

EPILOGUE

*have you seen that lonesome cowboy
riding on a long lost trail?
only searching for redemption
though you know he's bound to fail
his old skin is tough as leather but his heart is paper thin
he'll survive in any weather
hat pulled down against the wind
way up on the High Sierra gotta be some kind of fool
like the ghost of an Apache as stubborn as a mule*

Researching for this book, early 2010, I came across Woody Fest, an annual festival celebrating the life and music of Woody Guthrie held in Okemah, Oklahoma, the singer-songwriter's birthplace. Apart from Arlo Guthrie, I'd not seen or heard any of the artists appearing before but felt I'd like to attend anyway. It was an impulsive notion, of course, and shot down with equal haste by my sensible wife who raised many objections including the cost (too high), the need to take time off work (permission unlikely), and the possibility that it might coincide with an eye operation she was due (date not then known). I dutifully accepted she was right, or had no reasonable arguments to prove her wrong, so dropped the idea.

Well, not quite. Also on the festival website I noticed they were holding a song writing competition - entries to be recorded and mailed in. Over the past year or so, following my adventures with Arthur, I'd had something of a musical renaissance - a burst of composing activity - and was trying the results out in clubs around Tyneside. In 2009 I entered a song writing competition at the Saltburn Folk Festival, Yorkshire, and despite a nerve-wracking performance was lucky enough to win first place. Actually, the scariest bit was later performing my song on the main stage - though I did get presented with a silver rose bowl along with a cheque by the local mayor which was nice. Maybe I should try again - even if I didn't win it would be good experience. Although over the years I'd written and recorded many kids songs, I'd mostly neglected adult material and still hadn't much confidence in returning to that genre. Coincidentally, however, I did have a tribute song for Woody Guthrie which seemed to fit the criteria the festival panel were looking for. So, to cut a long story short, I recorded it, along with a couple of others, and in due course learned I'd won third prize. This time, when I informed my wife, she was a little more willing to give the proposed trip her blessing - though by now I'd made up my mind to go anyway. Other objections faded when told her eye operation was to be the following month and my employer was also more than happy to release me.

It's not quite true I hadn't heard of any artists at the festival - Sam Baker was on the guest list and, after Arthur's comments, I was keen to hear him play. For some reason he reminded me of John Otway⁽¹⁾, not that he leapt about in that eccentric Englishman's unpredictable way but both artists shared a couple of important qualities essential for any serious singer-songwriter - a determination to overcome impossible odds and a unique, or at least quite individual, view of the world. Also, though neither is known for great instrumental skills, both manage to shine through sheer strength of personality. Maybe this is also why they both attract great musicians to accompany them.

Sam's style is sparse but poetic - a kind of singing Hemingway. His songs tell bitter-sweet stories and are delivered in a slow Texas drawl which seems hewn, painstakingly, from the desert landscape. But this is no artificial affectation. According to him it took a long time to come to grips with language again after being blown up, and he still has difficulties, both hearing and speaking. He says, of words, 'I have to find them; they don't just come. I have to

go out and pick them. I'm more like a worker in an orchard.' This problem also distinguishes his vocal delivery, which has a staccato quality. As a result, written out, a song like 'Juarez' would read:

*he wears a blue suede cowboy hat
got a Juarez woman stretched out on his lap*

But as Sam sings, it goes:

*he wears a blue
suede
cowboy hat
got a
Juarez woman
stretched out on his lap*

Sitting in the darkened auditorium of the historic Crystal Theatre in Okemah watching Sam sing these words, I remembered what Arthur had said about him. I also realised that without the old rogue's encouragement I probably wouldn't be here at all. Only a little while ago I too had sung on that same stage and, despite the nerves, had got through without fluffing a line and even raised a few laughs with a song about a pub crawl in Newcastle where some girl had tried to pick me up, but to which I'd amended the lyrics for local relevance, adding the corny line, 'Here's to you, Oklahoma girls!'

