

Elfin beauties in Eternal Summer: Nostalgic and Gendered Imagery in Folk Singer Publicity Photographs

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Tämä artikkeli tarkastelee nostalgian ja sukupuolittuneisuuden ilmentymiä naisfolklaulajien PR-valokuvissa. Musiikkigenren stereotypiat ja etenkin folkmusiikille lajityypilliset piirteet ovat mediassa selkeästi nähtävillä tekstimateriaalin lisäksi myös artistien PR-kuvissa ja ne muokkaavat näin osaltaan artistien mediarepresentaatioita. Artikkelissa analysoidaan skotlantilaisten, irlantilaisten, brittiläisten ja amerikkalaisten folklaulajien PR-kuvia ja tutkitaan kuvissa ilmeneviä perinteitä ja uudelleen käytettyjä elementtejä, jotka ovat ajan kuluessa muodostuneet musiikkilajityypin sovinnaisavoiksi artistirepresentatiota luodessa. Kuvien sukupuolittuneisuus ja nostalgisuus rakentavat sekä folkmusiikin genrea että artistien autenttisuutta folklaulajina.

Keywords: authenticity, folk music, gendered representation, nostalgia, women artists

1 Introduction

The folk singer stereotypes and the folk music genre conventions are visible in the publicity photos that the artists, or those marketing them, produce and use to promote themselves. The conventional styles and compositions for folk singer images and photos created during the 1960s folk music revival are still in use and the most popular choices for folk music artists' publicity photos throughout the folk music genre. Nature, the artist in the photograph on her own, possibly with her instrument of choice, looking bohemian, dressed in feminine clothes, often with long, loose, and seemingly unstyled hair – these are some of the most typical elements in female folk singer promotional photographs, starting with Joan Baez and her contemporaries in the 1960s and continuing to this day with a startling majority of contemporary female folk singers. A study of twenty active British, Scottish, and Irish female folk music artists' publicity photos has revealed that the folk revival imagery is deeply embedded in the public consciousness, and whether it is the artists' or the photographers' choice or suggestion, the folk revivalist themes and compositions keep appearing in the PR photographic material of contemporary folk singers. The visual material supports the themes of nostalgia and authenticity that are constructed in the singers' media representations in articles, reviews and interviews written about them.

This article examines the gendered and nostalgic imagery used in contemporary folk singer PR photographs and it is connected to my ongoing PhD research on female folk singer media representations. Through an analysis the nostalgic and gendered features visible in the photographs I point out how the singers appear authentic as folk singers through their photographs, and how these factors are constructed in the folk singer media representation. I do this by highlighting the recurrent themes and features in the folk singer PR photographs that have their origins in the folk music revival era of the 1960s and 1970s, and that are still in use in the 21st century folk singers' photos.

1.1 Material and Theoretical Framework

The material for this article consists of thirty-one publicity photos of twenty contemporary Scottish, Irish, and British female folk singers. Seventeen publicity photos of eleven 1960s and 1970s folk music revival era singers from USA and the British Isles are included as comparative material. The photos used in the study are those readily available on the artists' own websites as free press material or – as is the case especially with the older photographs from 1960s and 1970s – stored in publicly accessible online sources such as acerecords.co.uk, rockpaperphoto.com, hubstatic.com, and photobucket.com. The photos have been collected between 2014 and 2016. Therefore, the sixteen photographs featured in this article are by no means all of the photos examined, but a small selection from the above-mentioned larger body of material, chosen as examples of themes to illustrate specific points. Some of the photographs used are album covers, but their function is more or less the same as that of proper PR photographs, as they too are circulated widely, portray the singer in the way she has chosen to be portrayed, and are used to promote the artist and her musical endeavours.

