied and repeated listening to vocal performances and viewing dance routines. A good example is the reference to viewing Michael Jackson videos with her cousins made by a girl in the London school, in an interview about influences on her own playground dance routines (Burn & Bishop, 2013).

Television show theme tunes and advertisement jingles also make their way onto the recordings. Of particular popularity is 'The Wombles' theme tune, from the 1970s children's animated television series, based on the series of books by Elizabeth Beresford. When interviewing schoolgirls from Nottingham in June, 1977, the children discuss with Opie various singing games that they play, including *I'm a Little Dutch Girl*. One of the girls then suggests that they sing the song that 'Michaela learnt us' and they begin to sing 'The Wombles' theme tune. Significantly, the children seem unaware of the television origins of the song and explain that 'Michaela made it up, it's ever so good'. In another instance, when interviewing children in Hampshire, Opie records a small group of children performing a television jingle for fruit pastilles. They sing: 'put them pastilles round Ma, put them pastilles round, pastille-picking Mama, pass those pastilles round'.

(C89804-02). Again, this song appears in and amongst the other traditional playground songs and that it is borrowed from the television is not mentioned by the schoolgirls; indeed, it appears to be of little significance to them. Opie is clearly interested in what they know of the provenance of the song, asking if it comes from the TV, to which one of them replies ‘Yeah’, and another ‘It’s an advert’. Opie asks twice if they know who made the pastilles, clearly looking for Rowntrees, but they do not respond to this.

Finally, in Boughton and Salford, November 1970, when performing the widespread clapping song *When Susie Was a Baby*, a group of schoolgirls chant the line: ‘when Susie was a Saint, a Saint Susie was’ before beginning to sing the theme tune from the popular 1960s television show ‘The Saint’, aired between 1962 and 1969. Based on the novels of Leslie Charteris, the show followed the life of adventurer Simon Templar, played by Roger Moore. This kind of media reference is of the type that Bishop et al (2007) term *onomastic allusion*, here accomplished by a noun-phrase (‘a Saint’) easily inserted into the sequence, as ‘a highly flexible unit which can be adapted by lexical substitution on a slot-and-filler basis’ (Lennon, 2004: 166). In this case, ‘Saint’ does not scan, as two syllables are required for the meter; so two notes are slurred by the girls over the single syllable. However, interestingly, the word ‘Saint’ is insufficiently specific to function alone as the allusion, needing to be disambiguated by the melody of the theme tune. This is, then, *multimodal* onomastic allusion, pleasurable in its avoidance of the obvious citation of Simon Templar’s name.

This example is indicative of the significant function that different media fulfil within play culture and raises questions which relate to themes addressed throughout this book. One of these is the way in which apparently settled traditional texts are subject to what the Opies called the processes of ‘wear and repair’ (Opie & Opie, 1959: 7). Here,

the interweaving of TV character and theme tune into a flexible sequence (itself subject to many variations, as the Opies and others documented), along with the witty alignment of the Saint with a moment in between Susie's death and appearance as a ghost, demonstrates the process of oral composition which other researchers have noted as a feature of play culture (e.g. Marsh, 2006), while at the same time seamlessly welding together elements from oral culture and media culture.

That the children often claim to be unaware of the media origins, or uninterested in them, is a common response, confirmed in the ethnographic studies for this project (see also Bishop and Curtis, 2001). While it suggests that the dominant concern of the children is the cultural moment rather than its back story, it also brings into question the apparently secure boundary between orally transmitted lore and play derived from children's media cultures. The ethnographic studies in our project contain examples of media-derived texts taught by one child to others, so that the process of transmission is identical to that of oral tradition. How to distinguish between a folksong and a performance of media culture in these contexts becomes an impossible task, resolved here by acknowledging the merging of the two cultures and their movement through the micro-histories of children's improvisatory play.

This process also raises the question addressed elsewhere in this book of the agency of childhood. While these children are the inheritors of oral transmission and consumers of media texts, this instance and many others demonstrates their ability to transform the cultural resources they acquire, producing something new each time, determined by their interests, aspirations, and tastes and preferences. This kind of agency, while it is expressive of social identities and interests, is often also referred to as a form

of creativity – an idea returned to below in the context of the variations found in the Opie archive.

