



111 KNOCKING DOWN KINGSTON BRIDGE

*steal away oh my Susanna summertime afternoons
down by the riverside singing old yanky-doodle tunes
beneath a weeping willow
no gambling man could refuse
just a little careless love or the Saint James Infirmary blues
but now they're knocking down Kingston Bridge
they're knocking down Kingston Bridge
brick by brick with hammer and pick
they're knocking down Kingston Bridge*

I knew I was no Robert Johnson; though maybe if I went down to the Surbiton/Kingston crossroads and made a pact with the devil, I could be someday. Or at least, I could carry his guitar. I also wasn't an impoverished share cropper, cotton picker, hammer swinging railroader, rambling hobo or po' boy on a chain gang. My folks weren't descended from slaves or treated like shit just because of their skin colour. On that last point, I did have issues, but how deeply they affected me I can't say because I was determined to ignore any psychological hang-ups ⁽¹⁾ and keep on running - putting distance between me and those pesky hell-hounds. Robert Johnson, along with many other black blues musicians, sure paid their dues (although, as Elijah Wald notes in his excellent book, 'Escaping The Delta' ⁽¹⁾, most blues singers were actually trying their darnedest to be the next pop stars of their day). I tried to pay mine, in some measure, despite the English suburban origins.

*Robert Johnson's gone
he just walked out of here
the Mississippi river
must be the world's widest tear
I know and you know it too
if you really wanna sing the blues
you got to carry such a heavy load
just like Robert Johnson*

These words, from a song I wrote in the late Sixties, are evidence of a preoccupation to discover what inspired such blues geniuses. Maybe all my teenage wanderings were an unconscious attempt to break into their world. Though why would I, a dreamy kid born into a white middle-class family, choose to emulate a poverty stricken black man who got himself murdered at just 27 years of age? It didn't take much intelligence to see, reading the lyrics of most blues numbers, these guys had incredibly tough and even bleak lives - yet many youngsters like me were not deterred.

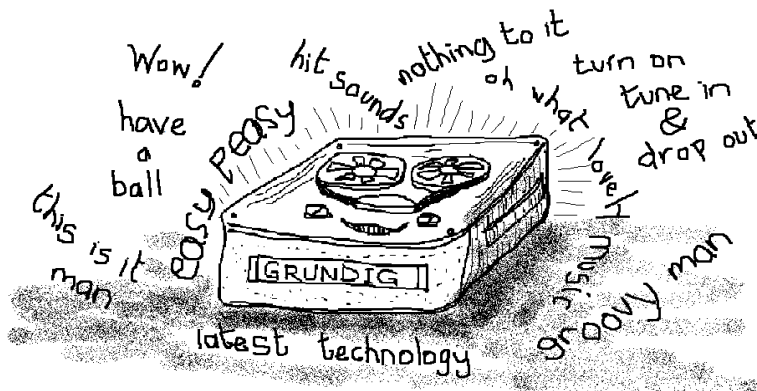
All I can say is, I wasn't alone. For all the British blues men who made it big in bands like The Stones, Yardbirds, Led Zeppelin, Manfred Mann, Fleetwood Mac, Animals, Bluesbreakers, Cream, et al, there were thousands more in the shadows desperately seeking the spotlight. Some were in lesser known bands, electric or acoustic, and others, like me, struck out alone touring the folk clubs, bars and festivals. Crap jobs and crash pads, along with some hard travelling, gave you cred; but were also a necessity for the freewheeling, go anywhere, anytime, kinda lifestyle of the dedicated bluesman. And if you weren't actually a bum, you could try and look the part, as John Martyn admitted (The Word, 2009) when deciding, as a rising guitarist in 1960's Glasgow, that he was a beatnik. 'That meant I never wore shoes and I never had a guitar case. Real beatniks would steal a mail sack from a post

box to sling their guitar into. My thing was to look as dishevelled as possible, as if you'd been fucked, fingered and found out and thrown in the street twice. My speciality was looking weathered! Not easy when you're 16.'

Nor has this attempt by white youth to emulate 'street' style, especially of black origins, diminished. Hip-hop culture, from rapping, DJing, scratching, sampling, beat-boxing, break dancing and the many offshoots of these, has become a world-wide phenomenon despite its source often being crime and drug infested inner-city ghettos - about as far from sleepy middle-class suburbs as it is possible to get. I have seen, for example, lily-white young British teenagers turning up the volume to near unbearable levels on Gangsta rap sounds that, even leaving aside the interminable expletives, threats of sickening violence and misogyny, can't possibly mean a lot to most thirteen year olds who've not long been rapt by the likes of CBeebies or even Coronation Street.

