



## HARD TRAVELLING MAN

*Woody Guthrie was a hard travelling man  
riding the rails with a guitar in his hand  
saying this machine kills fascists just as sure as any gun  
but his songs of liberation sure never harmed anyone  
ooh - can't you hear that lonesome whistle blow?  
ooh - still got a long long way to go*

The Railway Tavern was packed with punters shouting to be heard above a throbbing juke box, the roar of football fans from a giant screen (ignored by all but a lonely drunk), the pinging of fruit machines, a clackety-clack of snooker balls and the intermittent chink of glasses. I'd parked in the street, just behind a grandly immaculate pearl Bentley, hefted my old guitar case out of the boot and entered the pub somewhat warily. It was years since I'd done anything like this and felt a little apprehensive pushing aside the heavy stained-glass doors. The contrast with the cold empty street could not have been starker; the atmosphere like a steamy bathhouse with most patrons dressed for the Med and me, self-consciously wrapped up in winter coat and woollies, suddenly feeling very out of place.

It took a while to find Arthur, not because he was late, as expected, nor because the place was jammed, but his remarkably altered appearance. Hunched in a corner besides a poker-faced guy in what appeared to be a chauffeur's uniform, Arthur was barely recognisable as the same trampish individual I'd been with just a few hours earlier. Now he wore a cream linen suit, jazzy Hawaiian shirt, checked tweed cap and shiny polished brogue shoes. As I got closer he looked up, clean shaven and neatly coiffured, only his ghostly complexion and sunken eyes giving the game away - though these were not apparent till he whipped off a snazzy pair of shades and rose to shake hands. Seeing my flummoxed expression he grinned, displaying a miraculously restored set of choppers.

'Don't worry my boy, all will be revealed,' he yelled above the din.

'Yeah well, you said that before. I'm still waiting.'

'Plenty of time, plenty of time eh.' He then asked me what I fancied, handed his grim companion fifty quid from a thick roll of notes and, when we were alone, leant close and said, 'Actually, I don't. It's the one thing I have very little of, according to the medics. But what do they know? Should've croaked years ago,' he chuckled.

Surveying the raucous scene around us, I asked, 'Is this it?'

'Why not?' he replied. 'Problem?'

'Hum, well...' It was difficult to hear myself speak, never mind anyone else, but maybe I just wasn't used to the constant assault and battering on my eardrums as so many obviously were these days.

'Not your cup of tea, eh?'

'Not quite,' I admitted and, given the shrunken look of him amidst this young and boozy crowd, doubted if it was his anymore either. I pulled my guitar case closer, as if checking it hadn't been tampered with already, and peered around for signs of a stage or PA system. In answer to my unspoken question Arthur smiled reassuringly. 'Don't worry; the gig's upstairs.'

'Sure,' I said, gawping like a child in wonder at his gleaming new teeth. For some reason, of all the outward signs of transformation, it was these more than anything which bothered me most.

Seeing my bewilderment he patted me on the arm comfortingly, 'It's nothing - just a little stage trickery. American dentistry - best in the world.'

‘And all this cash? The flash clobber? The driver chappie? And, well... everything?’ But Arthur would not be drawn. As always, he remained charmingly enigmatic.

When the drinks came we all trooped off through a side exit and up to a large function room which was, compared with the bar downstairs, a haven of tranquillity. Pausing at the door, as the hand written sign requested, we stood reverently while a middle-aged folk trio harmonised. I caught the gist of it; the adventures of a bold highwayman who was eventually betrayed by his girlfriend, arrested and hung upon the gallows tree. It was an ancient, universal tale (Robin Hood, Dick Turpin, Ned Kelly, Jesse James, John Dillinger, etc <sup>(1)</sup>), retold in various guises and always popular, especially if the anti-hero can be given some redeeming features. You know the sort of thing; the outlaw adores his dear old mum (blowing the legs off anyone stupid enough to diss her), strokes the occasional dumb animal (whilst ordering mass mutilation of opponents), and gives generously to poor folk (after forcing them to conspire with his gang of thugs). The Sopranos, for example, almost makes the viewer root for ever more ghastly gang murders and only later, perhaps, do we begin to have qualms at the displays of psychotic cruelty dished up with cartoon abandon. Many folk ballads contain the same carefree levels of brutality, albeit cloaked in genteel harmonies.

This musical trio, armed with no more than a Spanish guitar and penny whistle, were hardly young desperadoes but came across more like retired geography teachers - an assessment not far off the mark as it later transpired. Their self-deprecating good humour, however, made censure of the odd memory lapse or wobbly note seem miserly.

Their chief subject matter; mistreated rural workers, union solidarity, robbery with violence, doomed love, betrayal and premature death, and similar cheery topics were mainstays of the folk vernacular which, though frequently delivered in undemonstrative manner, could be strangely moving at times. I say ‘at times’ because, as I was to rediscover in the months to follow, the emotion tended to get lost when performers preceded with a rambling explanation of the song’s origins <sup>(2)</sup>, or sang in a monotonous drawl during which they muddled lyrics, pitch or instrumentation, and often finally dried up entirely <sup>(3)</sup>.