Variation and its social context

The process of selection needed to produce a collection like *The Singing Game* inevitably narrowed the representation of variation, even producing something of an effect of standardization of songs and games. The recordings demonstrate that the variations of language, music and to some extent action are much greater than *The Singing Game* was able to show. There are instances, for example, in which a particular well-known song is sung to an entirely different tune from that often heard and from that recorded in *The Singing Game*.³ The Opies admit in the Preface to *The Singing Game*: ‘we have given more than one tune in the few cases in which there are several well-established tunes for the same game, but we have not given all variants’ (Opie & Opie, 1985: vii). Though there is a brief comment in the Preface on the music, its effect is to generalize and homogenize; their interests lay more with linguistic and prosodic variation and transformation.

However, melodic variations are evident in the recordings. One striking example of this is heard when a child, recently moved to a school in Liss, in 1974, sings her version

³ The version published in the *Singing Game* was recorded in Stepney, London, in 1976 (C898/29). The words of the recording correspond exactly to the published version; though the tune does not, quite. Perhaps Michael Hurd’s transcription was based on another tape (there are many instances of this song in the collection); or perhaps it is a composite derived from several.

of *Under the Bram Bush* (C898/23)⁴. Her school friends have already sung their version and this follows the familiar rhyme recorded by the Opies in *The Singing Game*. The children seem reluctant to let the ‘new’ girl sing her version and Iona notes that the girl has trouble trying to persuade her friends to sing it with her. Eventually, when she does sing, the tune and rhythm are entirely different from that previously heard. This episode suggests two ideas. Firstly, that variation is, as suggested above, greater than can be easily represented in collections; and greater than is sometimes suggested in academic analysis emphasizing the limited repertoire of clapping game tunes. Curtis suggests, for example:

Girls have a great many clapping games and at a casual glance would seem to have an extensive repertoire of movements, actions and songs in their games. A closer examination, however, reveals that they build a wide variety of games from a small number of hand movements and snatches of melody. (Curtis, 2004: 421)

Secondly, that the social process of transmission is complex. Certainly, the movement of children between schools (as in this case), regions and countries is a factor in the intertextual borrowings, mergers and mash-ups - to use an expression typically applied to the combinatorial bricolage of contemporary online culture (e.g. Ito, 2011) - which characterize playground rhymes and tunes. However, the temptation to celebrate such transmission as smooth, collaborative and communal is given pause by the kind of resistance found in this example, where a new and different version of the song is treated

⁴ This recording is not accessible online, as it is an off-air recording of a BBC broadcast. It can be listened to locally at the British Library.

as an alien invasion, rejected in favour of familiar orthodoxy, representative of settled patterns of friendship reluctant to be disturbed.

Another variation of *Under the Bram Bush* is sung by children from St Clement's School, Salford, November 1970 (C898/38). This tune is reminiscent of the song *Down by the Riverside*; a popular gospel song widely employed as an anthem of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Here, then, the words of the rhyme, their origins in late 19th/early 20th century popular song (cf Opie & Opie, 1985: 452-3), embellished with a playground interest in adult love and procreation, are complemented by music filtering through from global protest culture – though of course there is no evidence of the children's awareness of such a meaning.

The following notation attempts to demonstrate these markedly different tunes and rhythms. The four lines represent the most commonly-found *Under the Bram Bush* tune (Michael Hurd's transcription in *The Singing Game*), the one recorded in Salford, 1970 (C898/38), the one recorded in Liss, Hampshire, 1974, and the one recorded in London's American School (C898/02):

Opie, SG
[values doubled/
rebarred]

Un - der the bram bush, Un - der the sea, boom, boom, boom,

Salford
♩=84

Un - der the bram bush, un - der the ap - ple tree,

Hampshire
♩=104

Un - der the bram bush, un - der the tree, bom bom bom,

American School
♩=120

Un - der the bram bush, un - der the tree Bom bom bom

5

True love for you, my dar - ling, True love for me. When we get

True love for you my dar - ling, true love for you and me,

5

That's where my true love is wait - ing for me, bom bom bom,

True love for - ev - er, true love for me And when we're

9

mar - ried, We'll have a fam - i - ly, A
 When we get mar - ried we'll raise a fam - i - ly A
 When we get mar - ried Hap - py we will be, bom bom bom,
 mar - ried, we'll raise a fam - 'ly Of lit - tle

13

boy for you, a girl for me, Um tid-dle-y um dum, sex - y!
 boy for you, a girl for me, Um did-dle-y-um - dum bum bum!
 Un - der the shade of the old bram tree, sex - y!
 chil - dren all in a Row row..[etc.]

American School cont.