The theoretical framework of the article is based on the concepts of cultural memory, nostalgia and authenticity, and I have chosen to apply nostalgia and memory studies by Svetlana Boym (2001), Aaron Santesso (2006), and Astrid Erll (2009), and authenticity studies by Regina Bendix (1997) and Allan Moore (2002) to interpret the ways in which nostalgia is displayed in the publicity photographs of female folk singers. Moreover, I have also made use of Edward T. Hall's (1966) works in social semiotics as well as visual culture and media studies by John Berger (1972), Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001), and Irene Costera Meijer and Liesbet van Zoonen (2002) in analyzing the ways in which those photographs are gendered.

1.2 Theoretical Connections

Nostalgia and authenticity are both equally difficult to define, and as phenomena they are highly circumstantial and affected by influences of time and place. Boym (2001: 351) and Santesso (2006: 16) both describe nostalgia as a longing for an idealised version of the past, something that never existed exactly in the form envisioned. The

nostalgic past is a constructed version that conveniently forgets the past complications and only includes the idealised imagery and elements of the past events and phenomena. Similarly, Bendix (1997: 8) categorises authenticity as a form of longing, and according to her it involves an attempt of recovering something that has been considered to be lost through modernity. Indeed, in the context of music and folk music in particular, authenticity is often seen as an opposition to modernity or commercialism; according to Allan Moore (2002: 210, 218) the fundamental reason for authenticity endeavours is the alienation caused by modernity. Bendix characterises authenticity as a “quality of experience” (Bendix 1997: 13), and Moore sees it as something that depends on the perceiver (Moore 2002: 220). Both of these descriptions emphasise the circumstantial, experiential nature of authenticity, and also the idea that it is always ascribed from the outside.

As concepts, nostalgia and authenticity have several interconnecting links, especially when they are utilized in the context of folk singer media representations. A folk singer is a serious artist of her genre if she exhibits a commitment to tradition and an appreciation of her roots and history. This pastness is emphasized in her media presentations and it renders her authentic as a folk music artist. The folk singers are connected not only to specific places, localities, cultures, and languages but also to the cultural connotations linked to those places, localities, cultures, and languages. The publicity photographs of the folk singers that are under scrutiny here play with these connotations and combine them to those connected to folk singers in general.

The existence of musical genres requires cultural memory (see Erll 2011); people agree upon the features of a genre and what can be constituted as, say, folk music or a folk musician. Composition and other elements in folk singer PR photos are agreed upon on the collective level of cultural memory (see Erll 2011: 113), so therefore if there are certain elements in a photo, the artist depicted must be a folk singer or a folk musician. Astrid Erll’s concept of premediation concentrates on making use of the existing media and memories of earlier events in order to understand new phenomena and events (2009: 111, 114). Therefore the genuineness of a folk music artist’s representations, persona, and performances is defined by their connection to the traditions, the past and remembering. Staple elements in folk singer photos are premediated, as are the connotations attached to folk singers in general, and this creates the genre conventions that are used to categorise and make sense of new artists and their work.

The female image in visual culture is traditionally constructed as passive, of being and appearing, not doing or acting (Meijer & van Zoonen 2002: 331). This conformity to cultural norms is also visible in the female folk singer PR photographs. The singers’ stillness and the prevalent inertia of both body and time in the photographs connect the singers not only to the conventions of visual culture but also to the conventions of folk music genre and its way of depicting women artists. The traditional, romanticised, idealised, and objectifying images of female folk singers are created with the help of

recurrent elements such as nature settings and musical instruments, and by establishing connection between the artists pictured and the audiences viewing them.

The distance of the artists from the camera is an important issue with the folk singer publicity photos, as it establishes the connection described above, and has an effect on the genderedness of the photos. According to Edward Hall (1966: 115–116, 128) the distances people keep from each other are determined by how well they know each other and also by the social situations. With photographs, the photographer, and in the case of publicity photos, also the artists photographed decide the distance on behalf of the viewer, thus creating intimacies that would not exist in real life (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 126). Thus, applying Hall's (1966: 115–123) concepts of social distance to photographs, intimate distance shows the face only, whereas close personal distance frames the head and the shoulders. Far personal distance shows a person from the waist up, and from close social distance shows the whole figure. Approximately half of the photos studied here exhibit close personal distance, and the rest fall either in intimate distance or far personal or close social distance. This evokes intimacy between the subject of a photo and the viewer as it brings the viewer very close to the artists, inviting familiarity and personal closeness.