But none of this mattered as the audience, mostly fellow performers, were equally supportive irrespective of quality or entertainment value. Incidentally, the idea of ‘entertainment’ seemed alien (that often being reserved for the jokes and stories told between numbers) but rather the shared experience, somewhat akin to a jolly but select religious rite. Not that folk clubs are picky about who joins them, quite the opposite. Almost as soon as we entered the room a welcoming lady at a small table took our pound coins and asked if we wanted to play - I suppose the guitar case gave it away, but I still stopped in surprise and thought, ‘Why ask me?’

‘Errr, maybe,’ I said, warily. Not having stood up in such a venue for many years I was expecting things to have improved somewhat; that now there’d be audacious young musicians racing hell for leather through challenging avant-garde material which would leave me gasping in awe and reeling with envy. That all the various genres, from world music, jazz fusion, electronic, hip-hop, nu-metal, country-rock and so on, which have appeared over the past thirty odd years would have revolutionised live music in clubs like this - but no. The participants and spectators alike seemed to have atrophied in their seats over time; ravaged by endless ale sodden too-ra-loo-ra-lays in smoke filled rooms; worn down by long campaigns in arctic fields at remote festivals; or simply befuddled from trawling library shelves and websites in search of ever more obscure renditions of ‘John Barleycorn’ or ‘Wild Mountain Thyme’ <sup>(4)</sup> - an endless task which had at least one compensation; all roads, however convoluted, led back to the pub.

And there was a kind of dignified resilience here - like old soldiers refusing to put away their medals and stop marching. Other more flashy forms of entertainment had come and gone, often leaving little but outdated technology and embarrassing photographs, but the

folk movement trundled on regardless - endlessly adaptable and nurturing, yet also wilfully conservative. As Jiva, a hard working duo from Northumberland sing:

*you don't hear me on the radio - you don't see me on TV  
you don't read me in the papers or the glossy magazines  
but I built me my own website and I burn my own CDs  
that's why I'm singing in the folk clubs for free  
I never played America - never made the grade  
never played the Albert Hal - never did get paid  
couldn't fill the local bar or even get laid  
that's why I'm singing in the folk clubs down your way  
singing in the folk clubs, there's no-one there to hear  
singing in the folk clubs, I just do it for the beer  
singing in the folk clubs, I don't know where I am  
singing in the folk clubs and I don't give a damn <sup>(5)</sup>*

Now, so it seemed, the once ruddy faced enthusiasts were beaten, though perhaps not quite bowed - still up for another round of 'The Wild Rover', but only just. The more forward looking types, call them the awkward squad if you like, including many singer-songwriters, went their own misguided way down electric avenue and deserted the fold decades ago. To be fair, this assumption was not entirely correct. Some clubs, I came to find, have quite an open song policy together with a good PA system and also welcome cover versions from a wide range of styles and eras - though Sixties and Seventies ballads prevail. Old material is still the mainstay of most British folk clubs, though it's surprising how many 'traditional' songs have been written in recent times. Strangely enough, few people seem bothered by this so long as they have an authentic ring and are preferably sung unaccompanied or with an appropriately rustic sounding instrument tuned to a modal scale.

Mind you, I wasn't averse to plundering ancient stories myself. Turning to Arthur, I whispered, 'That highwayman song - you know it?' He nodded and I went on. 'When I was living near Banbury, a few years ago, I wrote a musical about the Culworth Gang - a bunch of Eighteenth Century robbers. It got staged at the Royal Theatre in Northampton.' I grinned stupidly at him, as if to say, 'So there!' in answer to his apparent lack of appreciation of my talents at Stottie Kate's. I knew I had nothing to prove but still felt the need to impress him for some reason.

The story went that just over two centuries ago, in and around the borders of Northamptonshire, a gang of twenty or so men were attacking stage coaches and other travellers, plundering houses and putting their many victims into such a state of terror that they refused to give information for fear of reprisals. Lack of willing witnesses might also have been due to the fact that most of the gang were poor agricultural labourers around the village of Culworth and many locals felt some sympathy for them due to the ravages caused by land enclosures and other social injustices. Indeed, a good few were probably friends or relatives of the robbers. Eventually the gang was apprehended when the landlord of an inn at Towcester became suspicious after two men were discovered to have masks and smocks in a bag they said contained fighting cocks. Later a nearby house was burgled by men wearing the same disguises. A constable arrested these gentlemen and from there others were also apprehended. On August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1787, four gang members were publicly hung on Northamptonshire Racecourse; others were imprisoned or transported to Australia.

I had become interested in these events when delving into old records for a history project during the time I worked at Culworth village school in the Nineties. At the same time Northampton Royal Theatre were encouraging schools to showcase productions at a drama

festival and so, after further research and discussions with staff, I managed to come up with a script informed by the tale. I also discovered that Fairport Convention, based at nearby Banbury and holding annual festivals nearby, had recorded a number inspired by these same events. Unfortunately their excellent rendition, 'Too Close to the Wind' <sup>(5)</sup>, was too difficult for our kids to sing so I composed some more appropriate numbers.

After the highwayman song there were various other delights including a fiddler who played a selection of Austrian folk tunes, a brave Northumbrian piper determined to reach the end of his piece whatever the odds, a venerable Geordie intoning a rambling but moving ballad in incomprehensible dialect, an accordionist of similar vintage bravely battling through a sea shanty, a nifty bluegrass banjo player and, lastly, our charming MC who sang about the tragic demise of a lover praying for her grave to be dug deep with a silver spade (to accommodate both lovers despite never consummating their relationship and dying apart). But illogicality never held back traditional folksong composers, many of whom first came to prominence after the invention of the printing press during the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the so called Broadside Ballads <sup>(7)</sup> and, as with the modern press, knew that colourful exaggeration never harmed sales. Many other songs were passed down the generations orally, changing and being honed as they went, but the principle still applied; never let the truth spoil a good story.

