



FARMER'S WIFE SINGS THE SOUNDS OF THE LAND

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WMN features writer **Sarah Pitt** meets Somerset songstress Yvette Staelens

Folk songs are often inspired by hard times, and there have always been plenty of those in farming. For Somerset folk singer/songwriter Yvette Staelens, otherwise known as farmer's wife Yvette Totterdell, life on a struggling dairy farm has proved a rich source of material.



The Totterdells have farmed at Wrantage on the edge of the Somerset Levels for at least 400 years, but five years ago Yvette and her husband Charles were forced to get out of farming. They simply couldn't make a living any more.

This painful time inspired the poignant songs on Yvette's first solo album, *The Devil and the Farmer's Wife*. It is a very personal chronicle of the crisis in British agriculture.

"Writing the album was total catharsis during that awful time," says Yvette. "I was fed up with the way farmers were treated by the supermarkets, and the lack of public support for farmers.

"I couldn't stop writing about it. Every day there was another article in the paper that inspired me, whether it was food miles or imports. At one point they were importing cheddar cheese from South Africa and labelling it with English-sounding names, and people were buying it."

She says that at the time she felt that there was little public support for farmers, although "people have changed their views and values now, and that is really gratifying".

"Back in the mid-1990s when I was writing these songs, my impression was that people thought farmers were just rich four-wheel-drive drivers who ponced around the countryside, made lots of money and exploited the masses."

Yvette, arriving at Higher Wrantage Farm as a bride in 1992, saw it rather differently, as she saw her husband Charles struggle to make ends meet. Over the decade that followed they came to the slow, hard-to-swallow realisation that dairy farming would never pay while the market was paying a price lower than the cost of production.

Foot and mouth was the final straw, living with the fear that they would be next, particularly when a neighbouring farm was affected. "I remember coming home and seeing a red sign at the end of the road saying it was a restricted zone, and I thought, 'oh my God, we have got it'."

They weathered that storm, but it didn't get any easier to earn a living. Then the following year they decided to sell the herd and quit farming. Yvette's song *Who Understands the Land*, on *The Devil and the Farmer's Wife* album, describes their eventual reluctant decision to get out of farming. It is all the more heartbreaking because Yvette sings it so softly in her clear, melodious voice. "I wrote the song before we sold up and it became like a prophecy," she says. "I can't bear to sing it now."

The worst time was the day of the auction, when the farming community turned out to bid for their cattle and equipment.

"They build an auction house of straw bales so it is like an amphitheatre and the farmers come in and bid," she says. "The cows are all confused because this is where they sleep, and there are all these strange sights and sounds. As the farmer's wife you have to sit in the front row, there are certain things you have to do, and you have to sit and smile through."

Looking back, she says, that was the turning point for them as a family, the point when things started to get better. They still live in the farm-house, and now have a tenant, young farmer Rodney Down who has returned cattle to the land.

Life is less stressful now Yvette, an archaeologist by profession, concentrates on that, and her music. Her daughters, Juliette, nine, and 11-year-old Katherine, who have both inherited Yvette's musical talents, are happier and so is Charles, who has turned his practical skills to building.

Past lives on the land have also inspired Yvette's music. She has become fascinated by the songs which were sung by people who had hard lives on the land. They were noted down by folk-song collector Cecil Sharp when he took cycling tours around Somerset during the early 1900s, stopping at cottage gates to hear women sing.

Among the women he met was Betsy Holland of Kentisbeare in East Devon who sang Sharp

a haunting performance of the Execution Song, which sends a shiver down the spine. Far from romanticising the rural life, these songs are variously bawdy, bleak and chilling.

Yvette was so entranced by them that she and Michelle Hicks, another member of Roots Quartet, recorded some of them, which they released on their album, Somerset Singers.

"I love them," says Yvette. "They tell you of a time past and it is like a film in your head, it takes you to that place."

Yvette's ballad Pretty Nancy, one of the tracks on The Devil and the Farmer's Wife, takes its tune from a song which Cyril Sharp recorded Frances Haskings of Rackenford in Mid Devon singing. Yvette has discovered Frances was the great-great-grandmother of her two daughters.

Yvette writes her lyrics first then composes the music on her piano. She is, she says, "always scribbling", coming up with songs which are alternately feisty, irreverent, moving and funny. This is an album by a free spirit where the tone changes according to the track. There is the upbeat Crazy Aunt Cottage, a single woman's song for her as-yet-unborn nephew or niece, and Patio Song, a splendidly risqué rant written as solidarity for a friend who was being beaten up by her partner. For Yvette, song is for sharing. She believes everyone can sing, and is a firm believer in music's therapeutic power.

Her singing workshops are legendary, and she also runs the Voice of the People Choir in Bridgwater, training its members to sing in harmony, unaccompanied by instruments. "When you have a voice without accompaniment people always stop and listen," she says.

Maybe that is what makes her song Who Understands the Land so particularly powerful. "I have sung it at farming conferences and farmers have been in tears listening to it," she says. One day, perhaps, she will be able to sing it to herself again.

You can hear Yvette singing Who Understands The Land by [clicking here](#) . Find out more about Yvette's music at www.rootsquartet.com

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