...row your boat Gent - ly down the stream Kick the teach - er o - ver-board and
 see how loud she screams. [scream]

Music transcription by Julia Bishop.

The first point to note, perhaps, is that almost nothing is known of the origins of the *Singing Game* version of the tune published in *The Singing Game*. While the Opies spend a page and a half on the history of the *words* and their origins in Harry and Harriet Harndin's 1895 song 'A Cannibal King' and Cole and Johnson's 1902 song 'Under the Bamboo Tree' (parodied by T.S. Eliot in 'Sweeney Agonistes', as a matter of interest), they say nothing about the *tune*. Certainly it bears no resemblance to the tunes of either the Harndin song or the Cole and Johnson song.

The resemblance of the Salford tune to 'Down by the Riverside' has already been noted. The Liss tune is elusive, but is reminiscent of stirring film theme tunes of the time: the rhythm and melody of the four-note sequence which repeats in bars 3, 5, and 11, for example, resembles a sequence in Elmer Bernstein's 1960 theme music for *The Magnificent Seven*. It also resembles 'Under the Spreading Chestnut Tree', which, though it may derive from a traditional English dance tune (Gilchrist, 1940), has been much anthologized in campfire song manuals and more recently, websites.

Alongside these markedly different tunes, we also hear variations that borrow from other songs. For example, in the recording of children performing *Under the Bram Bush* in London's American School, the children concatenate the usual tune with the song 'Row, Row Your Boat' (C898/02). The girl performing sings: 'and when we're married, we'll raise a family, of forty children, all in a row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream, tip your teacher over board and see how loud she screams, ah!' This is followed by two other girls singing 'A Sailor Went to Sea, sea, sea', and then questions from Opie about where they learned the songs. A voice resembling that of the girl who performed 'Under the Bram Bush' (an English accent with a slight trace of American) tells of learning it in Boston, Massachusetts. There is no other information, but it is worth noting

that ‘Row Row Row Your Boat’ is a traditional nursery rhyme with a likely American origin. The Roud Folk Song Index has three versions: two recorded in Nova Scotia in 1949 (S250614) and 1951 (S270014), and one text version from Canada from the 1970s (S276030). It is widely anthologized for summer camps, Scouts and Guides, and incorporated in children’s TV programmes such as *Sesame Street*. It can be seen, then, as an example of the glocalisation Bennett finds in hip-hop (Bennett, 1999): a meeting of global cultural resources with local inflections and specific motivations.

The Opies had neither the time nor the space to note these variations in the published outcomes of their research. However, the recordings remind us how easy it is for these songs and rhymes to become standardised and indicate that further research into variation and the complex inventiveness of this culture is required. Bishop demonstrates how such complexity might be traced and analysed in Chapter 3 of this volume.

One response to variation can be to treat it as evidence of children’s creativity, (e.g. Bishop and Curtis, 2001). However, creativity can be an unhelpful and confusing idea; and it is certainly much contested in relation to children’s culture, art and education (Banaji & Burn, 2006). The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky proposed a specific model of creativity in childhood and adolescence (1931/1988). In his account, creativity is closely linked to play: it involves imaginative transformation of cultural resources, and traffic between external play with such transformations (through language, toys, objects and social interaction) and the internal processes of the imagination. To this extent, the kinds of transformation the Opies collected can be seen as examples of creativity. However, Vygotsky argued that true creativity also involved conscious, rational control. In this respect, it may be that the imaginative processes of game and song change are best kept within conceptions of play, rather than celebrated as creativity. Vygotsky’s model

certainly allows us to think of such play as a necessary foundation for creativity, just as specialists in different disciplines have seen playground games as foundations for literacy, music-making, and other domains of creative activity which later become formalised as curriculum subjects and disciplines. However, while we may in this way circumscribe the forms of invention and innovation described in this chapter, we should note that other forms of play may involve much more conscious control and awareness of structure: girls constructing dance routines; children inventing rules and systems for chasing games; children controlling elaborate socio-dramatic play. We found examples of all of these in the ethnographic studies of contemporary play in our project, and they are discussed in other chapters of this volume. What all have in common, though, is an immersion in the affective flow of the moment, in the aesthetic pleasure of the game, in the dynamic social bond of collaborative play – a set of improvisatory impulses which resist distanced reflection, interest in provenance, and design abstracted from performance.

