

Sam Eskin and "Shule Aroo"

By Neil Rosenberg, March 2009

On Friday, March 6, 2009 Mayne Smith wrote from Berkeley with a request:

I've signed on to help with a Freight & Salvage show on May 27 that will benefit two veterans-assistance organizations (one of which is my ex-employer Swords to Plowshares). The songs will range through wars in American history, always trying to focus on the experiences of those who have had to fight them.

I would like to use the song you sing that I believe is called "Shurley Manaroo." It's a version of what Alan Lomax called "Johnny Has Gone for a Soldier" (*Folk Songs of North America*, Dolphin Books edition, 1975, p. 47), but I'm more familiar with your melody and chords. Could you please send me the words you have for that song?

I immediately wrote out the words to the song, which I still sing. I usually call it "Shule Aroo."

I wish I was on Buttermilk Hill
There I'd sit and cry my fill
Till every tear would turn to milk
Come dibble a la boo sal dory

Surely surely surely man aroo
Salamana ralaback salabarba coo
Then I'd sigh for a salabobalink
Come dibble a la boo sal dory

My sweetheart he has gone to France
To seek his fortune in advance
And when he comes back we'll do a little dance
Come dibble a la boo sal dory

I'd sell my rod I'd sell my reel
Likewise I'd sell my spinning wheel
To buy my love a sword of steel
Come dibble a la boo sal dory

I'd dye my petticoat dye it red
Around this world I'd beg my bread
To find my true live alive or dead
Come dibble a la boo sal dory

This song means a lot to me. Writing it out for Mayne got me thinking about how it came to me, what I'd done with it, and the other people I'd taught it to. Hence this note.

I learned "Shule Aroo" at my Berkeley home when I was sixteen. It came from a recording by Sam Eskin that my folk guitar teacher, Laurie Campbell, gave me in 1955. At the time, I thought of Campbell as "an older woman." Indeed, she was about twice my age and had a daughter who was about half my age. A number of my Berkeley peers, like Scott Hambly and Tony Kay, also studied with her. My parents had steered me to her after hearing her praised by their friend Sam Kagel, who'd taken some lessons with her. She had a children's music show on KPFA. She taught in her home, which was just off La Loma St., not far from Northgate on Euclid. Besides the guitar, her lessons included training for voice, improvisation, and composition. I remember her as a great teacher.

This song was in an album containing four ten-inch 78-rpm discs. Titled *Sam Eskin--Songs and Ballads*, it was on the Sierra label. This is not the Sierra label started in southern California during the seventies by John Delgatto, but an earlier record label published, according to authoritative print on the bottom of the front inside liner of the album, by "Staff Music Corporation, Berkeley, California." Laurie told me that she and a group of her friends had invested in this production around 1950. In 1955 she still had a lot of them sitting unsold in her basement. She was giving them to students.

Also on the album's inside front liner is a picture of Eskin seated on a doorstep singing and playing a guitar, a classical or flamenco type, which he's holding on his left knee. There's a fuller and better copy of this photo on his website, at the "Chronology" page (<http://www.casa-chia.org/Sam/samchron.html>). It's dated at 1925, when, the chronology states:

Sam arrived in San Francisco found [a] radical bohemian crowd of artists, writers, intellectuals and hangers-on in Telegraph Hill; was their mascot and then became part of them. He took up photography, sandal-making, practiced and learned banjo, guitar, mandolin, thought of himself as a

writer. Met Montana dancer-poet, Pearl/Ann (b. 1901), who attended University of California at Berkeley.

This description connects with my own experience. During the 1930s my aunt Ted lived in the same neighborhood, was involved with the same crowd, and attended Cal. She was still in Berkeley when we moved there in 1951. I heard my first folk music on records, 78s of the Almanac Singers, at her apartment on Hillegass Street, not far from the campus. In the late fifties I began going from Berkeley to hang out in North Beach, just East of Telegraph Hill, much as my contemporaries went from Brooklyn and the Bronx to Greenwich Village. Eskin was an early figure in the world that nurtured the beat movement.

Wrapped around the photo of Eskin on the inside front liner of the album is a six paragraph biography of him by "Dr. Desmond Powell, University of Arizona."

The full text of this bio belongs with the other interesting narratives on the Eskin website, but it isn't there so I abstract it here. Powell, writing around 1950, opens: "Perhaps it doesn't matter what town Sam Eskin was born in," and then argues that what's more important is "the part of town where he grew up" -- by the railroad tracks.