2 Nostalgic and Gendered: Constructing Folk Singer Authenticity in the PR Photographs

Comparing the publicity photos of female folk singers from the 1960s and 1970s folk music revival era to those of the 21st century female folk singers reveals a certain continuum in themes, compositions, and style. The folk music revival era publicity photos of singers such as Joan Baez, Judy Collins, Mimi Fariña, Shirley Collins, Sandy Denny and others have set the standard for Western European, Anglo-Celtic folk singer photographs.

The folk singer publicity photographs evoke nostalgia through their compositions, the set elements reserved for folk singers, the settings and postures of the artists portrayed. Such elements can be pointed out quite easily, and the differences between photographs exhibiting these elements are not sharp; often the photographs have combinations of several conventional elements in them. These photographs are used as press material and stock newspaper and magazine pictures when anything is written about the singers. When the photographs appear with text material they illustrate the text by giving readers a visual point of reference of the artist in question but they do not exhibit explicit connections to the written text as such. The photographic material is also strongly gendered and utilises the feminine attributes of the artists to their full extent, however within the limits of what is suitable for a folk music artist. The photographs are not openly sexual or trying to sell with bare skin; rather they create a nostalgic, romantic image of innocence, mystery, and subtle sensuality.

2.1 Gendered Image: Looks and Body

The most popular element by far in the folk singer publicity photographs is to portray the singer lying down in a field or on the grass. In photographs such as these the connection with nature is thus emphasized, the singers are depicted as nature children, simple and uncomplicated, who connect with nature with the entirety of their being. A picture of a female folk singer lying down in a field is also significantly gendered, as it puts her in the position of an object to be looked at and implies inertia, stillness and inactivity, features used throughout the history of visual art to depict women (Berger 1972: 47). One could also argue that photos with the singers depicted lying down outdoors also have sexual implications, connected to the well-known themes of “rolling in the hay” and “losing one’s thyme” that appear in a majority of the folk songs in the Anglo-Celtic canon. The singers’ femininity is emphasized with the choice of poses, and the foregrounding of certain features such as their long hair and big eyes. The attention is thus directed to what the singers look like, to their photogenic faces and natural good looks. The naturalness in their look classifies them as folk singers or at least ‘folksy’ artists.

