



## Gold Badge Citation: Frankie Armstrong

*At Frankie's request, the citation was delivered by Martin and Shan Graebe jointly, with each focusing on a different aspect of her work.*

### **Martin**

Frankie Armstrong began singing in public at the age of 16 and has no intention of stopping yet. As we will explain, her passion for songs and for the singing of them has followed two entwined paths, that of the folk singer and that of the voice teacher and coach. Frankie asked Shan and me to prepare and deliver this citation jointly, as we have come to know and admire her through those different paths. To begin, I am going to tell you about Frankie the folk singer.

Frances Armstrong was born in Workington, in Cumbria. The family moved when she was six to Hoddesdon, in Herefordshire. As a child she sang for enjoyment and then, in her teens, she was asked to become the singer for the Stort Valley Skiffle Group. The songs they sang reflected the fashions of the time but there was a thread of social conscience in their repertoire that led them to move to more folky material. They changed their name to 'The Ceilidh Singers' to reflect this interest. They founded a folk club at a pub in Hoddesdon where they performed regularly.

In 1963 Frankie qualified as a social worker for blind people. By this stage her own sight had deteriorated, but this had not slowed her down. She never has slowed down, even as her sight has deteriorated further. She lived in London but continued to sing with the Ceilidh Singers at weekends and occasional gigs. She met Louis Killen, who was a great influence on her and taught her about the craft of a folk singer. It was



Killen who persuaded her to listen to traditional singers and to learn from them. It was at Louis' suggestion that she approached Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger and was invited to join the Critics Group.

Bert Lloyd was looking for another singer to join him and Anne Briggs on a recording for Topic Records to be called 'Bird in the Bush, Traditional Songs of Love and Lust' – a very enjoyable and successful recording. This was followed by a number of recordings with other members of the Critics Group. One of these was 'The Female Frolic', made with Peggy Seeger and Sandra Kerr. This explored women's experiences through song at a time before the growth of the women's movement. Frankie's first solo recording was 'Lovely on the Water' in 1972.

She had come to love traditional songs for their directness and felt that the themes of traditional ballads reflected truths that she saw in her job as a social worker. She also embraced many of the political causes of that era and sang, sometimes wrote, songs that supported those causes. Her reputation as a singer had grown and she was now getting regular gigs. In 1973 she spent several weeks in the USA and met many influential people, among whom was Ethel Raim. And it is at this point that I will hand over to Shan.

## **Shan**

Since her earliest days, when she took the role of the Pied Piper in a primary school play, Frankie has been captivating people with the magic of music and leading them to find new freedoms and skills in their own creative expression through song and voice work.

Her early experiences in listening to traditional singers, who often used a 'basic' or 'chest' voice, naturally led Frankie to explore this style to express the dramatic power and emotional truth inherent in the songs she was singing. Inspired by working with Ethel Raim in her Balkan



singing workshops, Frankie began developing her own approaches to singing with a natural voice. Her unshakable conviction that singing is for everyone has subsequently underpinned all aspects of her practice.

She is one of the founders, and is indeed the President, of the Natural Voice Network. This is a network of people who share a common philosophy about singing and group work. It promotes the essential notion that singing is not an exclusive activity reserved for those who see themselves as singers or who have been trained, but is fully inclusive, whatever people's previous experience has been. The NVN reflects Frankie's understanding that humans have sung for thousands of years, expressing a full range of needs and emotions. In singing together we can find a way to be creative that is not criticised or judged and which builds a community which is open and accessible to all and which brings many benefits to both physical and mental well-being. The fact that so many cities, towns and villages now have thriving community choirs where people find acceptance, a sense of belonging and sheer joy in singing is testament to the pioneering work of Frankie and her colleagues.

A very important strand in Frankie's teaching is the strong connection between Body, Breath and Voice. In her workshops, where her partner Darien Pritchard is an important influence and often fellow teacher, this aspect is explored and experienced. The activities lead to greater freedoms in physical and vocal expression. Restrictive tensions and habits which may have prevented singing can be reduced and people learn to use their voices and their bodies safely and freely. And any attempt to distil a full and rich lifetime of singing and teaching such as Frankie has enjoyed which does not include reference to 'hoeing' would be a sad failure. Frankie leading a group in the simulated work of hoeing, swinging and moving rhythmically whilst leading a call and response sequence of vocal sounds, usually for several minutes, is a never to be



forgotten and totally delightful experience. There are many people who have started that experience believing that they could not sing, only to discover that they can!

Frankie has worked with numerous theatre groups, including the National Theatre and the Central School, with children, teachers, storytellers, poets, songwriters, singers and all manner of friends all over the world. Her influence on the thousands of people who have heard her or who have met her has been inestimable.

Martin and I are delighted to have been asked to write the citation for Frankie's Gold Badge award which, as we hope we have shown, is well deserved.

We got to know Frankie when she was a guest at the Baring-Gould Folk Festival in 2001 and was a tutor on the associated Song School the following year. An abiding memory is Frankie taking part in the Conker competition that is a regular feature of the Festival, with a lot of advice and encouragement from the crowd. She is extremely busy with workshops and gigs and is very hard to pin down, but we greatly enjoy our lunches with her and Darien. Long may she continue to give pleasure through her singing and to help those who want to sing better.

Martin and Shan Graebe

November 2018



## Martin and Shan Graebe – Biography

Martin Graebe researches and writes about traditional song and collectors, notably the Devonshire song collector Sabine Baring-Gould. His recent book about Baring-Gould and his folk song collection has been awarded the Folklore Society's Katharine Briggs Folk Award for 2018, as well as the W. G. Hoskins Prize of the Devon Historical Society. Shan Graebe is a former speech and language therapist who is well-known for her workshops on aspects of voice use and care. Together, they sing traditional songs, mostly unaccompanied and in harmony. They also sing a number of more modern songs, including some of those that Martin has written.



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