



## WHISTLING JOE

*Whistling Joe with a heart of gold  
gold leaf tobacco - lord he seemed so old  
older than me at least a hundred years  
Whistling Joe - roll-ups and beers  
Whistling Joe - roll ups and beers  
met him at a warehouse stacking pallets and crates  
taught me all his skiving ways like we were special mates  
sometimes I ran errands to the bookies down the street  
he gave me tips and little nips of whisky so discrete*

Despite having mixed feelings about the Railway Tavern session, it had moved me enough to get scribbling again. Over the following days and before Arthur and I headed south, I felt like trying out some of this new material in a live situation - only without him looking over my shoulder. I hadn't written any new songs for a long time, not for adults anyway, and wasn't sure what would emerge or how they might be received. I had plenty of old favourites I could rustle up and duly practised a few, but quickly tired of them when new ideas began to flow. My first effort was a jokey little number inspired by the aging shape of most folk club members - the silver strummers you might say (who buy expensive instruments with pension payouts hoping, valiantly, to at last emulate the guitar heroes of their youth).

*as you get older losing your hair  
and your marbles down the old armchair  
you won't want whisky or crack cocaine  
hordes of wild women easing your pain  
just a nice warm milky beverage  
not too hot or sweet  
a nice warm milky beverage  
and a blanket over your feet*

It went on in similar vein about those little frustrations that come to us all in the end; dementia, incontinence, aches and pains, dementia, etc, ending with:

*call me a sad old fidgety fart  
glad to be grey - in need of a start  
but me and my armchair we're doing okay  
shaking it down in our own wrinkly way*

Okay, it's not Bruce Springsteen. But it was a start and might raise a chuckle - though I hoped no one got the impression it was autobiographical. I played with some other ideas and then noticed, in a flyer for a festival in Yorkshire, they were staging a song writing competition. It wasn't something I'd normally touch with a barge pole, especially given memories of that fateful Marquee Club debacle. But this seemed a gentler affair and, though there was little likelihood of winning, might give me a chance to meet other song writers and hear the latest trends - not so much from fellow contestants, but the many professionals attending. As it happened I did have the germ of an idea for a new song, kicked off by thoughts of our impending trip.

I'd already wondered if, on our way to Swanage, we might stop off at Kingston and check out old haunts and see for myself how they'd 'improved' the old market town with their wrecking balls. I guessed it might be painful, but maybe not. Did I care anymore? It was only a place - a pile of bricks and mortar (as I remind my dear wife when she's salivating over some impossibly pretty cottage on a TV property programme) and mostly different ones to what I'd once known, judging by Google Street View. I never was one for historical sentimentality, especially about places, but maybe, what with Arthur's unexpected re-appearance, it might be interesting to remind myself of the town I once tried so hard to escape. In any case, I'd been thinking about some of the people I'd known back then and, for no apparent reason, this old geezer I once worked with came to mind.

I did flog the tape recorder and get a suit. I also made an effort to straighten out, clean up and move on down the career highway (or dusty track in my case) from unskilled labourer to unskilled shoe salesman. Unfortunately I was lousy at selling and, when customers had doubts, found myself in agreement rather than trying to persuade them otherwise. 'You're quite right Sir; our shoes are ill-fitting, shoddy and unfashionable.' (How could I argue? They were!) I even managed to find a bedsit, shared with Andy and a psychotic unemployable guy whose name now escapes me, and tried my best to settle down. But it didn't last long. One night we came home after work to find Shifty had been knife throwing around our cramped quarters (just relieving some nervous tension), killing anything that might once have had life in it such as furniture, wallpaper and doors and ending with personal belongings like shoes, jeans and coats. Though we accepted he was either very stoned or very sick, this little prank was a laugh too far and, shamefully, we all did a moonlight. Back home again, I decided maybe I really needed to move far away and, after giving my folks some bullshit about emigration, got a more lucrative job in a big warehouse to raise travel funds once again.