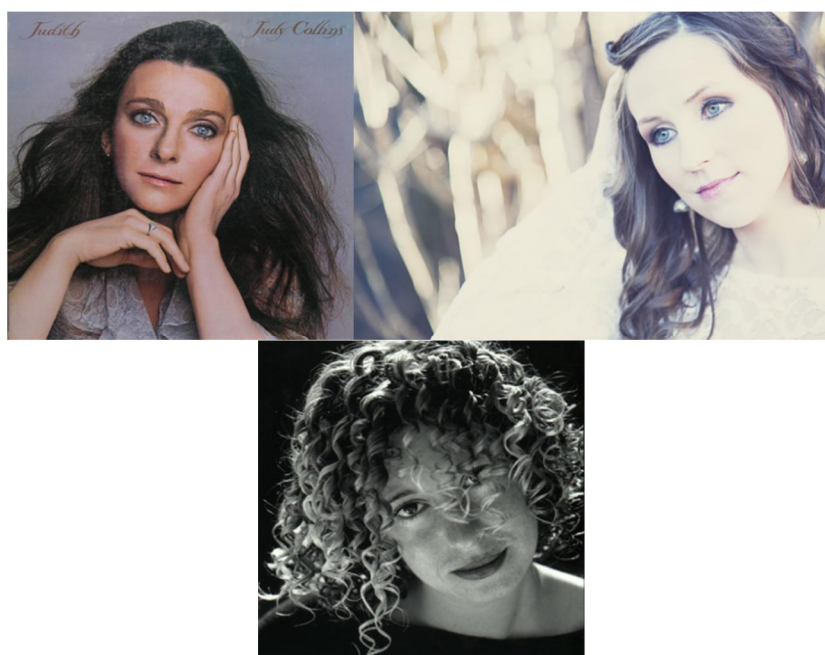


Picture 1. Julie Fowlis, Joan Baez 1961, Emily Portman

Portraying the singer lying down or taking close-up photographs of her lustrous hair and large eyes are the means available in the sphere of folk music for the publicist for using the artists’ bodies as a sales gimmick. Picture 1 combines PR photos of folk singers Julie Fowlis, Joan Baez, and Emily Portman. 1960s folk music revival era singer Joan Baez, probably the most famous folk singer of the last fifty years is portrayed lying down in a field, exhibiting all the features discussed above. The photos of Julie Fowlis, a successful 21st century Scottish folk singer, and Emily Portman, an equally successful 21st century English folk singer, are almost identical not only with Baez but also with each other, and channel the folk revival era connotations, and folk singer stereotypes as well as the connotations connected to their origins and endeavours as folk singers.

Face close-ups are another frequently used, possibly the most mainstream composition in folk singer publicity photographs, and they highlight the large eyes and masses of

hair most folk singers appear to have. The artists' femininity is yet again foregrounded and most often the face is the only thing discernible in the photo.



Picture 2. Judy Collins 1975, Julie Fowlis, Kate Rusby

The PR photos in picture 2 illustrate the points made above. A mid-seventies album cover of American folk singer Judy Collins emphasizes her flowing hair, symmetrical face and large blue eyes. A PR photo of Scottish folk singer Julie Fowlis, taken over thirty years later is reusing the same elements and manages to produce almost an identical picture with the Collins photo. English folk singer Kate Rusby's PR photo might be in monochrome, but this only emphasizes her signature curly hair and plaintive liquid eyes. In addition to the bodies and the faces of the singers, their eyes and the way that they are looking out of the picture are highlighted in the photographs. In twenty-two (twelve of the contemporary artists' photos, ten of the 60s and 70s artists') of the studied photos the artists are looking directly in the camera. In the rest of the remaining twenty-six photographs the artists either cast their eyes aside, down or up, or are not facing the camera at all.

Though in visual and media studies a direct gaze into a camera is usually interpreted as a sign of defiance, masculine power and assertiveness, and gazing aside, up, or down as a sign of submissiveness, modesty and femininity (van Zoonen 1994: 99–101; Sturken & Cartwright 2001: 88), the distinction is not as straightforward in the case of female folk singer PR photos. Even with the artists looking directly into the camera, the effect produced is not defiant, dominant or assertive. The poses that the artists have taken in the photos are feminine, and highlight their attractiveness and feminine attributes rather than their desire to challenge the viewer. Therefore, the ways that looks, body and the

direction of the gaze are used in female folk singer PR photos reinforce the genderedness of the photos and produce images that comply with the conventions of the genre of folk music.

2.2 Setting and Props: Past, Nature, and Musical Instruments

Nostalgia is also evoked through rurality, namely the nature elements in the photographs. The settings are almost uniformly non-urban and all the photographs studied have some form of nature element in them, be it fields, gardens, trees, flowers, grass, or flowing water. This use of nature as a backdrop and sometimes even as the more dominant element than the artist herself in the publicity photographs connects to the connotations of folk music being of rural origin and of ordinary people.

Flowers are popular symbols of the nature element in female folk singer publicity photos. They connect to the scenes of implied eternal summer in the photos, as well as to the rural origins of folk music. Flowers placed close to the artists' faces in the photos draw the attention to their simple natural beauty and invite the viewer to make comparisons between the artists' looks and pretty flowers, as well as understand the flowers as metaphors of feminine beauty.