*I went out the other night - drinking in a bar
had my best friend with me - my old banjo-guitar
some girl comes up and asks me
can you play that thing?
and do you know any Lindisfarne or my old boyfriend Sting?
no no no - no no no no
but here's to you - my Tyneside girl*

The trip had been expensive but, I felt, a great success. I'd done a lot of singing, especially at the Rocky Road Tavern which was at first intimidating but ultimately fun, and heard many great artists. Everyone I'd met had been friendly and welcoming, and now I was just sad the week was nearing its end. Several singers told me about other good festivals such as the one in Kerrville, Texas, or places with lively music scenes like Austin, Nashville and Memphis and hoped to return one day and play at some of them. Though I'd never attended a music venue in the States before I felt very much at home amongst all these Woody fans - for his were the songs, probably more than any other, that had inspired me as a kid to pick up my first guitar. What's more, being a singer-songwriter here seemed the norm rather than something to be hidden under a bushel of self-deprecation as it often was at home.

Incidentally, whilst in town the local rag, The Okemah News Leader (serving Okfuskee County since 1921) ran a story on my trip to the folk festival which didn't get many visitors from the UK. Whilst in their office, after the official interview, I mentioned Arthur and his possible links with American financial institutions, maybe in Boston or the Bahamas. After some digging they discovered that W.G. Holdings was a private investment company, set up in the Fifties, but which had seen little activity till the late Eighties. After sporadic movement the fund suddenly came to life a few years later when many investments were made, mostly in the property and money markets and, though these saw much initial

success, collapsed spectacularly in 2007 and 2008 leaving little but foreclosures, wind-ups and bad debts. The picture was complicated as the company had numerous off-shoots and subsidiaries but all, it seemed, had been affected as if by a virus. No wonder the old man was now so opposed to such regular investments.



A few weeks after meeting Arthur in Newcastle, I returned to the RVI hospital for another bout of laser treatment. Although I was still a little apprehensive, not about the pain (which is no worse than having an elastic band flicked against your skin), but whether I should be trying to remove the birthmark at all. Though I was somewhat reassured by another patient in the waiting room on my first visit who, by coincidence, was also a musician and teacher. She said she'd been coming to the clinic for several months and was very happy with the results. Nevertheless, it still seemed to me like cheating - this was the hand fate had dealt me and maybe I should just accept it. But I had not sought out the treatment nor, after so many years, was I bothered unduly if it was successful or not - I was just curious, so I told myself. As a child, once aware of the skin complaint, I'd been determined not to let it get me down or prevent my doing anything I wanted. When some kid started calling me names in the playground, 'beetroot face,' 'rosy cheeks', etc, (innocent times - today's kids can be far more cruel) I set about him angrily and knocked him down with a bloody nose. Later in life it never held me back, though I've always been rather reserved at big formal occasions I don't think the PWS had anything to do with it.

But maybe I'm putting on a brave face (as you might say) and in denial even. Consciously I wouldn't admit to being affected, not only by the birthmark but by any other psychological problems. After my father died when I was eight years old I felt exposed and vulnerable, but my way of dealing with it was to become as independent and resilient as possible - to come out fighting and not show childish emotions, proud of the fact I never shed tears at any time whilst growing up. The floodgates didn't open till much later in my twenties (another story). Though I've lived a full and active life, accepting my lot for better or worse and certainly never blaming any disappointments on my appearance, it's inevitable that such an upfront condition is going to cause problems, even if not openly acknowledged. Running from the TV cameras was an obvious and dramatic instance, but there probably have been many other more subtle effects both positive and negative.

After about a dozen laser sessions (over eighteen months or so) I was given an appointment with the consultant who told me that continued treatment was unlikely to result in more improvement. The birthmark had not been eradicated, though it was now significantly less obvious, apart from a narrow section under my right eye which couldn't be tackled for safety reasons. I've also noticed that it is more noticeable in extreme temperatures or following vigorous exercise. The strange thing is, though I was very pleased with the results initially, I'm now less certain whether having the treatment was a good thing or not.