The company was a wholesale distributor of cookers and fridges, etc, and the warehouse an endless forest of crates stacked to the roof - leaving plenty of hidey-holes to relax if given half a chance. Nowadays, no doubt, employees would be much more closely monitored but then, with more militant unions to protect their 'rights', many got away with murder (well, grand larceny anyway). One old boy was Stan - named Joe in the song, to scan - one of life's natural-born whistlers who could trill like a bird in a meandering, oddly tuneless, way. He tottered around the cardboard city, leisurely shoving a barrow before him, always appearing busy yet frequently not on company business. For some unknown reason he took a shine to me and, with a sly look over his shoulder, cupping a rollup from prying eyes, would let me in on the latest scams. There was nothing to worry the fraud squad about, but these petty fiddles were what got Stan and his old mates through the otherwise tedious monotony of long days moving numbered, but otherwise anonymous, boxes from one rack to another. The big treat being to get on loading bay duties where smaller items might be up for grabs when packages were mysteriously lost or broken.

The song which I came up with, and hoped to enter for the competition, told this man's story - ultimately sad. Or was it? He died with his working boots on. He'd had a good innings, as they say. Some years later I was employed in a care home as a gardener come general handyman (well, the only man handy) and watched many elderly residents barely move all day, often doped to the eyeballs, slipping in and out of consciousness, except when meals were set before them. Then they would twitch into life, enough to spoon down a few mouthfuls, smile meekly and sink back into their default position - a kind of semi-comatose bewilderment. What kind of existence is that? Stan had done a lot in his life, as the lyrics say - maybe longevity isn't everything.



Surprise, surprise; Arthur called me up on Thursday - we were due to set off on our trip Saturday, though no arrangements had yet been made - and immediately began to apologise, which wasn't like him. He was also drunk, which was. Anyway, the upshot, if I got his drift, was there'd be no comfy limousine ride to the south coast. Indeed, if we were to make it at all, transport was down to me. Oh, and could I manage to squeeze a few bits and pieces into the vehicle? What vehicle? I asked. A truck of some description might be suitable, he said. I made all due protestations, but nothing seemed to sink in, and eventually told him I'd get back when, and if, I had something - preferably not at my expense.

In fact, unexpectedly, I did soon find a solution. The following evening I lugged my guitar over to the Railway's function room again and found, unlike two weeks previously, the place packed with young (ish) folk fans and a real buzz in the air. I'd forgotten guests were booked but, since I was nervous about playing, being so under-rehearsed, it didn't bother me. However Roz, excellent club MC that she was, remembered my name and put me down for a song or two. After a few floor performers, some I recognised from previously plus others including a Northumbrian pipe band, a concertina player and a canny Irish fiddler, then me with a self-penned bluesy number about a gambler trying to kill his girlfriend. The response I got was mixed, which was fair since it was mostly a traditional venue, but for myself I was just relieved to have recalled all the lyrics. After that, and halfway through a shaky penny whistle medley from a very nervous young duo, proceedings stuttered to a halt as a noisy late-comer, ignoring club decorum, tried to gain entry. 'Hellooh! Don't mind me!' trilled a large Afro-haired woman carrying a capacious shopping bag. Her long green dress, brightly decorated with bold appliquéd flowers, flounced about as she pushed her way through the crowd, making it hard for even the most liberal folkies not to mind - but she hardly demurred. 'If I can just have a minute?'

It was plain Roz was reluctant to give the newcomer a spot but, presumably in the hope it might shut her up, she consented.

'Is this a folk club?' said the bag lady, noticing a collection of instruments on stage. 'Oh, all right then.' Despite her discovery she was not fazed and launched into a mercifully brief, almost monotone version, of 'Daisy Bell' <sup>(1)</sup>. The audience, conditioned as they were by years of hearty choruses, managed to drown her out:

*Daisy Daisy give me your answer do  
I'm half crazy all for the love of you  
it won't be a stylish marriage  
I can't afford a carriage  
but you'd look sweet upon the seat  
of a bicycle made for two*