Sitting there in the flickering candle light, somewhat mesmerised by the surreal nature of the situation and not a little nervous about my own forthcoming role in this musical parlour game, I noticed my companions joining in the choruses with gusto in between regular swigs of Newcastle Brown Ale.

- What was I doing here, I wondered?
- And, more to the point, what were Arthur and his companion?
- Was his smart gear just another disguise?
- Or was the busker his true self?
- If, as now seemed possible, he was really rolling in it, how and when had he come into the money?
- Was he, perhaps, a kind of secret millionaire returned to old haunts with bequests to assuage his guilt?
- And was I maybe, due some kind of cash payment?
- An ignoble thought perhaps, as I viewed the crumpled old codger who, despite the designer gear, was looking decidedly not long for this world.
- But there you go. We all have to live, and I needed a pension.

My teaching days were nearing an end and it was a relief. I was weary of the relentless timetables, testing regimes and training sessions; the excessive and often pointless paperwork, boring meetings, endless new government initiatives; not to mention the continuing hassles at the chalk face itself, trying to educate hordes of lively pupils who'd rather be anywhere else but sitting in front of you all day. Funnily enough, it was the informal times with kids I valued most, those priceless off-the-cuff moments when it was just banter between you and them and everyone forgot where and who they were.

Some of the more memorable lessons too were not planned (and would most likely have been panned by Ofsted Inspectors). I recall a hot summer's afternoon once with a class of eight year olds, none of us able to face another formal English lesson. A girl told me about her cat which was sick so I grabbed an old poetry book and found some light hearted poems on the subject and read them aloud. Soon everyone was telling tales about their pets, laughing at their antics and funny ways. We got out all the art stuff we could find; pencils, crayons, chalks, paints, clay, etc, and I said they could do what they liked so long as it was vaguely feline in nature. When they'd finished, I suggested, they could write a poem or story. One shy

little boy, a bit of a skinny runt to be honest, who was poor at everything and had very low self esteem, drew a bold impressionistic portrait of his own cat in colourful pastels. Everyone loved it (I later sent it off for a competition and it won first prize) and the kid hardly stopped smiling for a week. It also had the effect of getting him to talk animatedly about his pet and, with help, write a good deal too. That was one of the best afternoons I ever had in a school, but such moments were rare.

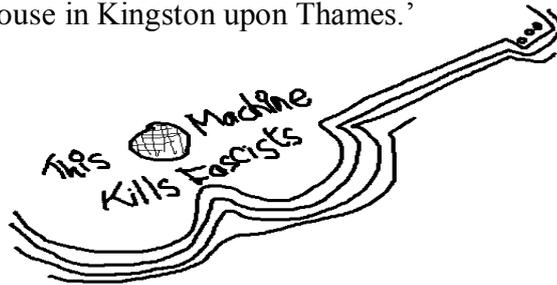
At the end of the day, for both staff and pupils, education is a job, and a hard one at that. You're not paid to think but simply follow a national curriculum according to Government rules (invariably called guidelines) and woe betide you if attainment levels fail to meet targets. Stress levels, consequently, are extremely high. The hours may not seem long compared to many occupations but, believe me, five minutes can seem like hours with some classes and the pressure seldom goes away even with well motivated groups.

Unfortunately for me, chances of a decent pension were slim as I'd not always done what the boss man said but come into the profession late after many years of bumming around, then dropped out halfway through to pursue other crazy dreams. So, if there were some goodies coming my way from this aged prodigal in the off-white suit – why not?

'Hello?' Roz, our host, was smiling at me expectantly.

'Sorry?' It took a second or two to recall where I was, another piper's ethereal bleating having come and gone leaving me a little drowsy.

'Okay, well, er...' I mumbled, opening my guitar case and checking the tuning. 'This is the first song I ever sang in public. It wasn't on a stage though, but sitting on a church wall outside the Kenco coffee house in Kingston upon Thames.'



I launched into 'Nine Hundred Miles', Woody Guthrie's world weary train song which, when I first heard it over forty years ago, could hardly have fully appreciated. Or maybe I did, because within weeks I was putting the hobo lifestyle to the test; heading to Scotland with intentions of exploring my ancestor's land (Mum's family hail from north of the border), assisted by nothing more than a wagging thumb and a hopeful heart. Not that Woody was the only inspiration; British explorers such as Sir Francis Drake, James Cook, David Livingstone and Robert Falcon Scott<sup>(8)</sup> were often glamorised as heroes of the Empire when I was a boy, in comics, films and the media, even at school. But I can't just blame these patriotic sources; I avidly sought out such stories at the local library. For many years I'd been fascinated with Percy Fawcett's doomed expedition to discover a lost city in the Brazilian jungle (he went missing without trace in mysterious circumstances around 1925) and I fantasized about following in his footsteps. My trip up North might seem paltry in comparison, but we all have to start somewhere - as the Chinese proverb says: 'A journey of a thousand miles began with a single step.'<sup>(9)</sup>

I'd always dreamt of freewheeling around the world; jumping ships and trains, working my passage, turning a hand to any task just to keep moving recklessly on. My first attempt to get away was around four years of age, not long after falling out of Fredrik's car (maybe that near-death experience was a sign of things to come - a prod to hit the road running) when I hopped onto my little three wheeler whilst Mum was preoccupied and pedalled like fury down the road out of town. Well, it was just a sleepy little village,

Thorpeness, in Suffolk. I got about half a mile and came up against a railway crossing with the barrier down. I don't know if the old loco was a hundred coaches long, as in Woody's song, but it felt like it. By the time it had clanked slowly past, my mother caught me up, breathless and disbelieving. But I just smiled up happily, proud to have got so far alone.