The irony is that as soon as an artist gets a little success, the songs about hard living, injustice, inequality, etc, became nonsense. So then, as in most popular culture, they revert to that worn-out perennial - love (lust) or the loss of it. My baby done me wrong... woe, oh! Trouble is, you'd think, with all that fame and fortune, what have these performers got to complain about? At least when Peter Green sang, 'I just wish I had never been born,' he had the decency to wind up in an asylum - he wasn't just singing the blues for dramatic effect. Mind you, neither are many Rap artists just blowing hot air, whatever you might think about their morals. Many, like Tupac or Old Dirty Bastard, etc, have come to drug-related sticky ends and often seem to have predicted this in their lyrics. Big L, for example, a young rapper who was shot seven times in the head and chest and killed on 139th Street in 1999, just blocks away from his home in Harlem, sang:

*aiyyo you betta flee
Hops or you get your head flown three blocks
L keep rapper's hearts pumpin like Reeboks
I got the wild style - always been a foul child
my guns go boom-boom and yo guns go pow-wow⁽²⁾*



After returning from France, a little sooner than expected, my family seemed quite understanding - at least to my face - but I felt the pain, if not the shame. What's more, the house was no longer big enough for us all, a growing family (four kids with another on the way), our new stepfather and me. It didn't help that I was frequently out, doing all the usual wild and wasted teen stuff till the early hours. To brighten up my dungeon of a room, emulsioned black as previously described, I began oil-painting pictures in my spare time - but these attempts came out as doom-laden visions in mud, like Turner's sunsets but without the sun, dramatic landscape or epic grandeur - not really much like Turner at all in fact, except in my mind - but I hung them up proudly anyway.

If Andy and I were to make our grand escape and not plummet back to earth prematurely, like Moon rockets failing to break out of Earth's gravity, we needed plenty of fuel. We both took labouring jobs, moving on before tedium set in, reluctantly living at home to conserve funds. On one occasion the clerk at the Labour Exchange (Job Centre) warned me not to keep changing jobs or I'd acquire a bad reputation and become 'unemployable'. I laughed but he was genuinely attempting to help, asking what I really wanted to do - like an idiot I said, 'write'. Naturally he enquired what I'd done so far and had to admit it wasn't much, just a few daft poems.

I blame the fruit tree
for
it should know better
maybe it does
but I blame it anyway
it must die
die
die
and die again

But I wouldn't have dreamed of letting him or anyone else read my scribbles - mostly attempts to emulate American beat poets like Ginsberg, Burroughs and Corso, though more akin to the Liverpool lot, such as Henri, McCough and Patten.

In fact, it was probably radio shows such as 'The Goons', 'Round The Horne', 'Hancock's Half Hour', and their ilk, also the nonsense verses of Lear, Carroll, Nash, etc, that were my chief source of inspiration. However, I was really just building up to song composition, which didn't seem that hard given the simplistic efforts of many top ten hits then. To help capture fleeting revelations I bought a reel-to-reel Grundig tape recorder. This wasn't cheap but, I reasoned, would soon pay for itself, not only as a creative tool but as a way to produce demos for the many A&R men who'd soon be banging at my door. I did not doubt the wisdom of this investment and brashly showed it off to friends - hoping privately, as time elapsed, no one would ask to hear the recorded gems.

Although I was now developing on guitar, discovering and practising new material, visiting clubs around London, or just jamming with other beginners, I did not find it easy writing my own stuff. In fact, all I came up with were derivative riffs and meaningless phrases, and nothing remotely singable beyond the dungeon. One of the places I used to hike my guitar was Hampton Court Palace, not to perform for royalty but to lounge with mates on the grassy banks of the Thames at weekends. We mainly played American folk and blues. I never really got into singing English traditional folk though I enjoyed listening sometimes - appreciating the history more now as I get older - but it's never been my thing as a performer, unpatriotic bugger that I am.

I recently scrambled together some snatches of the songs we played then to make a kind of musical collage (see 'Knocking Down Kingston Bridge' lyrics) which I sing occasionally now, challenging audiences to count up the different tunes featured (I think there's 24). When tired of sitting by the river we'd wander around the palace grounds, hopefully having paired off by this time or, in summer, go for a swim. The Thames then was a dark and murky brew, but it was long before environmental concerns and we were far more worried about getting hit by passing cabin cruisers than contracting waterborne diseases from the toxic tide. The only time I was ever aware of danger was when I swam over to the far bank one hazy summer's day (trying to impress a flaxen haired beauty) and got so exhausted

on the return leg, kept on sinking, gulping down gallons of the foul tasting water, and barely making it back alive – not that the fair maid noticed.