Picture 3. Judy Collins 1967, Bella Hardy

Picture 3 shows another 1960s album cover of American folk music revival era folk singer Judy Collins, standing in a field of flowers, and a 2011 album cover of an acclaimed British folk singer Bella Hardy walking amidst a field of rapeseed. In both photographs flowers are more in focus and take up more space than the singers, thus foregrounding this nature element. The element of inertia, through the implication of eternal summer is also present, both photographs exhibiting bright summery weather and flowers in full bloom.

This absence of the passing time and the perpetual summer in the outdoors pictures is another popular element in the folk singer publicity photos, and it is also discernible in all the photos above. As stated earlier, the nature element is always present in the folk

singer PR photos and for obvious reasons, the photographs taken outdoors depict an eternal summer, warm weather (judging by the artists' choice of clothes) and the inertia of time. This connects to the pastness that is a central theme in the female folk singer media representations also in the written media material.

A weathered, wooden or stone wall is often combined with the nature scenes and wild outdoors settings in the folk singer publicity photos. This element further highlights the non-urbanity, the rurality and the simple life connotations connected to folk music and folk singers, and it also invites nostalgia for the past. The viewer understands that the wall in the picture has been there for a long time and has withstood the passing of the years. Depending on what is known about the artist in question and also on the attention to detail in the photo, the weathered wall, together with the nature element can also invoke national connections to Ireland, Scotland, and the countryside of England, all places which in collective memory are known to have plenty of weathered walls, stone fences, ruins of castles and houses.



Picture 4. Bridget St. John 1968–69, Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh

Bridget St. John and Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh, the two folk singers depicted in Picture 4 above both have the weathered wall element in their publicity photos. In this case, the singers' country of origin is not easy or even possible to discern from these particular photographs. However, through the weathered wall element the photos exhibit above-mentioned links to rurality, simple rusticity and, to some degree, nostalgia for the past.

As stated above, the folk singer publicity photos strive to create romantic and mythical images of the artists and this objective is central to the constructions of nostalgia in the folk singer media representations. The mythicalised and romanticised features in the photographs are varied, but mostly connected to for example the romantic rural settings used in them, linking the singers to the countries of their origin. The singers are portrayed in nature, and in close connection to it, and this reinforces the references to the commonly agreed and premediated images of a female folk singer as 'Mother Earth' and 'Mother Nature' that are preserved on the collective level of cultural memory. In some cases, being one with nature is an image that some folk singers are keen to promote. Folk singers are depicted not simply lying down in grass, but with flowers and

leaves in their hair, being portrayed in a mythicalised style. The written media material of folk singers refers to them as enchanting, beguiling, unearthly, ethereal, spritely, angelic, and elfin, and this kind of imagery is also applied in the publicity photos such as the three combined below in Picture 5:



Picture 5. Lisa Knapp, Emily Portman, Kate Rusby

Here, English folk singers Lisa Knapp, Emily Portman, and Kate Rusby have all chosen a mythicalised theme in their PR photos, reflecting their media representations as exponents of highly original folk musicians, utilizing the strange and even macabre currents in traditional English folklore in their songwriting and musical creations. Lisa Knapp, with ivy in her hair, photographed with a garland of ivy, Emily Portman with shadows of tree branches on her face, and Kate Rusby with her face and hair superimposed with flowers and branches exhibit the conventional nature element in a mythicalised way. In these photos nature is not simply a prop or a background setting but a part of the singers' persona and body. This reinforces the generedness of the photos via the stereotypical ideas of nature as feminine, and also connects the singers to the woodland sprites, Elder Mother, May Queen, and other traditional creatures of English folklore.