Years later, aged fifteen and guitar slung over a shoulder, I was finally off for real. My very limited musicianship, only recently acquired after Arthur's brief introduction, was not going to hold the wandering minstrel back - wildly optimistic, I'd assumed I could busk my way around the country, goodies showering down like rain at the flick of a pick. Neither would my new axe be a hindrance (a large unwieldy cello-style instrument), despite being totally unsuitable for hauling around the streets in a canvas bag. It was got, frankly, almost exclusively for its good looks - I called it Black Beauty - also the main reason I'd brought it with me on this trip, to enhance the beatnik image.

Not that I didn't have good intentions. From that early start, copying sounds from LPs or learning lyrics and chords out of books, I began finding all kinds of rootsy songs not usually found in the charts. Also discovering about the mostly American musicians, frequently from poor rural backgrounds, who lived tough peripatetic lives, inspiring so many others who later led the way, and made millions, in popular music. For me, Woody Guthrie was the most outstanding of all, not only for his prolific output of original songs, stories and other writings, but because he didn't just talk the talk. The opening and closing chapters of 'Bound For Glory' <sup>(10)</sup>, his autobiography, are set aboard a freight train, and describe the kind of hard bitten wanderers commonly found haunting the roads and railways during the Great Depression. These weren't superficial mug shots gleaned from hearsay or news reports but characters known and experienced by the author personally.

*I been having some hard travellin I thought you knowed  
I been having some hard travellin way down the road  
I been having some hard travellin hard ramblin hard gamblin  
I been having some hard travellin lord* <sup>(11)</sup>

Though Guthrie certainly did some hard travelling, especially as a teenager following his mother's committal to an asylum (suffering from Huntington's disease, <sup>(12)</sup> a genetic neurological disorder which would also one day afflict him) and his father's failing business fortunes, it was generally of his own choice as he was picked up quite early by Californian radio stations and record companies but still went back on the road. Likewise, his alignment with the workers was largely emotional rather than a dust bowl prerogative, as it was for millions of others. Nevertheless his lively songs of freedom and workers' solidarity had genuine power, and not just for quixotic youngsters like me. 'This Land Is Your Land' has become the unofficial American national anthem, despite its socialist message, because it encapsulates the essence of hope for all people, rich and poor alike - it's also got a damn fine tune if, as with many others, not entirely Guthrie's own <sup>(13)</sup>.

Woody was, of course, a hopeless idealist, but surely that's what most of us want from our poets, writers and musicians, not mean spirited cynics. He sums up his song writing philosophy in blank verse:

*a folk song is what's wrong and how to fix it or it could be  
who's hungry and where their mouth is or  
who's out of work and where the job is or  
who's broke and where the money is or  
who's carrying a gun and where the peace is*

I set out on my own solitary journey of discovery one afternoon in 1960, rucksack on my back, taking a commuter train to Victoria and hence the bustling Coach Station nearby to board a bus for Edinburgh. There was only a tentative significance in that destination; chiefly just wanting to get as far away from my comfort zone in the Home Counties as possible. Nor do I recall any great doubts or fears; for ages I'd wanted to step out into the unknown and with the arrogance, or stupidity, of youth my excited anticipation was only marginally dampened by our slow progress around grubby London suburbs. Although the Clean Air Act of 1956 had made smog a thing of the past, most buildings were still coated in ancient grime and new development was either in progress or blatantly crying out to be done following the war years. Eventually, after a fitfully circuitous route to pick up additional passengers, we launched onto the wonder of the age - the recently opened M1 motorway. Unfortunately this comparatively empty stretch of concrete only lasted sixty odd miles and we were then back onto the single file A1, crawling along with all the other old jalopies.

It was a warm breezy day in May but the rumbling bus soon became a stuffy greenhouse - without air conditioning - and though starting out in high spirits I gradually began to feel drained and a little paranoid. I started fantasizing about other passengers, imagining their life stories and, after some hours, almost began to believe I had known them for ever. As night fell time stretched out endlessly in a nightmarish mix of rushing lights, bodily odours, traffic sounds and snatched conversations, all underscored by the grumbling diesel engine. Occasionally we stopped to pee or stretch legs, but all too soon were back in our stiff-backed seats shifting in vain to find a comfortable position. Sleep was impossible, not even rest, only a semi-conscious jangling doze, just a fart away from hell. Even before alighting at dawn in draughty Caledonia, I'd begun questioning my romantic notions of wanderlust - maybe I'd have to modify those Woody inspired ambitions of 'hard travelling'. All I'd done so far was sit on public transport for a few hours yet I was drained, disillusioned and homesick.