Another place to strum was on the church wall in the centre of Kingston. As already noted, it was a favourite meeting place for many young people before the pubs opened. One of those hanging around sometimes was a striking bottle-blonde teenager called Lynn Ripley who, as Twinkle, later had a hit with a song called ‘Terry’. The self-penned number, about the (fictional) death of her daredevil boyfriend in a motorcycle crash, caused some controversy and was banned by the BBC at the time. Morrissey, unlikely as it may seem, picked up on Twinkle’s material some years later and was a big fan, covering ‘Golden Lights’ by her in the 1980s. Although making several more attempts at the charts in various guises, Twinkle remains a one hit wonder. Incidentally, for trivial information freaks, she is the aunt of actress Fay Ripley and also shared a school class with Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall (née Shand, formerly Parker Bowles) at Queen’s Gate School, Kensington. I can’t say I knew her well but was on nodding terms for a while.

Though Twinkle and the rest of us had a liking for dark clothing and even darker song lyrics, these were really quite innocent times. As John Martyn admitted, though one might adopt a tattered appearance, we were a long way off the genuine down-and-out article. But maybe there was a little prophetic musing behind our attempts at such songs as ‘Nobody Wants You When You’re Down And Out’⁽⁴⁾.

*once I lived the life of a millionaire
spending my money I didn't care
taking my friends out for a good time
buying bootleg liquor champagne and wine
then I began to fall so low
I didn't have a friend and no place to go
so if I ever get my hand on a dollar again
I'm gonna hold on to it till them eagle's grin
nobody knows you when you're down and out*

At the time there were few hard drugs on the streets of Kingston and the worst that usually happened to any of us was a bad hang-over. A couple of years after this, when curiosity had turned into some serious habits, a young guy I knew OD’d in that same churchyard. Only a short time earlier I’d been chatting to him at the Exchange and he’d seemed very different to the extrovert character I’d once known - gaunt, depressed and hopeless. Other deaths followed, but many lives were simply crippled and diverted down miserable paths of delusion and paranoia. Though I witnessed some of this at first hand, I was lucky never to get seriously caught up and eventually found a way out. John Martyn⁽⁵⁾, a fantastic musician who I later got acquainted with when he was gigging South London clubs, was not so lucky and died prematurely, bloated like Henry VIII, leg amputated, his once youthful looks long gone due mainly to heavy drink and drug misuse. One of his favourite numbers was his version of the old perennial, ‘Cocaine’ (which Martyn spelled ‘cocain’ for some obscure reason):

*did you hear a story about Cocain Lill?
she had a house on cocain hill
she had a cocain dog and a cocain cat
she even had a cocain rat
cocain it's all around my brain
hey baby - come here quick*

*this old cocain's making me sick
cocain running round my brain*

'Cocaine Blues' ⁽⁶⁾, as sung most notably by Rev Gary Davis and not to be confused with various others of the same (or similar) title including the excellent story song made famous by Johnny Cash (sung in Folsom Prison) or 'Cocaine' by J.J. Cale but popularised by Eric Clapton, has been sung by almost every blues player on the planet at some time or other. There are versions by Bob Dylan, Keith Richards, Townes Van Zandt, Dave Van Ronk, White Van Mann, Davey Graham, Jackson Browne, Stefan Grossman, Ramblin' Jack Elliot and even a punk version by UK Subs, to name but a few. The original version by TJ 'Red' Arnall is a rewriting of an Appalachian murder ballad, 'Little Sadie', known also by other titles. There's also 'Take a Whiff on Me', another cocaine influenced song, though in a lighter vein, usually associated with Leadbelly but with many variants by other artists. Lonnie Donegan even changed the lyrics to 'Have A Drink On Me' to make it more acceptable and charted with the number in 1961.

As an aside, Mark Chadwick of The Levellers when asked in a recent interview (Uncut, April 2011), 'What do you regard as the worst drug?' said 'Cocaine. It's not very creative. It's all about yourself. I've written lyrics on it and you look back and think, "Christ, they're awful, what was I on? Oh, that's right, cocaine." The Levellers lost about ten years doing that stuff.'