Rude Rhymes in the Record

A brief glance through *The Singing Game* would suggest that the children's oral tradition of the 1970s was one largely free of scatological or offensive rhymes. There is also some evidence in the recordings that this appears to be a culture that carefully toed the line of what might be considered socially acceptable, from the girl who is too embarrassed to refer to 'Susie's bra' (lost in her boyfriend's car), to the giggling children in London who refer to Queen Mary's apparent hairiness. Elsewhere, however, the recordings suggest otherwise, as the examples discussed below demonstrate. A plausible explanation for the omission of such material from *The Singing Game* is that stringent publishing policies may have prevented the Opies from publishing such material. As Iona Opie remarks: '[...] it was editorial policy amongst publishers in the 1950s, not to include

dubious material, and that prevented us including anything that was unacceptable to OUP: 'knickers' was the limit'.⁵ Of course, by the 1980s we might assume that such censorship had softened, but even so, this disclosure highlights the regulatory regimes by which the Opies had to abide.

Considering these factors, it is significant that Iona Opie is vigilant in recording those instances in which the children test the boundaries of social acceptability, performing songs that range from the mischievous to the scatological. One example comes from a school playground in Poole (C898/80). While performing singing games, one young girl begins to sing: 'One plus one, we're in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah.' The song progresses and she sings: 'three plus three, we're jumping all around in the bedroom' before briefly noting to the interviewer, with a giggle, that this song is 'rude'. Nonetheless, she continues to sing: 'four plus four, he caught me on the floor in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah; five plus five, my legs are wide open in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah, six plus six, he's pulling down my knicks in the bedroom, cha-nah-nah-nah-nah'. The song continues and Opie can be heard laughing as the schoolgirl finishes her song (concluding with the couple 'breaking up' in the bedroom). The British Library notes accompanying the recording represent further contextual information contained in the recording:

The girl learnt this song when she lived in Pimlico, London. She would use this to play 'Two Balls' and explains the different actions that accompany this song. She uses terms such as 'tubble eggs' and 'nodsies'. The girl from Pimlico becomes irritated with another girl who tries to explain how this game is played and remarks:

⁵ Iona Opie cited in Boyes, 1995

'you don't know how we do it Jennifer with 'One Plus One' 'cos you don't even know it'. In the background a girl can be heard remarking (about the girl from Pimlico) 'she thinks she knows everything'.

The ludic function of the rhyme, then, is also to provide the necessary rhythmic accompaniment to the two-balls routine, while its more general cultural function is the entertaining appeal of its transgressive content. Its value is evident in the fierce defence of its local ownership.

Thus, although predominantly collecting traditional singing, clapping and skipping games, the fact that Opie recorded this song suggests that she was aware of its significance. Indeed, these recordings would be particularly pertinent in testing and validating theories such as those of Sutton-Smith who suggests that play can both allow children to transcend the 'normal limits' of their society and enable them to make sense of the adult world around them (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This view resembles the notion of the 'tribal child' which James, Jenks and Prout associate with the Opies: childhood perceived as a different society, operating by different rules and customs, difficult to penetrate and requiring ethnographic enquiry to do so (James, Jenks & Prout, 1998). It also echoes, however, the versions of youth culture found in British Cultural Studies in the 1970s, which conceived of young people as oppressed by adult society and urgently motivated to carve out a cultural space of resistance, albeit pursuing different strategies of resistance according to class background, and in part inheriting features of parental cultures (Hall & Jefferson, 1993).

However, there are other quite different explanations. The above interpretations construct childhood as a rebellious counter-culture, gleefully exotic, shockingly amoral,

assertively ribald. By contrast, developmental approaches to childhood play see such explorations of taboo themes like adult sexuality as the child's predictable interest in future selfhoods, including the sexual identities waiting in adolescence. Our approach in this project has been to argue that these two approaches – the tribal child and the developing child – are compatible, if paradoxical. Children's play is, to echo the new sociology of childhood, about both *being* and *becoming* (e.g. Uprichard, 2008): about the self-sufficient moment of play *and* about anticipatory fantasies of adolescence and adulthood.

