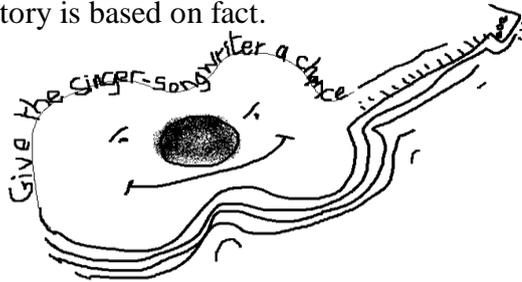




THE SINGER SONGWRITER'S SONG (extract)

*he goes out with his old guitar to play upon the street
and if he's not arrested collapses in a heap
but the people all look the other way - ignoring him as they pass
some yobbo nicks his begging bowl and kicks him up the arse
oh the world is all against him and it cuts him to the bone
he only manages to survive coz most of the time he's stoned
so give the singer-songwriter a bloody chance*

My name is Alwyn Stevens and I'm a singer-songwriter. Although no great fan of the confessional mode, I was finally pushed into it following a recent upsetting encounter - a ghost from the past you might say - and felt it necessary to put the record straight. For the sake of protecting the privacy of friends and family, names and other identifiable details have been changed; some characters have also been merged to improve narrative flow but, other than that, most of this story is based on fact.



It was treatment day, early morning, a year or so back. Though I usually drive everywhere these days, on this occasion, following clinical advice, I'd walked to the Metro, stood shivering in the cold and boarded a train along with hundreds of morose looking commuters. The carriage was packed but, noticing one seat inexplicably vacant, I edged towards it. Then I saw why it was free; a young man had his long legs stuck out making a bony gatepost. He also had his head in a paper – either too absorbed with the latest tabloid scandals to notice or simply not caring if others could get past or not. At first I thought, leave it, there's only a few stops to go; then changed my mind, addressing him close and personal with a curt, 'Excuse me!'

At first the guy just peered up, cold and menacing as a reptile, then reluctantly shifted enough to let me squeeze through. During the rest of the journey I occasionally glanced across, hoping to catch his eye with a disapproving glare, as if to say, 'Selfish bastard!' When he did eventually look over I noticed, for the first time, a port wine stain birthmark, about the size of an apple, on his right cheek. All of a sudden, this seemed to change everything - gave his surly attitude a possible motive – and me something else to worry about.

- Was he angry at the world, the Universe, God, me even; for having made him different?
- Did he resent others for their unblemished symmetry?
- Or was this an ill omen?
- But of what? And why?
- Perhaps I should return home, even though my hospital appointment had been arranged for months and came with a welcome day off work?
- But, why so bothered about such a triviality anyway?
- Was it really nothing to do with him and more a reflection of my own anxiety over what might soon happen at the clinic?
- The pain, the loss of control, unknown consequences and so on?

Soon, the red-faced man had gone, leaving me slightly bewildered. But I didn't have long to ponder because at the next stop I was off too, wrapping my scarf up tight against the North East wind and walking briskly past Newcastle University to the RVI hospital for an appointment with Nurse Josie.

An hour or so later, and with nothing more than a little residual pain despite all previous concerns, I wandered back to the Haymarket. It was about then I became aware of the opening bars of a half-remembered ballad. I tried ignoring it at first, as one does with annoying tunes, mentally fighting the sound like a bad smell. But such is the lot of the singer-songwriter; to be cursed, or blessed, depending on your point of view, with stray words, melodies, riffs, titles, etc, popping into your head for no apparent reason.⁽¹⁾ Occasionally one of these pop-ups may seem memorable; though twenty-to-one it won't be, especially if there's no pen or paper handy.

*let me tell you about Jacob Arkwright
they said he was a terrible man
but though he was really big and ugly
that giant was really gentle as a lamb*

'Geronimo!' An angry voice broke through my reverie. Then again, from somewhere out of the crowd, 'Hey! Geronimo!'

There was no reason to suspect this disembodied voice might be aimed at me, until the third time – becoming more high pitched and fervent 'Geronimo! You bastard! You lousy fucking traitor!'

I looked around the station entrance, then quickened pace and headed on towards Northumberland Street, seeing nothing unremarkable; just the usual crowd of assorted shoppers, students and commuters drifting in their own worlds along the broad pedestrianised thoroughfare.