Songs, such as 'Cocaine Blues', which once held a romantic appeal, weren't so pretty when fiction turned into ugly fact. But, at this time, when I was just a lad, such harsh realities were either unknown or seemed remote. We'd read about drug taking in books like 'Naked Lunch' by William Burroughs or Huxley's 'The Doors Of Perception', but it never occurred to us such experiences would be replicated on the streets of our home town.

My main concern then was getting enough money to make another stab at world circumnavigation and, though some got spent in pubs and clubs, I took this effort pretty seriously - it was all I had in the way of a Big Dream (until someone recognised my song-writing genius that is).

Andy and I finally set sail for France early in 1963 - stupidly going in winter time again but assuming we'd soon be in tropical climes. Progress was painfully slow and miserable, mainly due to the very wet weather (one night near Perpignan the tent was flooded with muddy water and everything saturated and stained orangey-brown including us) so we finally caught a train through Spain down to Gibraltar. We took a ferry from Algeciras to Ceuta and then walked miles into Morocco, rarely seeing a motor vehicle in what was then a very poor but mysterious country with virtually no tourists, till we reached a little town called Tetouan. We hung about there a while, drinking mint tea and smoking in shadowy little cafes. From there we took a bus to Casablanca and, belatedly discovering there was no way we could get around the Sahara, set off to cross North Africa instead.

We were a little apprehensive entering Algeria as the war of independence ⁽⁷⁾ had only recently ended. In fact, on my previous journey through France, I'd been given a lift by some very threatening Arab types who, once they realised I was English, bragged about their anti-French terrorist connections. They were keen for me to swear allegiance to their cause which, at the time, I was totally ignorant of and didn't know what they were talking about.

We were still politically naive but, as it happened, the Algerians turned out to be the warmest and most hospitable people of all throughout our trip. Despite many signs of recent conflict - numerous road blocks, army personnel everywhere, burned out buildings and abandoned vehicles en route - also lots of apparently unemployed men hanging about and looking threatening - as soon as people realised we weren't French they couldn't have been nicer. Hitching was easy, despite little traffic, and we only had to use our tent on one

occasion as someone would always invite us back to their home for mountains of food and, after much jovial socialising, a bed for the night. The only time we had to make our own sleeping arrangements was arriving very late into Algiers when we camped on some waste ground. In the morning we were awoken by what sounded like hail pounding the canvas but which, on investigation, turned out to be a bunch of little kids throwing stones. They ran off when we poked our heads out but after a while one youngster timidly approached and, pointing up to one of the blocks of apartments surrounding our patch of dirt, beckoned us to follow him. After we'd packed away, he led us up stairs and we were treated to a wonderful cooked breakfast by his family in their little flat overlooking the city.

Our luck continued through Tunisia until we reached the Libyan border, where we were turned back at customs for not having visas. So then we set off up to Tunis and hung around for days waiting to see the relevant officials. However, after some discussion, we decided instead to catch a boat across to Sicily and hence Milan, given our rapidly depleted funds and, frankly, sheer weariness after two months on the road. From there we caught a train back to the UK. On return I was hardly given a hero's welcome and soon realised, whatever I might do, many changes were coming regardless. My younger brother and sister were now off to college, Mum and Logan were talking about moving - possibly abroad - but I, despite all my grand ideas of international travel, was back at square one, in the same old dungeon.

A week or so later found me resting my butt on the church wall when who should roll up but the old wastrel himself, a skinny young creature clinging to his arm. After the usual pleasantries, of which the girl took no part nor even dragged the lank yellow hair off her face, Arthur showed great interest in my travels - especially Morocco. It was some time since he'd been there, he said, but dropped a few names connected with Tangiers and Marrakesh. I said we'd not visited either places and, in any case, had mostly kept on the move. 'What about Mary Jane?' he asked. I shook my head blankly, so he said, 'You know, weed? Smoke? Shit man? Bring any back?'

Now I thought about it, there was that block of hashish I'd wrapped up in dirty underpants and shoved to the bottom of my rucksack. Though I had been nervous when going through British customs, I was since more concerned about unemployment, impending homelessness and my total lack of any success in life so far - strange as it may seem. For Arthur, however, the discovery brightened his face like a child's at the promise of cotton candy. Within minutes I found myself accepting his suggestion to split, the family having gone away for the weekend and unwisely left me in charge of the house, in order to sample my little illegal import.