Although, like everyone, I want to look ‘normal’, I realise that such a concept is actually false. We’re all different in some way, externally or internally, and these differences are often more a problem for other people than ourselves. Society, in other words, is really where the treatment should be given - by improving understanding and changing attitudes. Maybe there never have been high profile public figures, especially in the entertainment industry, with an obvious facial defect, but maybe it’s time there were. Talent is not given exclusively to ‘beautiful’ people. In any case, most folks, especially women - even the most supposedly perfect ones - feel inadequate physically one way or another and would change some aspect of their appearance if they could (hence the ever-growing public obsession with weight loss, cosmetic surgery, fashion and beauty products, etc).

I recently saw an excellent BBC TV programme highlighting ‘Face Equality’, a campaign by Changing Faces ⁽²⁾, a UK charity, to improve public perception of children with disfigurement of the face or body. The campaign, fronted by a small group of children aged between 9 and 13 years old, involved them appearing in a series of adverts which challenge four very common assumptions about children with disfigurements: ‘...that they are less able to achieve, less socially skilled and confident, are shy and retiring, and lead tragic, pitiful lives.’ ⁽³⁾ We are invited to read their stories and find out why these assumptions couldn’t be further from the truth. In the programme we see the children travelling around London to view their photos on billboards and all, without exception, were delighted by the displays. Of course, these may be the lucky ones with supportive, positive minded, parents and teachers and, inevitably, life may not be so easy when they get older and have to face discrimination alone. As it says on their website; ‘In 2008, Changing Faces commissioned a public attitudes survey which revealed that 9 out of 10 people unconsciously make negative assumptions about the lives and prospects of people with disfigurements. People with disfigurements maybe judged to be sad figures, bravely coping, somehow less attractive, less capable than you – even less of a person.’ ⁽⁴⁾

Despite the fact that, ‘one in 500 children and young people has a severe disfigurement and one in 100 has some form of visible difference,’ ⁽⁵⁾ attitudes remain negative. As the charity say, ‘These children have to deal with other people’s pre-occupation with their appearance on a daily basis; staring, comments, questions, ostracism and bullying can regularly occur. Without appropriate intervention these issues may impact upon the pupil’s psychological wellbeing, ultimately leading to withdrawal and underachievement.’ ⁽⁶⁾

And it isn’t only children: ‘There are over one million people in the UK who have a disfigurement. These marks, scars, paralysis or unusually-shaped features may be present at birth or acquired from an accident, cancer surgery, a skin or eye condition, warfare or paralysis.’ What’s more, ‘In the media, disfigurement is often described with negative words and imagery. Words - like horrifically disfigured, grotesquely scarred, ugly birthmark, misshapen head - are commonly used. Coverage also tends to be medicalised - people with disfigurements are often the subject of documentaries that present them as quirks of nature, abnormal or in need of surgery. They are rarely seen in soaps, game shows or as incidental characters in drama or comedy. In film, disfigurement is often used as a device to portray evil characteristics such as Freddie Krueger in ‘Nightmare on Elm Street’, and the countless villains in Bond movies and many other films. Advertisements for cosmetic surgery and the beauty industry portray scars, blemishes and other forms of disfigurement as unsightly and to be removed. These judgments and assumptions can result in unwitting facial prejudice and facial discrimination. Face equality is not about getting rid of noticeable faces but valuing and treating everyone who has one as an equal.’ ⁽⁷⁾

Also at the Crystal Theatre on the same Saturday Sam, I and others appeared, there was a documentary shown about Woody’s legacy presented by staff from the Woody Guthrie Archive in New York ⁽⁸⁾. The film, ‘Man in the Sand’ ⁽⁹⁾, chronicles the collaboration

between Billy Bragg and Wilco, which involved the musicians creating new music to accompany lyrics that were written decades earlier by Guthrie ⁽¹⁰⁾. In this and another film shown, there were numerous anecdotes and memories, from Pete Seeger to Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash to Bruce Springsteen, as well as songs and words from the man himself.

Most people know 'This Land Is Your Land', often assuming the author to be politically motivated, but I believe his drive was much simpler and rooted in a basic humanity. Here's what he said about his intentions – his mission statement, you might say: 'I am out to sing songs that will prove to you that this is your world and that if it has hit you pretty hard and knocked you for a dozen loops, no matter what color, what size you are, how you are built, I am out to sing the songs that make you take pride in yourself and in your work. And the songs that I sing are made up for the most part by all sorts of folks just about like you.'