Wandering around the draughty city, from wide boulevards to steep cobbled alleyways, in a bleary-eyed daze I came eventually to Edinburgh castle. I considered acting the holiday-maker and climbed the hill to look around, but it was still only eight-thirty and shut. There was no sign of any other attractions either, just a few drab looking pubs, hotels, and the like, or shops selling tartan decorated souvenirs and other predictable items, and none appeared open anyway. Apart from the castle and one or two grim monuments nothing grabbed my attention amidst the maze of tall forbidding stone buildings which only reinforced feelings of unreality and alienation. But I had not travelled all this way out of historical or cultural interest and sight-seeing wasn't exactly where my up-and-coming hipster self was at. No, I wanted to experience something of the real Scotland, the birth place of my forebears, not a fake tourist facade. Or did I? What was it I was expecting exactly? The truth was, I didn't know - just that this wasn't it.

The weather had turned overcast and a chilly drizzle began to seep through my lightweight anorak. Then I saw something open - a wee newsagent's with a dim light on - and made my way to this welcome haven. My night's stash of snacks was long reduced to crumbs so I replenished them with more crisps, chocolate bars and pop. Outside I sheltered in a doorway and guzzled till I felt marginally more human, then set off in what I guessed was a southerly direction. Foolishly (okay, the whole trip was a fools errand, but that aside) I'd brought no map with me, somehow imagining providence would guide me along some kind of fun-filled yellow brick road.

For some time I avoided asking directions but was eventually forced into it, though the ancient geezer I approached was nigh incomprehensible. Subsequent enquiries were met with similar colloquial gibberish, but eventually a ginger mop-headed youth came up and started getting inquisitive about the contents of my instrument case. I was suspicious at first

as he seemed a little too earnest but when I relented and unzipped the bag he beamed like a five year old. He surprised me even more by pulling out a plectrum and whipping through a faithful version of 'Apache', a big instrumental hit by The Shadows at the time. Though he was perhaps a year or so younger than me, shabbily clothed in threadbare jumper and worn flannel trousers, his guitar playing was way out of my league and almost prompted me to give up there and then. 'Take it,' I nearly said. 'I'm obviously wasting my time and, anyway, it's just become an unnecessary burden.'

Alex, however, was so overjoyed at this unexpected musical opportunity that he overlooked my pathetic response - bashing out the chords to some old skiffle tune - and couldn't have been more helpful. With a combination of gestures and expressions we managed to communicate and discovered similar musical interests. He then walked a couple of miles out of his way for me and wouldn't leave till finding a good hitching spot on the London road. I thanked him sincerely, realising he'd not only set me on the right track but revived my failing spirits. He also prompted a change of heart towards my musical baggage - it didn't matter that as a rooky player I was hauling round little more than a large ornament, the thing had pulling power. Maybe, I fantasised, it might also draw the opposite sex and they, unlike Alex, probably wouldn't know an A sharp from a B flat, nor care.

At first I was reluctant to raise my thumb - though I'd some experience of hitching locally during the long London bus strike of 1958, it had been with mates - now I felt vulnerable and uncertain. I'd learned one thing, which my new friend had taught me; make sure you stand in a prominent place where drivers have plenty of time to see you and then pull over. It might seem an obvious point, but I still see youngsters hanging about hopefully in busy or secluded locations where no vehicle could stop even if inclined. The other basic bit of advice I learned is to look reasonably human and non-threatening - only masochists make a show of pirate hairstyles, psychedelic fashions or flamboyant tattoos and piercings when begging (which, as my old Mum reminded me, it actually is) by the highway. Never try hitching without some sort of luggage, it just arouses suspicions and looks desperate, but do persuade any kind of female to accompany you, for obvious reasons. These, along with other helpful travel hints, I was beginning to discover and would be expanded on in the years to come both here and abroad. It should be remembered, by the way, that back in the Sixties hitch hiking was a widespread and mostly safe form of transport for the young or hard-up rather than, as today, a cause for suspicion. For some reason I don't understand (please enlighten me dear reader) I noticed on a recent trip to New Zealand that it was still quite prevalent there. Are Kiwis more trusting or just low on public transport services?

My new found confidence gradually ebbed away, however, as lifts were mostly short and waiting times long. When the dreary day turned dark and I stood cold and alone facing the intermittent stream of headlights, I was forced into admitting my biggest mistake yet - not sorting out any accommodation. I had only a cheap sleeping bag, cheerfully assuming there'd be an abundance of accommodating females en route or, at least, some derelict sheds or barns. But I found nothing remotely like any of these and, as the night wore on, was becoming desperate. I felt so zonked out from lack of sleep, a decent meal and the disorientating effects of stop-start travelling over the past thirty six hours I was almost ready to collapse into a ditch. Not only that but I'd lost all sense of what I was doing or why I was doing it, never mind where I was going. After an interminable wait during which I'd all but given up hope and walked for miles through windswept moorland, a big twelve wheeler juddered to a halt up ahead. I stumbled along as quickly as possible and reached up to wrench open the passenger door but was greeted by two blank faces.

'Sorry,' I said, after an embarrassing silence when it became obvious they'd not actually stopped for me.

‘Yeah well,’ said the burly driver. ‘We only pulled over for a slash but... hang on a minute.’

I stood by the roadside whilst both men jumped down and emptied their bladders onto the hard shoulder. ‘Alright, young ‘un,’ said the older guy. ‘Hop up.’