On the bus, Arthur was animated, interested in every aspect of the journey, both our current one down to Stonebroke, and my foreign escapade. He didn't accept the premature homecoming as failure, such a concept was alien to him, it was just life - the way chance, fate, or providence, call it what you will - had ordained the dice would fall. 'No regrets,' he told me - that was the best and only philosophy. Arthur was, however, keen to know when I'd be returning to Morocco or, as some were now doing, to venture East into Turkey, even Afghanistan or India. I told him I had no plans at present, except maybe try and get into the music business - if not as a musician then maybe on the recording side. I'd show him my Grundig and maybe, I said, let him hear a few song writing efforts. I regretted the last remark immediately as none of my scrappy bits and pieces to date amounted to a complete verse, let alone an entire composition. The truth was, I was seriously thinking of selling the machine and using the money for something more constructive, like buying a suit to help get a decent job with - the hobo scene having lost its previous charm.

He'd barely examined my illicit goods before our man was offering £15 cash, and probably would've gone higher had I demurred. But it didn't bother me and his obvious

delight was infectious - even his mute bird made an 'ooh' noise - so I accepted willingly, even though there wasn't much profit in it for me. After some preparation with papers and filters on the kitchen table, something Arthur was obviously well practiced at, we began passing round the first spliff with casual good humour. I didn't notice him lace the crumbled resin with anything else, but after the second, or maybe third joint, I began to feel decidedly off colour and went to crash out. Within minutes my pulse began racing alarmingly and it soon felt as if either my heart or head would explode. Everything began to feel black, inside and out, and I was afraid I might be about to die. Then time slowed right down and I felt paralysed so that, even if I'd tried to go for help or even shout out, it would've been impossible. As time went on I also began to sweat profusely and then shiver with uncontrollable chills. How long this frightening state lasted I don't know because eventually I fell asleep, plagued by horribly vivid nightmares.

I was awoken about four in the morning by an ethereal wailing harmonica and the mournful cry of:

*walk on - walk on - walk on - walk on
gonna keep on walking till I find my way back home*

The sound was vaguely familiar but it took me some time to identify Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee's ⁽⁸⁾ tune off a country blues compilation I'd bought recently. But how was that? Gradually it dawned - Arthur must have discovered it and put it on the old gramophone in our living room. I got up slowly, relieved I was still intact, and made my way to join him. The girl was curled up on the sofa sound asleep but Arthur was at the dining table studying album covers scattered all around together with the remains of some supper they'd rustled up. I offered to make tea and we were soon chin-wagging, mainly over the eclectic record collection which, apart from my obviously more sophisticated recent choices, included several pop hits going back a few years from the likes of Elvis, Paul Anka, Connie Francis, Harry Belafonte and others. However, despite my dismissive attitude to many of these records, he reminded me that they all had something worth listening to. 'Never forget man,' he said. 'It's not called the music business for nothing - with the accent on 'business'. Most singers don't realise that, till it's too late. If these discs here sold well, it's because the record companies saw the dollar signs - it's simple as that. Might as well realise the evil truth now baby - money rules. And how!'

Arthur surprised me - brought me back down with a bang. All this talk of commercialism from a poppy-eyed scruff who seemed more intent on getting wasted than wealthy made me wonder where his head was at, though not for the first time. The dope had blasted me into space and within an inch of my life, so it felt, but was it some sort of initiation or even a warning? Or maybe I just wasn't as accustomed to chemical highs as, presumably, he was. From the few crumbs left on the foil wrap it was clear he'd been puffing all night, yet was still wide awake and chirpy as ever. How did he do it? Could I? Did I even want to?

*well the world is too wide
highways are too long
no need of us being together
if we can't get along
walk on - walk on - walk on - walk on*

'Okay Al. Let's hear what you laid down. Or do you want to get your box out and play live?'

'No, no,' I said, taken aback for a moment. How could I follow a classic blues like that? Then, I thought, maybe he's more stoned than he looks and won't hear my feeble noise for what it is?

Switching the machine on I also flipped open a notebook for him to peruse - something I'd never allowed anyone else to do - yet still began wincing in anticipation. Though he sat listening pokerfaced, fast-forwarding now and then, a tiny grin appeared occasionally to relieve the tension till, after about ten minutes, he hit the off button but continued reading my notes.

'Have you seen worse?' I asked, eventually.

'Oh much,' he replied. 'You'd be surprised.'

'Trouble is,' I admitted. 'Nothing seems to come together, you know?'

'Let me tell you something - song writing, like many so-called 'creative' things, is mostly craft, not art. Only a very few remarkable people have a natural gift, and even they are usually driven - half insane. Do you want to be like that?'