But this wasn't the end, merely the prelude to a rant about the evils of globalisation, agro-chemicals and eco-terrorism (as she called it) and finally said we 'must, must, must,' go to her art exhibition on the Quayside. As Roz stepped up, though barely half her size, yet you

felt could easily have thrown the interloper out the window. But Daisy wasn't put off and simply showered the audience with leaflets from her bag as she was hustled to the rear of the room. Unfortunately it was also where I was sitting, alongside the only vacant chair. Though I tried not to encourage her she plumped her big bottom down and kept up a barrage of (environmentally) friendly comments for the next half an hour which was a pity on two counts: first, I'm allergic to large barking females, and secondly the main act were brilliant and I really wanted to hear them. Their names were Dan Walsh and Kathryn Davidson, a young duo who play banjo and guitar, respectively. Actually, when I say Dan plays banjo, that's like saying Bach or Mozart played piano. I checked out some reviews and, unusually, wouldn't disagree with any of the superlatives <sup>(2)</sup>.

By the break I was all for skipping the country, but she grabbed my arm saying casually, 'Know any good drivers?'

'Maybe,' I said, rising to leave.

'I'll pay,' she looked around warily. 'Good money.' Her voice lowered for the first time, as if making an unseemly proposal.

'Naturally. After all, I hardly know you.'

'What I need - is a man with a van. But not just any man. I want... well...' She flashed her false eyelashes and pouted her fat crimson lips, 'someone sensitive.' With great effort I suppressed a guffaw - then suggested we head to the bar for more details. Women in distress, I will admit, have always been a weakness of mine - even strange creatures like this.

It turned out she was a 'conceptual' artist with an upcoming exhibition at the Baltic - a converted flour mill on the south bank of the Tyne, barely a stone's throw from the Sage. According to their website it is, 'the biggest gallery of its kind in the world - presenting a dynamic, diverse and international programme of contemporary visual art.' What that means in practice is often 'challenging' to put it kindly, or 'fookin shite' in the words of many locals. Of course, provincial Geordie plebs can't be expected to appreciate the likes of Yoko Ono <sup>(3)</sup>, Damien Hirst <sup>(4)</sup>, and Malcolm McLaren <sup>(5)</sup> - just a few of the more well known and comprehensible ones - which is presumably why no entrance charge is made (would anyone ever go there if there was?) and has to survive on massive public subsidies alone.

But I shouldn't be so sniffy - maybe, dear reader, you can see through the mounds of found objects, pornographic detritus, aimless videos, provocative slogans and childlike daubings, to insights into the visual world that I have missed. All I say is, it's a pity the management of the Baltic weren't so narrow-minded and elitist, unlike its wonderfully inclusive neighbour, The Sage. It's not that I don't like art, just their one dimensional 'contemporary' view of it and unwillingness to accept any other. Sorry - sermon over.

Daisy's real name, she told me, was Jane R. Though she stared expectantly at me, I refused to rise to the bait and ask what the 'R' stood for. Since 'exhibitionist' rather than 'artist' should have more correctly been her job description, I guessed it was something ridiculous like Risotto, Rumblebum or Refrigerator, though nothing as obvious as Rubbish. It actually turned out to be just R, an excuse for her to bang on about the need to 'reduce, reuse and recycle'. Again, not things I'm against, per se, but just don't like being harangued and preached at. I also discovered that her exhibition was not actually in the gallery but on the Square outside, as part of an Eco Fair to be held the following weekend. Most of her pieces, she said, re-cycled 'objet trouvé' such as old arm chairs, dust bins, wardrobes, traffic cones and sinks, were planted with artificial grass and flowers. 'But,' she insisted, 'the flowers aren't ordinary plastic roses but giant fantasy papier-mâché ones.'

'Don't tell me,' I interrupted, 'instead of seeds they broadcast green anthems?'

'Sort of, but better - the sounds of plants growing, singing you might say - amplified a thousand times. It's amazing!'

'Really?' I yawned.

The reason she gave for needing a 'man with a van' was that she'd lost her licence, her girlfriend who usually chauffeured wasn't available, and all remaining artwork was down in London. Being essentially a one-man, 'oops, woman', band and with most of the subsidy spent, she needed all the help she could muster - hence the promotional drive touting leaflets around town.