The other bloke, not much older than me, was in army uniform and returning to base after leave. Discovering I had nowhere to sleep, he very kindly suggested I accompany him. Though suspicious I was too exhausted to argue and accepted his offer gratefully. We were dropped off a few miles past Scotch Corner, just into North Yorkshire, and tramped along a lane past a big sign for Catterick Barracks. He put a finger to his lips and led me around the camp to a gap in the fence, then we sneaked like a pair of housebreakers in between the huts till we came to his. Before entering he whispered that one of his buddies was not due back till tomorrow so I could use his bunk. But, he warned, I must on all accounts be up and out before six in the morning.

Woken by the dawn light and fear of detection, I slipping out the way I’d come, every second expecting a sentry’s bullet to crack out of the mist and fell me, and was soon back on the old A1 heading south. Though still without any plan of action and hunched up on the verge against the chilly slipstream of trucks rumbling past, my spirits began to lift with the sun as it rose like a ripe peach over the distant North York Moors. Soon I was singing to myself, not caring if I got a lift or not despite being nearly three hundred miles from home. Suddenly I realised I had the world at my feet, literally; anywhere that had a strip of tarmac and some kind of vehicles running on it was potentially a highway I could travel on, and virtually for free. All I needed were a pair of legs to get me from one hitching post to another and a bed roll to crash out on. Even if I never got much better at strumming it would surely be enough to earn my daily bread. How much bread did a man need anyway?

The realisation of how easy it was all going to be was like a genie handing me a winning lottery ticket and saying, ‘This little baby can’t lose.’ What’s more, no sooner had the magic thought popped into my mind than a big two-tone Ford Zodiac glided to a halt and a cheery young man leaned over and waved me in to the plush interior. We sailed along like a cloud whilst he chatted self-importantly about his life as a budding tycoon, or so he would have me believe. He dropped me somewhere around Leeds and I was picked up by a chicken farmer and his teenage daughter who, not far down the road, invited me to join them at a truck stop where we had full English breakfasts and big mugs of sweet tea. The girl, a curly headed beauty about my age, grinned shyly and, when we got back in the cab, squeezed up close making my face turn red. I fell in love that instant, forgetting all about my latest flame back at school.

I won’t recount all the typically tortuous teenage crushes I had back then, suffice to say that the unlikely but wonderfully named Carol Ann Candyman was the current one. She was sweet and sensible, and we went out together for several months, often to the pictures or for endless walks around the streets, and generally all pretty innocent stuff even if one often bragged otherwise to mates. The chief thing I recall Carol and me doing – or should I say, not doing – was talking on the phone for hours. I would ring her up from a call box as we had no telephone at home, standing for what seemed like hours in a freezer, but neither of us could think of anything much to say. For some reason it was only later all those endless hours caused me to flush with embarrassment. Anyway, most ungallantly, as the farmer’s daughter kept turning to smile at me ever more alluringly, I fantasized not only about possible liaisons with her but of all the other conquests I might make in future on the road. Whether it was my youthful good looks, rakish personality, or the enchanting spell of my big black musical mojo, it seemed this gypsy lifestyle had an irresistible allure for the opposite sex – and what kind of Woody Guthrie fan would I be to walk away from all that? He had, so it was said,

been married at least three times, not to mention numerous lady friends, and fathered children all over the place. Wow! This was the life.

Arriving home just three days after leaving didn't seem like a failure to me. Indeed, my brief adventure felt more like three weeks, packed as it was with so many new experiences, people and places. Though Carol, along with almost all my friends and family, thought I was a little mad, I felt triumphant – not because I had overcome the dangers of travelling the road alone (only many years later would the hazards occur to me) but because I had taken the first step in achieving my personal dream. A year or so earlier I recall writing an essay at school about stowing away on a boat to France, and hence proceeding around the world by any means, fair or foul. The English teacher made copious corrections in red ink, mostly grammatical, which was petty-minded and only to be expected, but what really hurt was his comment that my imagined exploit was 'simply impossible'. He was a nice old boy, unusually kind-hearted and considerate compared with most staff and maybe just trying to gently dissuade me from doing anything foolish, but his lack of support really made me annoyed.

A few weeks later I persuaded Andy to cycle with me down to Newhaven, the nearest port I knew of (though London docklands was closer, had I realised). We set off early, Mum-made supplies on our backs, skirting South London to Epsom, then Reigate, Redhill, and onto the A23 via Crawley down to Brighton. From there we headed East on the hilly coast road through Saltdean and Peacehaven to reach our destination by early evening. We were both shattered and, without anywhere to kip, really needed to sort out domestic arrangements. But I was so determined to prove the teacher wrong insisted we first visit the docks and check out the possibilities. Much to my delight we discovered a large freighter moored up, together with a few smaller vessels.