'I dunno,' I said.

'You will. Right now I can tell you something about all this.' He put down my notebook. 'In a studio, with the right session players, there's maybe half a dozen recordable numbers here. Let me tell you how it's done, not by every cat, but certainly many - especially bands. They come in with odds and ends no better than these and, after setting up the right mood - if you get my drift - they knock these scraps into shape. Some of the biggest hits began life as just some crappy little riff. So don't be so precious - let others see your stuff.'

Recently I read how Keith Richards came up with the chorus for 'Satisfaction' in a dream. He woke, blearily laid down this brief phrase on a cassette player, and then crashed back out. Later, he got up and found this little gem which he could barely remember from the night before. Taking it to Mick he did what often happened with them, filling in the gaps - the verses. They then played around in the studio with the rest of the band to record what has become one of their most iconic numbers - much covered and parodied over the years. The fuzzy guitar, incidentally, was Keith's attempt to get a brassy instrumental sound.

'Nah!' I said. 'Not me, I want my songs to be really good before anyone else can tear them apart.'

'I'm not saying sing them in public. Just like this - you know?'

'I suppose,' I said, unconvinced.

'Anyway - what does it matter? Pop songs are two a penny - any fool can write one, given a few tips⁽⁹⁾. Most are just padding, leading up to the hook. You could sing any old gibberish and most people wouldn't know or care - so long as it sounded okay. What's hard is playing them right. And,' he laughed, 'though I hate the bastards who do it - flogging the fucking things!'

Arthur was sounding more like the careers adviser I never had than a half-stoned beat, but what he said made sense. I guess my trepidation went back to deeper anxieties, not just about musical ambitions, but things I'd barely begun to put a name to, least of all understand. Last night real fears over my mortality had gripped me and, though common sense now told me I wasn't really going to die, not quite yet anyway, the experience had felt real enough at the time. Even the crazy dreams, though soon faded from memory, had been like a peephole into another, darker, dimension - were they something that mattered? That could return again one day in greater force?

Songs, on the other hand, though almost as insubstantial as any dream, were strangely comforting - down to earth and controllable. Well, that was the idea anyway. Arthur seemed to be offering me a lifeline - hope that one day I too might string words and music together in ways that, if not worthy of high sales, might at least cheer me up. Or, better still, get a girl like Blondie to cheer me up on cold nights.

‘Ah-ha?’ said Arthur suddenly. ‘How about this?’ He read from the page, ‘Hey Geronimo! What’s that all about?’ Then he went over to the sofa, slumped beside his bird and zonked out like a big tom cat for ten straight hours.

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 11

(1) ‘Escaping The Delta’ by Elijah Wald, published by Amistad (Harper Collins) 2004. He says, ‘Hard as it is for modern blues fans to accept, the artists we most admire often shared the mass tastes we despise, and dreamed not of enduring artistic reputations but of contemporary stardom.’

(2) My mother once suggested I see a psychiatrist as a teenager, but I resolutely refused. Firstly because to do so would be to admit I had problems and, so far as I was concerned, it was other people who had those; and secondly, though I may not have been following the family’s academic traditions or society’s norms, I was fulfilling my own dreams, however wayward they might have seemed. Also, I was having fun – most of the time. Pay back time might come somewhere down the line, but I never considered that then. It’s perhaps worth noting that some years later, when I finally gave in to numerous pressures and went to college, I studied child psychology and found it fascinating – using not only my own kids as subjects for analysis, but also the experiences I’d been through as a teenager.

(3) Quoted by Quiban Salazar-Moreno at, <http://www.thenewblackmagazine.com>

(4) ‘Nobody Wants You When You’re Down And Out’, written by Jimmie Cox in 1923, recorded by Bessie Smith in 1929, and by numerous others including Eric Clapton.