Most folk singers studied for this article also play several musical instruments. Therefore it is only natural that these instruments feature also in their publicity photos. Since the genre conventions demand outdoors photos of the artists, it means that the musical instruments are also taken outdoors and photographed. Photos such as these illustrate the singers' musicianship and professionalism, but not in an intimidating way. Rather, the folk musicianship and professionalism have a cosy, homely and bohemian air; after all there are no photos of classical music soloists lying in fields with their instruments. The publicity photos of folk singers outdoors with their instruments imply an easy, organic relationship with music and also a connection to the land and nature. The implication is that the music is simple, acoustic, and unedited, and that nature can be heard in the music. Again the rural origins of folk music are foregrounded: one can step out with the music and be one with nature.



Picture 6. Shirley Collins 1968, Laura Marling, Joni Mitchell 1970

The above analysis is well portrayed in the three PR photographs combined in Picture 5 of folk singers Shirley Collins, Laura Marling, and Joni Mitchell. Of the three, Collins and Mitchell's photos originate from the late 1960s and early 1970s, whereas Marling's is a contemporary 21st century product, closely following the genre conventions set by its predecessors. Marling's folk singer look follows the genre conventions religiously, complete with a simple clothing, unstyled hair, grassy field and an iconic folk singer instrument, acoustic guitar, which she seems to be tuning – a nod to her musical professionalism and a proof that the instrument is not simply a prop in the photo. Collins and Mitchell's photos are very alike and show where the composition of Marling's photo originates. The nature element has a significant role also in these two photographs but also the musical instruments are foregrounded. Collins is holding a five-string dulcimer and Mitchell's instrument of choice for this photo was an Appalachian mountain dulcimer. Both instruments have very strong folk music connections and are rarely seen in connection to other music genres; therefore the singers' compliance to genre conventions and their media representations as folk singers are even more enforced than what they would be without the dulcimers or with other more mainstream instruments. It is notable that in none of the studied photos featuring the singer with a musical instrument is the artist actually singing or playing music. Rather, the focus is again on their looks, eyes and hair, with the musical instrument used as a prop and connection to the folk music genre conventions.

3 Conclusions

The compositions of the photographs studied for this article echo the traditions reserved for female artists in the folk music scene PR photography. The publicity photos of female folk singers are startlingly similar throughout the genre and utilise the same elements not only with each other but also with the publicity photos taken of artists from earlier eras, such as the 1960s and 1970s folk music revival era singers. The compositions of the photos are therefore nostalgic, evoking the imagery that was in use already in the 1960s. Moreover, the photos of the contemporary 21st century folk singers also

exhibit connections to the wider understanding of tradition, invoking connotations of and connections to the specific histories and traditions of Scotland, Ireland and England from which the singers studied here originate. The nostalgic compositions therefore nostalgise the singers as well.

When considering the media representations that the publicity photos and other media material create for female folk singers, it must be pointed out that even though the photos are in a way a separate entity they still connect to the text material written about female folk singers and construct a similar media representation for them. It is also notable that the text based media material is produced by journalists and other writers, not the artists themselves, whereas the photos are produced on the basis of the artists' consent, and on the basis of how they want to portray themselves and what they want to signal. Despite this the media representations constructed by the text material and the publicity photos are surprisingly similar and follow the same conventions. This must mean that the genre conventions of what is a folk singer are so deeply embedded in the collective level of cultural memory that the media representations produced by different media material are highly similar, if not the same, regardless of the producer and the source.

The female folk singer publicity photos follow the stylistic conventions of folk singer photos. Popular features such as certain poses, hair, big eyes, the nature elements, rusticity, and overall themes of pastness constructing nostalgia in the photos also produce gendered images of the singers. Though the singers are depicted in romanticised, idealised and even objectifying ways, it does not necessarily mean that folk music as a genre would yearn for the social and gender orders of the past. A more likely explanation is that there is a collective cultural agreement about what a folk singer is expected to look like and conforming to those expectations makes the singers appear authentic in the sphere of folk music. The connection to the past media material, and memories of earlier phenomena are used to understand new phenomena and also to create new authentic representations of artists within the genre conventions of folk music.

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