There was very little activity and, most importantly, just an ordinary chain-link fence surrounding the area with no obvious signs of security personnel – easy to climb. The vessel was French but we had no idea where it might be bound, though its destination was unimportant. I'd have preferred somewhere exotic like South America or China, but the important point had been made, at least to my naïve fifteen year old satisfaction. There were plenty of bulky crates and life boats on deck, all covered in tarpaulins ideal as hiding places, though how one might survive without a toilet for any length of time was problematic. You could easily bring food and drink for a week or two, but weren't there shipboard afflictions such as scurvy, rats and weevils? Or was I getting my history muddled? Claustrophobia might be a problem, especially if you'd been crapping in the corner of your hidey hole, but maybe you could sneak out at night to pee overboard. That evening, bedded down in a little hut in the middle of a muddy field, we discussed all these and other likely pros and cons of stowing aboard a ship. We both agreed the English teacher's comment was crap. If I was to take anyone's advice about travelling in future it would be Woody Guthrie's

## **FOOTNOTES - Chapter 6**

(1) Romantic villains in song: Which characters might be included on such a list depends largely on where you are coming from. Most Westerners would not now, for example, include Saddam Hussein, Osama Bin Laden, George Bush, Ronnie Biggs, the Kray brothers or Somali pirates but, in a hundred or more years time, who knows how they may be portrayed?

(2) Folk song origins: usually off a recording or website by an artist who had likewise taken it from another similar source and eventually, by circuitous route, sourced in the field a century

or so ago by collectors F.J.Child, Cecil Sharp or Bert Lloyd, among others. However, one shouldn't knock rambling intros – often the most interesting or entertaining part. Some performers have even perfected the art so much they've ditched the music, e.g. Billy Connolly, Jasper Carrot, Mike Harding, etc. A marvellous current exponent is Vin Garbutt, by the way, who, though a great musical performer, one could happily listen to all evening just for the jokes and anecdotes.

(3) This is an unkind and hypocritical remark seeing as I've frequently mislaid lyrics and messed up instrumentals myself. Nerves not only freeze the brain but in a panic to remember make you say daft things to try and wriggle out of the hole. The best thing is to stay calm and act as if any lapse or mistake was intentional – it's called being professional. Mind you, I did once hear a guest singer admit to forgetting some lyrics (I hadn't noticed myself) and saying it was God's way of reminding him he wasn't as damned perfect as he thought he was.

(4) Wild Mountain Thyme, also known as 'Purple Heather' or 'Will You Go Lassie Go', is often mistakenly thought to be a traditional folk song but was written by William McPeake, a native of Belfast, Northern Island, and recorded by Francis McPeake in 1957. The song is commonly described as a variant of 'The Braes of Balquhidder' by Robert Tannahill, 1774-1810. Numerous artists have recorded the song including (in no order): Judy Collins, The Clancy Brothers, Paul Clayton, Joan Baez, The New Christy Minstrels, The Byrds, Marianne Faithful, Long John Baldry, Van Morrison, The Strawbs, Jim Diamond, The Corries, Rod Stewart, Mark Knopfler, The Chieftains, Fotheringay, Kate Rusby, Ronan Keating, Bob Dylan, and many more. It has also been sung by audiences ad infinitum in just about every UK folk club for the last fifty odd years, often at closing time. A confession; though I too always joined in the chorus, I never really understood what the song was about till I checked the lyrics for this book – actually I'm still not sure what the appeal is, but it does have a mysteriously soothing resonance. The power of song, eh?  
Stewart Grant – [www.morerootsofbob.com](http://www.morerootsofbob.com)

(5) *FOLKIE LAMENT*

1. *you don't hear me on the radio - you don't see me on TV  
you don't read me in the papers or the glossy magazines  
but I built me my own website and I burn my own CDs  
that's why I'm singing in the folk clubs for free  
I never played America, never made the grade  
never played the Albert Hall, never did get paid  
couldn't fill the local bar or even get laid  
that's why I'm singing in the folk clubs down your way  
singing in the folk clubs, there's no-one there to hear  
singing in the folk clubs, I just do it for the beer  
singing in the folk clubs, I don't know where I am  
singing in the folk clubs and I don't give a damn*
2. *I've done the songs of Dylan 'bout a hundred thousand times  
of Paxton and of Taylor now I need a song that's mine  
with six verses and a chorus, harmony and perfect rhyme  
Till then I'm singing in the folk clubs marking time  
singing in the folk clubs, there's no-one there to hear  
singing in the folk clubs, I just do it for the beer*

*singing in the folk clubs really is the pits  
singing in the folk clubs and I don't give a ....*

3. *they say that I should sing the blues when I'm feeling low  
maybe play some jazz with chords that I don't know  
or country - or bluegrass - or middle of the road  
till then I'm singing in the folk clubs... here we go  
singing in the folk clubs - there's no-one there to hear  
singing in the folk clubs - I just do it for the beer  
singing in the folk clubs - I just can't get enough  
singing in the folk clubs and I don't give a ...*

*singing in the folk clubs - there's no-one there to hear  
singing in the folk clubs - I just do it for the beer  
singing in the folk clubs - I guess I'm out of luck  
singing in the folk clubs and I don't give a ...*

Words and music by Jiva (Jimmy and Val) 2010 - [www.jiva.co.uk](http://www.jiva.co.uk)

(6) 'Too Close To The Wind', written by Stuart Marson, has been recorded by various artists including Fairport Convention, Dave Swarbrick & Simon Nicol, and Clyde Davenport. I've tried to discover more about the composer but without any luck. Anyway, it's a very beautiful and moving song.