(5) John Martyn (September 11th 1948 - January 29th 2009) ‘...may never have achieved household name status but he was one of the most revered and innovative singer-songwriters of his generation; his music – a mix of blues, folk and funk – influenced artists as varied as U2, Portishead and Eric Clapton. Many of his albums, especially ‘Solid Air’ (1973), are regarded as classics. But Martyn spent most of his career hooked on drugs and alcohol, and in 2003 he had his right leg amputated below the knee because of a burst cyst. John Martyn was born Ian David McGeachy on September 11 1948 at New Malden, Surrey. His parents, both singers of light opera, divorced when he was five and he spent much of his childhood in Glasgow, where he lived with his grandmother and attended Shawlands Academy. Having taught himself the guitar at the age of 15, he returned to London on leaving school and appeared regularly at Les Cousins, the Soho folk club which also launched Ralph McTell, Bert Jansch and Al Stewart. He became the first white act to be signed to Chris Blackwell’s Island record label, and recorded his debut album, London Conversation, for £158 in 1968. He began to experiment with electronic effects, notably a tape device known as the Echoplex, which provided his signature sound, and which he introduced on his second album ‘Stormbringer!’ in 1970. Martyn sealed his reputation with his album, ‘Solid Air’, described as the "musical equivalent of a reassuring hug" by Q Magazine, which named it the 67th best British album of all time in 2000. Martyn dedicated the haunting title track to his friend Nick Drake, another singer-songwriter, who died of an overdose at the age of 26 shortly after it was finished. At this point Martyn seemed on the brink of major international success, but he was derailed by his passion for musical exploration and by an appetite for excess that bordered on self-destruction. Solid Air included his most celebrated song, the beautiful ‘May

You Never' (subsequently covered by Eric Clapton and many others), and his record company anticipated a big commercial breakthrough. Yet the follow-up LP in 1973, 'Inside Out', was willfully inaccessible as his interest in experimental electronics increased, and the jazz-rock fusions gave the album only limited cult appeal. Over the next few years Martyn slid into alcoholism, his live performances punctuated by moments of incoherent drunkenness. The singer later recalled an occasion in Spain where he had been so drunk that he fell off the stage – "I still got three encores," he noted. Drugs took a toll on his personal life, and his first marriage broke up in the late 1970s. This darkest period in his life found artistic expression in the despairing, autobiographical 'Grace and Danger', which was finally released in 1980 after Chris Blackwell had initially blocked it because he thought it was too upsetting and personal. Martyn himself described the record as "cathartic". Yet it yielded a restoration in his fortunes, and subsequent albums – 'Glorious Fool' (1981), produced by Phil Collins and 'Well Kept Secret' (1982) – were the highest-charting records of his career. In the late 1990s Martyn began to experiment with electronic dance sounds, and in 2001 he had a top 40 hit as a featured vocalist on 'Deliver Me', a dance record by Sister Bliss, keyboard player with the group Faithless. Since losing a leg, Martyn had performed from a wheelchair but did not repine. "If I could control myself more, I think the music would be much less interesting," he told Q Magazine. "I'd probably be a great deal richer, but I'd have had far less fun and I'd be making really dull music." His cantankerous behaviour was famous, and age did not appear to mellow him or diminish his interest in expanding the horizons of music and making musical boundaries redundant. Early on in his career he proved himself one of the most brilliant acoustic guitarists of his generation, but he was never content to rest on his laurels, taking his guitar-playing into constantly new directions, even at the cost of his commercial appeal. Martyn hated being pigeonholed by any one musical genre and as a result remained essentially a cult hero. He never became rich, but he was hugely influential and was idolised by his peers. He was presented with a lifetime achievement award by Phil Collins at last year's BBC Folk Awards, when he sang 'May You Never', backed by John Paul Jones of Led Zeppelin. Eric Clapton sent a message saying he was "so far ahead of everything else it was inconceivable". Martyn joked: "At last I'm a celebrity." ' Daily Telegraph – Obituary.

(6) 'The True Story of the Cocaine Blues: The History of Cocaine in American Folk and Blues Music'. <http://www.suite101.com>

(7) The Algerian War was a conflict between France and the Algerian independence movements from 1954 to 1962, which led to Algeria gaining its independence from France. The war was a complex conflict characterised by guerrilla warfare, maquis fighting and terrorism against civilians, use of torture on both sides and counter-terrorism operations by the French army. Effectively started by members of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in 1954 during Toussaint Rouge (Red All Saints Day) the conflict shook the French Fourth Republic's (1946-58) foundation and led to its collapse. The Algerian war was a founding event in modern Algerian history. It left long-standing scars in both French and Algerian society, and still affects some segments of society in both countries to this day. Martin Windrow, 'The Algerian War 1954–62'.

(8) Sonny Terry (1911 – 1986) and Brownie McGhee (1915 – 1996) met in 1939 when busking in Durham, North Carolina. Terry was blind and McGhee walked with a limp. At the time Terry was playing harmonica for singer-guitarist Blind Boy Fuller, while McGhee was accompanying harp player Jordan Webb on guitar. They hooked up again in 1941, following Fuller's death, and made their first record together three years later. They played for tips on

New York City Streets for a time and appeared at many left-wing rallies with Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Pete Seeger and other folk singers. They parted company in 1947 to work on separate projects or as studio musicians then reunited in 1955 in Tennessee William's 'Cat On A Hot Tin Roof'. For over twenty years following this they produced numerous albums and toured extensively in the USA and internationally.