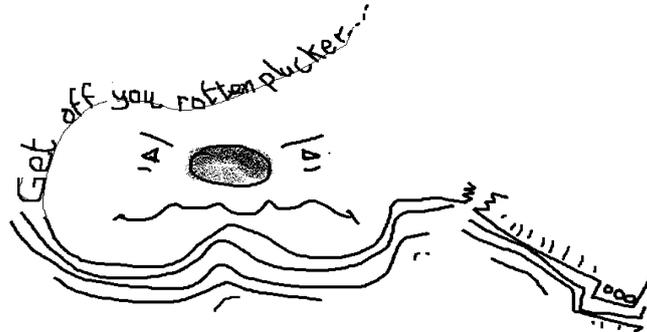
Whoever the voice had come from I seemed to have left him behind, so carried on walking and was soon lost in thought again. Some days I took pleasure in studying these myriad faces, my fellow naked apes, like some kind of Desmond Morris style social psychologist. I can't pretend this was part of a composer's search for likely subjects to write about, just simple nosiness, but it did get me thinking.

So many strangers begging so many questions, most of which I'd never be able to answer. But I bet they all had stories, even if few singers bothered immortalising them in song. And when they did try, were the compositions any good – or just meaningless doggerel relying heavily on catch phrases, sexual fantasy and fashion? But if the songs had a good hook? A catchy one might have millions singing along yet be total crap from a critical point of view. But what would you rather have; a superficial hit or an acclaimed flop? Take the money and run or be left behind like some X Factor reject? The artist's eternal dilemma.

A few singer-songwriters had tried speaking for 'everyman', but how many got it right? Jarvis Cocker sang, 'I want to live like the common people.'⁽²⁾ They weren't his words, supposedly, but those of a shallow art student who's 'Dad was loaded'. The girl could never understand the lives of ordinary people; that was Jarvis's message. But maybe, since the author was in fact a celebrated recording artist, he couldn't get back to his roots either and that's what actually bugged him – nostalgia for the bleak but authentic streets of Sheffield? Always look for the underlying message, I told myself – accept nothing on face value.

This train of thought was short lived however, as I was more concerned with the 'bastard traitor' man - and it was a man, that's one thing I was sure of, and kind of antiquated too. But then... it couldn't be, could it - my old mate, mentor and adversary, Arthur

Grimsby? That was impossible. Although these angry words were the last I'd heard him utter in the flesh - spat out along with a colourful stream of other drunken expletives - but he was long gone, even if his ghost cast a long shadow. Indeed, how could I forget the day back in 1978, standing exposed and alone on the stage of the Marquee Club ⁽³⁾ in London's Soho with nothing but some daft lyrics and a plastic plectrum to ward off an approaching tide of swaying rock fans?



At first the crowd just looked ugly, a sullen mumbling mass of mutinous pirates on a beer drenched deck. But almost as soon as the heckling began, as the first abuse, flying phlegm, then tins, bottles and glasses (no safe plastic then) came my way, more ominous attacks followed till I seriously began to fear for my memory (forgetting lyrics under stress always having been a worry, even before grey hairs started to emerge). I'd seen The Who and others wreck their instruments, had even totalled a few myself after the pubs shut, now it seemed the crowd was about to take matters into their own hands - but would they bother to spare my sensitive folkie skin? As it turned out, I had only been a catalyst. It was one another they really wanted to annihilate - a civil war between old and new music, prog versus punk - not unlike the conflict I once got entangled with along Brighton prom, 1964, when gangs of Mods and Rockers ⁽⁴⁾ went on the rampage.

Arthur never admitted instigating the Marquee riot - not to me anyway. But he was out of his tree so probably wouldn't have remembered what week it was never mind screaming revolt and revolution - not unlike like his namesake, Scargill, but hyped up on speed and gallons of alcohol. Unfortunately I was not on anything, just a pint or three for steadying the nerves, so I do have a clear memory of him clambering on stage, rolling around and railing about how I'd let him down. Didn't our friendship mean anything? How could I live with myself? What was I doing in this shithole anyway, competing in a talentless contest of all things, when I could have been headlining the Palladium by now - had I taken his advice? Then, like a flipped out parent lecturing an ungrateful child, 'After all I've done for you... you... fucking traitor!'

The last epithet he repeated many times before lunging at me, intent on strangulation or whatever other damage he could do. I ducked and dived to avoid his advances but soon retaliated with kicks and punches, hampered only by my guitar slinging pose and innate need to appear cool - mindful of the weasely Melody Maker judges ensconced somewhere out there in the gloom.

The mob (it was about this time they ceased to be a mere audience) who had previously called for nothing more than death to all lone minstrels, was now confused and divided. Was this all part of the act or what? A bit of cabaret before the main action began?

'Get off!'

'Kick his balls in!'

'Let the man sing!'

'Naaah! Fuck 'im!'

They knew the sooner this charade was over the sooner their own heroes could strap on their axes and start beating the shit out of the sound system, but now Arthur and I were holding up proceedings.