(7) The earliest broadsides that survive date from the early Sixteenth Century, but few survive before 1550. From 1556 the Stationers Company in London attempted to force registration of all ballads and some 2,000 were recorded between then and 1600 but, since they were easy to print and distribute, it is likely that far more were printed. (Sounds familiar, with regards current problems controlling the internet – MB) Broadsides were produced in huge numbers, with over 400,000 being sold in England annually by the 1660s, probably close to their peak of popularity. Many were sold by travelling chapmen in city streets and at fairs, or by balladeers who sang the songs printed on their broadsides in order to attract custom. In Britain broadsides began to decline in popularity in the seventeenth century as initially chapbooks and later bound books and newspapers began to replace them until they appear to have died out in the nineteenth century. They lasted longer in Ireland, and although never produced in such large numbers in North America, they were significant in the eighteenth century and provided an important medium of propaganda, on both sides, during the American War of Independence. Broadside ballads varied from what has been defined as the 'traditional' ballad, which were often tales of some antiquity, which frequently crossed national and cultural boundaries and developed as part of a process of oral transmission. In contrast broadside ballads often lacked their epic nature, tended not to possess their artistic qualities and usually dealt with less consequential topics. However, many traditional ballads only survive as broadsides. Among the topics included in broadside ballads were love, religion, drinking, legends, and early journalism which included disasters, political events, signs, wonders and prodigies. Generally, broadside ballads included only the lyrics, often with the name of a well known tune that would fit suggested below the title.

[www.contemplator.com](http://www.contemplator.com)

(8) The most intriguing adventurer of all was Richard Francis Burton who, among his many accomplishments including the mastery of about sixty languages and a deep knowledge of

many ethnic cultures, travelled in disguise to the holy city of Mecca (forbidden on pain of death to non Muslims) and later discovered the source of the Nile with John Speke. There was much dispute about this discovery between the two explorers, and amongst others regarding the actual source – a debate that continued for many years. Burton was not only an amazing linguist but also translated important works into English including the Karma Sutra and The Arabian Nights. Though very much a man of action, he wrote numerous books and articles throughout his life on various subjects such as human behaviour, travel, fencing, sexual practices, and ethnography.

Amongst numerous references: Brodie, Fawn M. (1967). *The Devil Drives: A Life of Sir Richard Burton*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Burton, Isabel (1893). *The Life of Captain Sir Richard F. Burton KCMG, FRGS*. Vols. 1 & 2.

Wright, Thomas (1906). *The Life of Sir Richard Burton*. Vols. 1 & 2 New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Also: 'Search for the Nile', 1971 BBC mini-series featured Kenneth Haigh as Burton The Victorian Sex Explorer, Rupert Everett documents Burton's travels. Part of the Channel Four (UK) 'Victorian Passions'

(9) Attributed to Lao-tzu, c605 – c531 BC, the founder of Taoism.

(10) According to Penguin books; 'Bound for Glory' is the funny, cynical and earthy autobiography of Woody Guthrie, the father of American folk music. He tells of his childhood running wild in an Oklahoma oil-boom town, the tragedy that struck his family and of his life on the open road during the Great Depression – hell raising and brawling in boxcars, all the while singing to raise a dime for his next meal. But above all, this is a song for an America Woody saw from the lonesome highway as he travelled from one end of the country to the other with a guitar in hand and the songs that made him a legend drifting out over the Dust Bowl.' I'd go along with all that – and a lot more.

(11) 'Hard Travellin' – words and music by Woody Guthrie © 1959 (renewed), 1963 (renewed), 1972 (renewed), TRO-Ludlow Music Inc.

(12) Huntington's disease, chorea, or disorder (HD), is a neurodegenerative genetic disorder that affects muscle coordination and leads to cognitive decline and dementia. It typically becomes noticeable in middle age. HD is the most common genetic cause of abnormal involuntary writhing movements called chorea and is much more common in people of Western European descent than in those from Asia or Africa. The disease is caused by an autosomal dominant mutation on either of an individual's two copies of a gene called Huntingtin, which means any child of an affected parent has a 50% risk of inheriting the disease. In rare situations where both parents have an affected copy this risk increases to 75%, and when either parent has two affected copies, the risk is 100% (all children will be affected). Physical symptoms of Huntington's disease can begin at any age from infancy to old age, but usually begin between 35 and 44 years of age. About 6% of cases start before the age of 21 years with an akinetic-rigid syndrome; they progress faster and vary slightly. The variant is classified as juvenile, akinetic-rigid or Westphal variant HD.

Walker FO (2007). "Huntington's disease". *Lancet* 369

(13) 'This Land Is Your Land' was written in 1940, recorded by Woody Guthrie 1944, based on an existing melody. It was composed in response to Irving Berlin's 'God Bless America' which Woody found 'unrealistic and complacent'. The melody was very similar to, 'Oh My Loving Brother', a Baptist gospel hymn recorded by the Carter family as, 'When The

World's On Fire', which had also inspired their 'Little Darlin' Pal of Mine'. However, Woody's song had a different melodic structure from all these and he used only the first half of these other melodies in his tune. Woody wrote and sang a number of variations to the verses over time, for various reasons. The song has been covered by many artists, most notably in the 1960s by Bob Dylan, The Kingston Trio, The New Christy Minstrels, Peter Paul and Mary, etc. In more recent days artists recording it include, Bruce Springsteen, Counting Crows and Sharon Jones & The Dap-Kings, among others. The song has also been used by electioneering politicians; movie and TV programme makers; also in schools, colleges and churches, etc.

<http://xroads.virginia.edu/~1930s/RADIO/woody>

<http://www.woodyguthrie.org/biography>