Ref: Smithsonian Folkways.

(9) Song-writing tips:

* Pete Seeger, in his musical autobiography, 'Where Have All The Flowers Gone' (2009 Revised Edition, page 89), gives some handy advice.

1. 'Try improvising variations on any tune you know, or are listening to. Imagine you are a musician from a different tradition or a different part of the world. How would they change that tune?'
2. 'Try slowing a tune down or speeding it up. Put it in a different "mode", major or minor. Start by changing one or two notes in the beginning, middle or end. Then change whole phrases.'
3. 'Play a game in the car – put tunes to words on highway billboards. Pretend it's a singing commercial you hear on the air. You can play the same game leafing through magazines or newspapers. Sing the headlines.'

Seeger concludes, 'What you'll decide is what the world's best composers have long known: it's easy to make up a half-good melody. But to make up an unforgettable one takes luck, and for all anyone knows, help from The Great Unknown.' He adds the oft quoted line from Thomas Edison that, 'Genius is 5 percent inspiration and 95 percent perspiration' Also his observation, 'Practice may not make perfect, but it sure as hell makes for improvement.' In the same book Seeger reflects how many songs, particularly in the folk genre, utilise the same or similar tunes. He quotes Woody Guthrie joking once about another songwriter, 'Oh, he just steals from me. But I steal from everybody. I'm the biggest song-stealer there ever was.' I guess the difference with Woody was he usually improved the originals.

* Jiva, a folk singing duo from Northumberland, gave me their song writing checklist, saying: 'We don't have specific 'rules' and we don't write in a formulaic manner. However we often find that songs which satisfy some (not necessarily all) of our 5R criteria seem to work better than those that don't.

R1: Reason, rationale, raison d'etre

R2: Rhyme

R3: Rhythm

R4: Repetition

R5: Resolution... (optional) - sometimes a song works better if the story is resolved, or there's a return to the starting point/theme... other times it's best to leave it hanging so listeners can ponder what happens next.

We never to set out to write with 5R in mind - but examining the R factors might help us pinpoint why a song isn't working or maybe help us work out what's 'missing'. We've recently realised that a sixth R can help kick start the process:

R6: Rage... quite often, when one or both of us is annoyed or riled about something a song is occasionally born as a form of catharsis. The casual observer/listener might never know what prompted us into song writing action for a particular song, but songs that emerge this way generally have a very strong R1 factor!' www.jiva.co.uk

* Keith Richards drops many hints about how he writes songs in 'Life' but also says 'Great songs write themselves. You're just being led by the nose, or the ears. The skill is not to interfere too much. Ignore intelligence, ignore everything; just follow it where it takes you.' He does admit, however, 'Not to say I haven't laboured. Some of them had us on our knees. Some are about thirty-five years old and I've still not quite finished them yet.' He also says that once, rather in desperation, they used the William Burroughs trick of cutting up newspaper headlines and scattering them on the floor – they wrote 'Casino Boogie' like that when recording 'Exile On Main Street' at Richards' house in the South of France in 1971 – but it wasn't a technique the Stones repeated.

* My own advice, for what it's worth, is simple – just keep on trying. There are structural rules, but you pick those up as you go along, partly by trial and error and also by listening to lots of other's material. Mind you, sometimes too much knowledge is a bad thing because it can make you lazy and go for what you know works, so don't be afraid to experiment and get it wrong. Rules are there to be broken. In the privacy of your own home who's to hear the racket? A scary thing, when starting out, but even more so after singing for some years, is writer's block – a state of mind which can last years or even indefinitely (it's given as one reason Phil Ochs committed suicide, despite having produced many fantastic songs). There's no fool-proof antidote to this, just keep playing and don't worry – there are other things in life after all – and usually the facility will return, maybe even better or having changed. Lastly, and maybe rather obviously, be true to yourself. Do your own thing. Covering known material is fine as a starting point but sooner or later, like learning to ride a bike, you have to take off the training wheels and go it alone. Alternatively, if you're happier doing other artist's songs then that's fine too – at least then audiences will be able to recognise what you're doing and maybe even sing along.

* For more up-to-date song writing tips, information and interviews, etc, go to:
www.songfacts.com