'Right,' I said. 'But I'll need a couple of days with the van for my own use before returning. Oh - and there's Arthur...' But I thought better of it and, after agreeing a price and time went back into the pub as Jane disappeared into the night. The following day, having secured the wheels for Monday, I rang the old man himself - with the usual difficulty. Eventually I got hold of Kate and told her the arrangements. She sounded thankful, getting rid of Arthur for a while I guessed, and again promised to make sure he would make the appointment - at her place - with his gear ready. What was wrong with staff at the Malmaison I wondered - but didn't ask.

A couple of days later, after collecting the van plus a dozy Arthur in crumpled white suit and dark shades along with his pathetically dishevelled pile of boxes and bags, I went over to the address given by Daisy. The only person I could see, however, standing outside a row of humble terraced houses was a scruffy young man in jeans and black leather jacket. I drove up and down a couple of times until the guy started waving, so I pulled up. 'Hi,' he said. 'Looking for Jane?'

'You know her?'

'I am her,' he cried, whipping out a frizzy wig from his bag and plonking it on his head, beaming.

'Right,' I said, ordering him into the cab. Wondering what on earth I'd let myself in for but, determined not to be thrown by either jokers, I sat for a while in silence and then turned to them both. 'Before we go any further let's get one or two things straight. First - you, Jane or whatever...'

'Jim,' said Jane. 'Jim Wilstone. I can explain.'

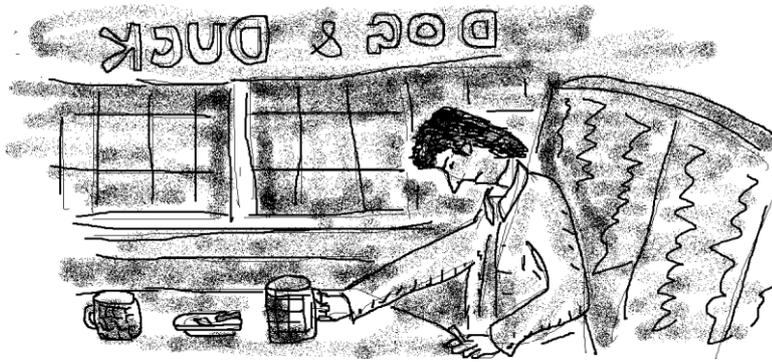
'You'd better. But for now, the hire charge - in cash.' I flashed the documents and he coughed up the lot in fifties without a murmur.

'You see...' he began.

'Never mind, Mr Millstone,' I said, pointedly. 'Later.' I looked at Arthur and found it hard to continue with the school-masterly tone, he seemed so down. 'If I didn't know better I'd say someone had been evicted?'

'Yeah, well. I guess it's time to move on. Can we just leave it at that?'

I revved the engine and pulled away from the kerb. Though I was interested in hearing both men's stories, right now I needed to concentrate on getting through the Newcastle rush hour and onto the bypass. Anyway, it was also a little early in the day for donning my agony aunt guise, and not one I wore with ease at the best of times. Though I'm told women need to let their concerns out as soon as possible, usually with other women - express their innermost feelings and all that guff - men usually need a little time and space to sit on their problems (embarrassingly, I'll admit to having scanned 'Men Are From Mars', etc) and this seemed like one of those occasions. The guys would spill the beans, as and when they felt like it, and when I was prepared to listen. Anyway, I knew what it was like to feel lost, mixed up about ones identity and on the run. Who was I to be critical?



Daydreaming as I drove, contemplating the many changes in my life, I recalled the time after Stan croaked (read the lyrics) when I didn't feel like hanging around Kingston any longer but hadn't a clue where else to go. Given half a chance I'd have been on the road again - trouble was, since my ambitions involved international travel and I was pretty much skint - so what to do? Worst of all, I was also bored. Dead-end jobs may involve few responsibilities and plenty of chances for skiving off, but they're usually mind-numbingly dull - and stacking shelves (albeit very large ones) was all that, even given the chance to drive a fork-lift one fine day if I kept my nose clean. Then a dumpy angel came to my rescue one night in the Dog. It was Phil who, knowing I had some experience with recording equipment, asked if I'd be up for working at a film studio. Would I? Even the location - Slough - didn't put me off.