I managed to duck his advances two or three more times as he came at me like a cross between Keith Moon and an enraged bull but, just as I was beginning to think I'd have to use a serious weapon – the mic stand, for instance, or even my precious jumbo - Arthur got hit in the chops by a bottle and started railing at the crowd instead. One half, the prog rock fans, saw only Arthur's wavy bum-length locks and took him to be their champion; whereas the other half, the younger, crop haired crew, took my modest barnet as a sign of allegiance to them. Poor rock-infested fools.

Some started to climb on stage and take matters into their own hands, whilst the bouncers grabbed at them trying to defend the spot-lit holy ground without much success. As frustration mounted all round, the opposing factions turned their wrath on one another, whether by design or default it was impossible to say. Before long, 'battle of the bands' (including camp followers) was more than an empty figure of speech as short-and-spiky fought long-and-greasy for supremacy.

I've no idea whether any clear winner emerged as I scrambled back out onto Wardour Street, having sustained little more than superficial bruising and the odd broken string. And, since Arthur and I hadn't spoken about this or any other matter from that day to this, we never got round to comparing notes.

- Why, I often wondered, had he been so offended?
- Was it just my satirical little song alone – unfair, untrue and defamatory though it certainly was – or could it have been something else?
- But why did he even assume I'd aimed it at him?
- Maybe he picked up on some innate resentment of mine – haunting my soul over the years and longing for revenge?
- Or was he just pissed?

I had no answers but, in the aftermath of the incident, both of us were soon blasted off into quite unexpected directions that would leave little time for discussion on the finer points of audience participation or our fractured relationship. What's more, each of us were angry and perplexed; I because my little joke had backfired and Arthur, because against all his best intentions, was soon to become rich - stinking rich in fact - and an international media darling to boot.

Oh, and by the way, I didn't win.

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 1

(1) Keith Richards says, 'You might be having a swim or screwing the old lady, but somewhere in the back of your mind, you're thinking about this chord sequence or something related to a song. No matter what the hell's going on. You might be getting shot at, and you'll still be "Oh! That's the bridge!" And there's nothing you can do; you don't realise it's happening. It's totally subconscious, unconscious, or whatever. The radar is on whether you knew it or not. You cannot switch it off. You hear this piece of conversation from across the room, "I just can't stand you anymore"... That's a song. It just flows in. And also the other thing about being a songwriter, when you realise you are one, is that to provide ammo, you start to become an observer, you start to distance yourself. You're constantly on the alert. That faculty gets trained in you over the years, observing people, how they react to one another. Which, in a way, makes you weirdly distant. You shouldn't really be doing it. It's a little of Peeping Tom to be a songwriter. You start looking round, and everything's a subject for a song. The banal phrase, which is the one that makes it. And you say, I can't believe

nobody hooked up on that one before! Luckily there are more phrases than songwriters – just about.’ From ‘Life’, published by Orion Books, 2010.

(2) ‘Common People’ recorded by Pulp – released in 1995 on the Polygram label. The writers were Nick Banks, Jarvis Cocker, Candida Doyle, Steve Mackey and Russell Senior.

(3) The Marquee Club first opened in April 1958 at 168 Oxford Street, London. Over the following years it became a very important venue for jazz and rhythm and blues where legends such as Sonny Boy Williamson, Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated, and the Cyril Davis band played regularly. During the Sixties new blues bands played there including the Rolling Stones, John Mayall, the Yardbirds and the Animals. In March 1964 the club moved to 90 Wardour Street. Virtually every British based band or musician of note played there at some point over the next thirty years including Jimi Hendrix, David Bowie, Cream, Pink Floyd, Manfred Mann, the Who, The Nice, Yes, Led Zeppelin, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, Genesis, Moody Blues, etc. As time moved on others who played there included the Clash, Ultravox, the Pretenders, the Police, the Cure, Joy Division, the Damned, Generation X, Siouxsie and the Banshees and the Sex Pistols, etc. Due to the constant vibration of thousands of watts at the club during more than 30 years, in 1987 a commission determined that the façade of the building had slightly slipped towards the pavement and demolition was necessary. The legendary Marquee Club closed its doors on 18th July, 1988.

Kaldo Barroso – www.themarqueeclub.net

(4) Mods and Rockers riots, Brighton, 1964. ‘From the early to mid 1960s young, mainly working class, Britons with cash to spend joined one of two youth movements. The Mods wore designer suits protected by Parka jackets and were often armed with coshes and flick knives. They rode Vespa or Lambretta scooters bedecked with mirrors and mascots and listened to Ska music and The Who. Rockers rode motorbikes – often at 100mph with no crash helmets – wore leathers and listened to the likes of Elvis and Gene Vincent. Inevitably the two gangs clashed. The 1964 Whitsun weekend violence in Brighton was famously dramatised in the film Quadrophenia (1979). In August that year police had to be flown into the Sussex resort of Hastings to break up fights between the two gangs.’

From : BBC Radio 4 – ‘On This Day’