

Voices From The Villages

There is apparently a phrase, a colloquialism that the English took to Australia, referring to the time of "dusk". A time when as the sun fades and vision goes, one's hearing becomes more acute, more attuned perhaps to the subtleties of the aural world. It is this same phrase, "Blindman's Holiday", that an a capella group from Sydney, who specialise in traditional folk songs from all over the world, have taken as their name.

Karen Smith, Gemma Turner, Julie Vickers, and Linda Marr (not yet in London), came together in 1982 from various backgrounds out of a love for singing unusual folk songs and for the occasional performance. But those occasions have become regular over the last two years around various venues in Sydney, and now here in London, they are about to embark on a European tour of performances. They are riding the wave of an unprecedented interest in "world" music, the music of 'other', strange and sometimes 'exotic' cultures. And they're not the only ones.

But unlike many other bands "incorporating sounds from anywhere from Turkey to South America, or using everything from a double bass to Macedonian bagpipes", Blindman's Holiday attempt to perform the traditional music intact, and except for occasional percussion, completely unaccompanied.

"We start with traditional songs, we sing in the original language, and we attempt to do it in the original traditional style," said Gemma. "Sometimes however when we're doing an arrangement, there is a new element that comes in. For example, with some Turkish music, there are no harmonies and so we'll look for some other ways of representing the quality of those Turkish sounds, perhaps in the rhythm, rather than adding harmonies that would obscure the Turkishness of the sound. We do new arrangements in this way, but we always keep an eye on what that original sound is like so as not to obscure it with our own 'cultural baggage'."

And what of muttered suggestions that perhaps this growing taste for the music of other cultures (most noticeably of late, those of Africa — afro-beat, soukous, rai etc.) is simply a form of cultural plunder for a jaded western palette in need of ever more exotic stimulation? In the face of this B H still have a clear conscience.

"It's a very interesting question that has come up a lot. Are we raping these cultures or stealing from them for our own music? I think it all depends on the spirit in which it is done," says Karen. "You can hear the difference between someone who has a real love of music and shows a genuine respect for it, and someone who's just commercially oriented and is just using it because they think, you know, I can make a hit out of this."

There seems more evidence however, to

"Blindman's Holiday", a capella group from Sydney, are taking their traditional 'world' songs back into the world. They spoke to Lyn Ashby about their music.

suggest that if in fact, the sun is setting on the dominance of a western rock music culture and as our ears become attuned to the unfamiliar sounds in this cultural twilight, then what we are hearing are the sounds of communities in 'full-throated voice', singing their traditional songs, or thereabouts. From all corners of the world.

"And Australia is perhaps unique in this way," suggests Gemma, "in that there is a sense there, unlike in Europe, of being able to make up a new culture. People can come from Vietnam or from Lebanon or wherever and feel that they can contribute to the culture and become a part of it rather than forever being an outsider." In this melting pot they receive their inspiration and find their material. "People come up to us from all sorts of cultural backgrounds and say that we must learn this or that song from their country."

Each of these cultures seems to have a distinct voice of its own and it is perhaps this, the simple unadorned power of voice, that characterises B H's interest in traditional song. "The voice," says Karen, "has

imaginations in this way?

"It could be that western music now is so over-produced and commercial and divorced from real emotion that it doesn't matter how good individual performers might be, the process still de-humanises them and de-personalises their music. And so that when people see a performer who is very much in touch with a tradition and having something that they feel very close to then people know that. They hear it and they appreciate it."

It's strange then that four western girls living in Sydney, amongst others, are becoming the inheritors of the vocal traditions of other cultures. "It's a strange process! But it is the voice that attracts. It's human. The language may be unfamiliar, the harmonies might be strange and people may not understand the words, but through all this the voice still always communicates."

The phrase Blindman's Holiday also refers of course to the notion of being able to close your eyes and experience the world in song. Songs that cross the language barrier from some of the world's remotest regions. And typical of this phenomenon, all you need do



always fascinated me and I enjoy singing in full-voice, in the 'full-throated' style. I enjoy creating the strange harmonies that we can create by doing traditional music. It's the power of the voice that is the essence."

With the rise of 'World Music', this power of traditional authentic voice is taking the world by storm. Why has it captured people's

is stay right here in London or in Sydney or wherever you happen to be at the time, put on the record or settle into your seat, and the world will come to you.

As a preview before they go to Europe, Blindman's Holiday will be appearing at Australia House on Tuesday May 23, but will be back in earnest in the autumn.