## FOOTNOTES - Chapter 12

(1) According to Ewan David (1966), in 'American Popular Songs' (Random House), the song 'Daisy Bell' was composed by Harry Dacre in 1892. He writes: 'When Dacre, an English popular composer, first came to the United States, he brought with him a bicycle, for which he was charged duty. His friend, the songwriter William Jerome, remarked lightly: "It's lucky you didn't bring a bicycle made for two otherwise you'd have had to pay double duty." Dacre was so taken with the phrase 'bicycle made for two' that he decided to use it in a song. That song, 'Daisy Bell', first became successful at a London music hall, in a performance by Katie Lawrence. Tony Pastor was the first one to sing it in the United States. Its success in America began when Jennie Lindsay brought down the house with it at the Atlantic Gardens on the Bowery in 1892. It is said the song was inspired by Daisy Greville, Countess of Warwick, a British socialite and mistress of King Edward VII. As an aside, there have been many cases of overheard phrases being used in songs, a tradition which continues up to the present day. The song and album by Show Of Hands, 'Arrogance Ignorance and Greed', for example, was used to great effect by Steve Knightley from a remark made about AIG, the big American insurance company, following disclosure of massive executive bonuses despite near bankruptcy and widespread customer losses.

(2) Dan Walsh:

'The new kid on the block - move over Mr Lakeman.' Maverick Magazine.

'The best banjo player I've seen in Britain.' Don Wayne Reno, Hayseed Dixie.

'Incredibly gifted. If anyone has the chance to see him they must.' Janice Long, BBC Radio 2

From the artist's website: 'Touted as the finest banjo player in the UK, Dan Walsh is an eclectic and exciting musician with a unique style taking in folk, funk, bluegrass, jazz, rock and even Arabic. Also a singer and guitarist, he has performed throughout the UK at festivals, theatres and folk clubs including the South Bank Centre, The Sage Gateshead, etc. As well as his explosive solo performances and work with harmonica player Will Pound, Dan also performs bluegrass with Mothers Ruin, singer Kathryn Davidson, fiddler/singer Christi Andropolis and trios Land Or Sea and 100 Man Orchestra.'

(3) Yoko Ono, given as one of the pioneers of conceptual art by the Baltic, in her December 2008 exhibition ('Between the Sky and My Head') showed works from the 1950s to the present day. These included light installations spelling out the words 'I Love You' around the city, a film shot with a high speed camera showing a smile of John Lennon's lasting 51 minutes, a coffin shaped car which visitors may take a ride in, large peace banners hung on the galleries exterior walls and wish trees where people may write their hopes for the world on paper tags. Though I'm sure the multi-millionaire artist means well (and any connection with the former Beatle is of course incidental with regards her career), the 'concepts' displayed are still immature, unoriginal, patronising and pointless.

(4) Damien Hirst's March 2010 exhibition ('Pharmacy' 1992) at the Baltic is described on their website as, 'an apparently functioning pharmacy complete with counter and floor to ceiling cabinets. The visitor enters the space from behind the counter, discovering the pharmacy as if stumbling in from a storage room. An uneasy, clinical and authoritative atmosphere is created, heightened by the absence of the pharmacist.' Not unlike Boots on a Sunday afternoon, in other words, but without artistic pretensions or the crippling price tag.

(5) Malcolm McLaren's October 2009 exhibition ('Shallow') is '...a series of original musical paintings or cut-ups composed by Malcolm McLaren from appropriated clips lifted from film which depict people just before sex. The footage is spliced, repeated and slowed down, resulting in a hypnotic, layered and provocative work. This collection of musical paintings - portraits of people preparing, thinking, desiring, wanting, wishing, anticipating to have sex; have been excavated from the ruins of pop culture: amateur sex films and pop music.'

Since McLaren seems proud of the fact that he not only screwed the bands he managed but also the public ('The Great Rock And Roll Swindle') it's hard now to take him seriously, especially given the title of the show. As with the others, it's very doubtful if the artists actually did anything personally other than conceive the ideas and collect the fees. Is that all art is now – mismatched found objects and images, arranged by a third party, primarily intended to shock? Not for me I'm afraid – nor most of Newcastle/Gateshead it seems. All these Baltic gems are from their website: <http://www.balticmill.com/press>