One interesting feature of the more extreme explorations of taboo subjects is the number of children who are willing to perform these scatological pieces beyond the regulatory regimes of the school playground. This is particularly apparent on a recording Opie collected from a housing estate in Chelsea in 1974 (C898/67). From the start of this recording, a particular boy can be heard in the background, continuously shouting rude rhymes, swear-words and insults. The fact he remains in the background suggests that he is careful to exercise some caution, unsure of his peers and most importantly the interviewer's reaction. Initially, he begins by teasing his sister who is being interviewed, mimicking her voice and answers. He then begins to shout insults, such as: 'Guess what, she [his sister] never combs her hair in the mornings' and 'Deborah I think you've got a bloody big thick head'. As no-one has reacted to these insults, he grows in confidence, shouting: 'Deborah, why don't you do a stripsys [striptease] show?' He concludes by announcing that he would like to perform a song and remarks: 'can I say another one for the old bag [presumably referring to Opie]?'. Neither the other children nor the interviewer, however, react. This defiant performance would have been unlikely

on many school playgrounds, then and now: the implications of different regulatory regimes for taboo themes in play is considered further below.

Meanwhile, perhaps encouraged by this particular boy's behaviour, the other children begin to recite transgressive rhymes. One boy sings: 'ip, dip, dog, shit, who trod in it. Not because you're dirty, not because you're clean, my mum said you're the fairy queen'. Another then sings: 'Chocolate biscuits down the drain, if you want some spell your name, if you want them, fucking go away'. When Opie asks the young girl to repeat this, the schoolgirl omits the swear-word. This particular group of children also tell an assortment of jokes featuring 'bosoms' and 'willies'.

These areas of the archive raise a number of questions. Firstly, again, they reveal the well-documented preoccupation of younger children with bodily functions ranging from faeces to sex (Roud, 2010). This theme lends itself to a positive interpretation of the kind supported by some of Sutton-Smith's work, easy to characterize in terms of Bakhtin's metaphors of carnival (Bakhtin, 1965/1968). The grotesque aesthetic, humorous obsession with appetite and excretion, and carnival laughter which Bakhtin identifies in Rabelais are all consonant with the ribald play of these verses and songs. At the same time, however, this kind of positive interpretation needs to be balanced against recognition of the very varied social functions of these kinds of play. Sometimes, indeed, they represent taboo bending, a pricking of adult primness and pomposity, a challenge to what Stallybrass and White see as the attempt to construct the bourgeois body through the education of the child:

as s/he grows up/is cleaned up, the lower bodily stratum is regulated or denied, as far as possible, by the correct posture ('stand up straight', 'don't squat',

‘don’t kneel on all fours’ – the postures of servants and savages), and by the censoring of lower ‘bodily’ references along with bodily wastes. (Stallybrass and White, 1986: 144-5)

At other times, like other forms of risky play, they can embody less benign functions: racism, misogyny and social exclusion. Play in its more extreme forms is a two-edged weapon, a vehicle for entering worlds otherwise inaccessible, but also an instrument of insult and inequity and the exercise of power, as Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne argue in their critique of the ‘idealization of play’ (Sutton-Smith and Kelly-Byrne, 1984; and Richards’ discussion of their essay, this volume, chapter 4). These aspects of play were also recognized by the Opies:

The dialectal lore flows more quietly but deeper; it is the language of the children’s darker doings: playing truant, giving warning, sneaking, swearing, snivelling, tormenting, and fighting. It belongs to all time, but is limited in locality.’ (Opie & Opie, 1959: 12-13)

CONCLUSION: LESSONS OF THE ARCHIVE

To say that *The Singing Game* is an inaccurate and distorted reflection of the eighty-five Opie recordings would be untrue. As we have seen, the diversity of the archive gives us a better and more detailed picture of variation in language and melody than the published work is able to do, given the constraints under which it operates. The detail the archive provides of the echoes of tunes and rhymes from children’s and adult worlds, along with the often-inspired compositional work of innovative details, clever

juxtapositions, and the mix-and-match aesthetic of singing game culture, offers robust justification for the Opies' admiration of playground culture.

At the same time, when set alongside the material found in this project's ethnographies, we can gain some sense of how continuity and change happens across the decades as well as within the micro-histories sometimes glimpsed in the Opie archive. We can see the perpetuation of the narratives and nonsense, the parody and wordplay, the rhythm and rhyme of the seventies in the songs and rhymes of the twenty-first century. We can see the disappearance of some familiar figures from folklore and the media - Cowboy Joe from Mexico, Poor Jenny, Shirley Temple, and Diana Dors - and the arrival of others - Tracey Beaker, Beyoncé, Barney the dinosaur. Some figures never seem to change: perhaps Susie and her ever-varying Seven Ages of Womanhood will be with us forever. And finally, we can see the perennial preoccupations with the taboos adults impose - sexuality, fighting and bodily functions - alive and well, if a little more muted within the regulatory regimes of contemporary playgrounds.

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