He says further: 'I hate a song that makes you think that you are not any good. I hate a song that makes you think that you are just born to lose. Bound to lose. No good to nobody. No good for nothing. Because you are too old or too young or too fat or too slim or too ugly or too this or too that.' One might add, 'too disfigured, scarred, coloured, misshapen or physically different in some way from most other people'. In a world increasingly obsessed with outward appearances, often of the most trivial and superficial kind, don't we need Woody's song creed now more than ever?

FOOTNOTES - Epilogue

(1) John Otway, it must be said, is not to everyone's taste – some call him a true English eccentric whilst others a talentless self-publicist. I saw him live when he first hit the scene in the late Seventies and found him a breath of fresh air and really quite unclassifiable. Despite the supposed anarchy, many of his songs are deceptively good, especially the more romantic ones. The clowning may pall after a while and he is certainly not an artist to relax to. Arriving on the back of punk rock and a gymnastic performance on 'The Old Grey Whistle Test', his first single, the half-spoken love song "Really Free" reached number 27 in the UK Singles Chart. It would be his greatest success for some time. The song earned him a five album deal with Polydor Records, who viewed him as a punk rather than merely an eccentric. His first album, recorded with Wild Willy Barrett, was produced by Pete Townshend but sold only fitfully. The follow-up singles fared no better despite some imaginative promotion, which included an offer for Otway to come to a buyer's house and perform the single if their copy was one of the few from which the vocal had been omitted. Otway's and Barrett's only other UK chart success came in July 1980 with "DK 50-80", a modest #45 hit. Despite variously imaginative attempts to achieve record sales, or at least get into the charts (not necessarily the same thing), he has only had fitful success. However, he has continued to maintain a loyal following through regular touring with a number of musicians including Wild Willy Barrett, The Hamsters and Wilko Johnson. His 1990 autobiography, 'Cor Baby, That's Really Me' (subtitled 'Rock and Roll's Greatest Failure') was a study in self-deprecation, and his touring continued to sustain him. Within weeks the book outsold almost all of his albums. In the 1990s, he toured as "Headbutts and Halibuts", with Attila the Stockbroker with whom he wrote a surreal rock opera called 'Cheryl'. In 1992 Otway appeared at GuilFest. In 1993 he was able to draw 2,500 fans to a gig in London and, in 1998, 4,000 celebrated his birthday with him at the Royal Albert Hall, coinciding with the release of 'Premature Adulation', his first album of new material for over ten years. Recently he brought out the next instalment to his autobiography, 'I Did It Otway' (both books published by KLG Press.)

Biography by Mark Allan, www.allmusic.com. Retrieved 20 October 2009.
Also, www.johnnotway.com

(2) Changing Faces is a UK registered charity (No. 1011222) that supports and represents people who have disfigurements of the face or body from any cause. According to their website their work involves, 'Providing personal support for children, young people, adults and families. Working with schools, employers, health and social care professionals to ensure a culture of inclusion for people with disfigurements.' And, 'Campaigning for social change by working with the media, government and opinion leaders.' www.changingfaces.org.uk

(3) to (7) Changing Faces website.

(8) The Woody Guthrie Archives, 125-131 East Main Street, Suite # 200, Mt Kisco, N.Y.10549, USA. www.woodyguthrie.org/archives

(9) 'Man in the Sand' (1999, Union Productions) is a music documentary that chronicles the collaboration between Billy Bragg and Wilco, which involved the musicians creating new music to accompany lyrics that were written decades earlier by folk singer Woody Guthrie. The project, which was organized by Woody's daughter Nora, spawned two albums: Mermaid Avenue, released in 1998, and Mermaid Avenue Vol. II, released in 2000.

(10) One of the first collaborations Nora Guthrie put into place following the setting up of the Woody Guthrie Archives was with Billy Bragg and American country band, Wilco, resulting in Mermaid Avenue Vol. 1, 1998, and Mermaid Avenue Vol. 2, 2000 (on Electra) setting previously unknown Guthrie lyrics to new music. Since then other artists have also been invited to set Woody's lyrics to music.