



Gold Badge Citation: The Wilson Family

To catalogue the Wilson Family's achievements in full would take far more time than we have tonight – for a start there's five of them – although even that is not the full picture. The Wilsons are a family – and there are others apart from Tom, Chris, Steve, Ken and Mike whose influence has shaped the way they sing, the way they perform, and who they are...I'm thinking of Patricia (who sang with them for 30 years) Jackie, and of course Mam, who after Dad died came away with them and sang...

It was in 1973 that Tom, Chris and Steve started to sing together in 3 part harmony. They were drawn to powerful traditional songs and songs of social comment. They became regular visitors to the many NE folk clubs, establishing themselves as respected floor singers as well as consolidating their knowledge of the repertoire, learning from traditional and revivalist singers in places like the Cutty Wren Redcar, Eston FC, the Bridge in Newcastle, Darlington Folk Workshop and many more...

Always happy to join in and support other singers they started their own informal singers club in 1974, with Ken & Mike joining them after school...! They also started the legendary week-long singing marathons in the Cutty Sark at Whitby Folk Festival, which lasted for many years. It was at Whitby, in 1977 that Malcolm Storey offered them their first paid booking – requiring them to come up with a name – that booking was at the Folk Union One in Hull, home to the Watersons...which may have influenced their choice of name...The Wilson Family.

In the decades since then the Wilsons have continued to promote traditional song, with hundreds of performances and singing sessions. They still run a weekly club at the Welly, in Wolviston, providing a platform and a meeting place for other singers. And when they venture outside the folk scene the power and volume of their hard-edged vocals, and the clarity of their harmonies never fails to impress. I've seen them



at the Proms, in the Royal Albert Hall, in the same concert as the BBC singers – who during the soundchecks had seen these long haired lads in their shorts and sandals, with broad Teesside accents, and probably thought they were part of the sound crew – until the Wilsons sang...and the BBC singers stood to attention!

And of course there's their work recording and performing with Sting (going over to New York with their entire families...turning the Standard Hotel in the East Village into a little oasis of Teesside for a fortnight). A typical Wilsons moment was when they were asked to sing the tune, just in unison. Despite their best efforts harmonies just kept flowing out...the Musical Director was at his wits end, but Sting said "Whatever the Wilsons do...that's what I want."

For The Wilsons, singing is their life – not a matter of wealth or fame. A family for whom the phrase 'down to earth' could have been coined, there is absolute commitment and integrity in their performance, although they are not above the occasional irreverent aside... Although their musical heritage is absolutely that of the North East of England – rural and industrial, traditional and modern – they are happy to take on a good song from anywhere, championing the work of other singers and songwriters, including Peter Bellamy and Graeme Miles (the Wilsons were the first to record a full album of Graeme's songs, back in 1983).

Hearing the Wilson Family sing is to be surrounded by powerful harmony – their singing is fused and potent, carrying the songs perfectly. This has brought them many friends and admirers from audiences across the UK and abroad. They have been a massive influence on other performers, including The Young'uns who say "Hearing the Wilsons sing for the first time when we were teenagers was one of the most inspirational moments of our lives. We knew then and there we wanted to be folk singers too and have spent the last 13 years pulling at their hairy ankles and looking up to them."

And this life of music is what has led to the Wilson Family being awarded the Gold Badge of the English Folk Dance & Song Society.



The Wilson Family's citation was written by Kathryn Tickell OBE, Northumbrian piper, fiddle-player, composer, broadcaster and educator. It was read by her father, Mike Tickell, at the Opening of the Hartlepool Folk Festival, Friday, 13th October, 2017.



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