What follows is a narrative of romantic travel inspired by Jack London. Rambles in the American West acquaint Sam with folksong in the raw. After traveling the world he discovers "Cecil Sharp's great collection" from which he learns many songs. He finally takes a "land job." After fifteen years he retires, buying "a trailer, a recording device, and a guitar" so he can "devote his whole time to getting songs and singing them."

Powell's liner note closes saying people have asked Sam "if they could get his songs on records." This album, answering the requests, is "the first selection from an incredibly rich repertoire. Others will follow."

They did. The first album his website chronology lists is a ten-inch LP Folkways album released in 1951. Eskin's recordings are now part of the Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections at the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage (http://www.folkways.si.edu/about_folkways/archive.aspx)

From the Eskin website ("Sam Eskin, Folksinger-Collector, 1898-1974" <http://www.casa-chia.org/Sam/eskin00.html>), we learn that Eskin was born

in Washington D.C. and raised in Baltimore. He traveled widely, spending much time in California. The site mentions his "background with the Wobblies and as a merchant seaman." In 1930 he began his "land job" in New York City as a "systems man" with the United Parcel Service. Upon retirement in 1945 he moved to Woodstock, New York. That was home for the rest of his life, although he traveled widely collecting and concertizing.

Eskin's connection with the Bay Area folk scene is reflected in reminiscences on his website by Barry Olivier and Faith Petric. Archie Green, another long-time Bay Area folk music scholar, knew him, too.

On the album's liner Eskin calls the song "Shule, Shule," and says of it:

This is an American version of an Irish love song, "Shule, Shule Agra." Charles W. Delver, age 77 years, sang this song to me in Colorado Springs in 1947. He said his wife's people were Pennsylvania Dutch immigrants to Kentucky in 1875, and they often sang this song."

I still have the album but somewhere along the line the disc with this song on it got broken. Eskin's notes to the songs (there are twelve in the album) portray diverse sources. Only one source appears more than once, and that is "Des Powell" of the University of Arizona at Tucson. Powell (1899-1964), after whom a poetry prize awarded annually at the U of A is named, was himself a singer. The Archive of Folk Culture at the Library of Congress lists recordings of six songs (including the two Eskin recorded for this album) as sung by Powell to Peter Robinson at Tucson in 1949. And I found a photo of Powell with guitar in hand at:

<http://www.tucsonweekly.com/gbase/Currents/Content?oid=oid%3A43776>. I don't know who Peter Robinson is, and wonder why he recorded Powell. That's a mystery for another time.

I haven't heard Sam Eskin's recording of "Shule, Shule" in many years. When I learned it back in 1955 I re-arranged the accompaniment, adding or changing chords, and developing an instrumental break. I only changed one word, I think. The text on the back liner of the album gives the first line of the third verse as:

"I'd sell my rock I'd sell my reel"

I don't know if "rock" is a typo or how Eskin sang it on the recording. [Note from Mayne, "reel" is the name of an article of spinning equipment, but a

quick Web search discloses no spinning item called "rock."] In any case it doesn't make sense to me, so I sing:

"I'd sell my rod I'd sell my reel"

I also changed the title, from Eskin's "Shule, Shule" -- words that aren't in the song, only in its history -- to "Shule Aroo." That way half of the title is from the song's history and the other half is from the song text. I've never spoken of this, and only noticed it now.

I began playing it at parties and concerts, and on KPFA's "The Midnight Special." Mayne recalls it from the year we roomed together as freshmen at Oberlin College, where I often played it in hoots.

Recently, former Blue Grass Boy and Monroe biographer Tom Ewing told me he'd heard his folk guitar hero, Franklin Miller, performing it at the Sacred Mushroom coffee house in Columbus Ohio in the early sixties. Franklin learned it from me at Oberlin in the late 1950s and added some nifty finger picking to the break, which I learned from him and still use.

I'm proud of the fact that friends in the folk music business twice recorded my version of the song. In 1961 Guy Carawan, whom I met first at Antioch College included it on *The Best of Guy Carawan*, (Prestige International 13013). In 1964 [Mayne's sister] Janet Smith, Oberlin classmate and longtime Berkeley friend, included it on *Berkeley Folk Music* (Arhoolie 4001, 1964). It's one of the few songs from my old repertoire I still perform. I enjoy playing my guitar arrangement for its lovely melody. I don't sing very many songs that speak from a woman's point of view. I like the way this one explores separation, commitment and support.

THIS PIECE LAST REVIEWED BY MAYNE 4/23/09