

A group of Morris dancers in white and dark vests performing on a stage, holding white fans and raising their arms. The dancers are wearing white long-sleeved shirts, white trousers, and dark vests with colorful ribbons. They are holding white fans and raising their arms in a celebratory gesture. The background is a cloudy sky.

Morris

Photographs by
Max Reeves

Introduction by
Ben Edge

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“If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.”

Emma Goldman

“Those Who Were Seen Dancing Were Thought To Be Insane
By Those Who Could Not Hear The Music.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

“For I dance And drink and sing,
Till some blind hand Shall brush my wing.”

William Blake

In the work of Max Crow Reeves, we are taken on a journey into the heart of British Folklore. In his photographs the recent resurgence of interest with Britain's thriving yet often overlooked folk culture, is captured in all its glory. We see groups of Morris Dancers hopping in front of old castle walls, banging sticks or waving hankies with towering high-rise flats standing tall behind. Boots pharmacies, Nisa locals, Chinese takeaways and old pubs also appearing in the backgrounds, inspiring a feeling of timelessness where the ancient and the contemporary walk side by side. The scenes within the photographs are familiar yet unfamiliar as we see high streets that could belong to any town in Britain, yet with the presence of Morris dancers we are reminded of the diversity and creativity that flows through regional cultures of Britain. Also shown is the wide age demographic of the participants, as we see men with white beards, in some cases dressed in drag, as well as young women in rainbow colours, corsets and elaborate face paint.

There is a sense that something that is both old and new happening here, You hear the throw away term 'Folk Revival' being used to describe it, but for me that evokes a feeling that this is all about to come to an end and that it is some kind of mainstream fashion trend where everyone jumps on the band wagon until the next big thing comes along. This is most certainly not the case here. What we are witnessing rather, is what I call a 'Folk Renaissance', where people are counterbalancing the blandness of monoculture and capitalism, and finding sincere ways to reconnect with nature as a radical act of defiance in the face of climate change. People have danced to the rhythm of the wheel of the year since the very beginning of humankind, it is something that is very much within our DNA. We may have outgrown the need for mass organised religion, but the need for ritual in which we realign ourselves with the seasons, the ancestors, and celebrate the joy of being alive whilst creating new community bonds, is something that we will never outgrow and will always be relevant and vital to the human experience.

Reeves's photographs also capture traditions with origins lost to the midst of time, where many of these rituals have been going on largely unnoticed by outsiders of the communities in which they've taken place for centuries despite the oppressive regimes that have tried to suppress them throughout history. Today we find ourselves in a Post-Brexit national identity crisis, in which new generations have rejected celebrity pop culture and the one size fits all out dated notion of national identity, and have responded to it, by looking to the grass roots folk culture of the oppressed everyday folk, whose songs, stories and seasonal rituals have survived against all the odds, as a testament to the resilience and creativity of the human spirit.

In the obsessive body of work in which Max steps out in the great unknown of British Folklore, capturing and revealing the fleeting moments of our Folk traditions that would have otherwise been lost to time as they ever evolve and mutate to accommodate the living and breathing nature of our culture. each generation adding to the collective creativity of the folk Mongrel that is Britain.

We see wide angle shots, often taken from below pointing up to the great cosmos, as dancing figures in some instances are blurred from the fast movements of their limbs, evoking feelings of expressionist brush marks, capturing the movement and energy of the performers, whose facial expressions often appear entranced as if they have entered another spiritual realm through the act of dancing. Essentially the images throughout this book come together into a collective force in which we can see the power of Folk Culture and its relevance today, and like with the Morris Dancers themselves, dancing in affirmation and transcendence we are freed temporarily from the anxieties and pressures of modern-day life.

Ben Edge.

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