

Riffing on Influence:
A Creative Writing Exploration of Music, Lyrics and Performance
after Listening to Mick Softley.

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DECLARATION

I, Craig Papworth, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores my own practice as research into songwriting and performance from the perspectives of Influence, Intertextuality and Cultural Absorption.

Starting with the influence of Existentialist thought and Beat literature on the 1960s folk revival, through reflections on psychedelia, mainstream culture and revolution in song language, this thesis considers the relevance of Julia Kristeva's Intertextuality and the validity of Harold Bloom's theory of Influence for music and song lyrics, while simultaneously recognising the social foundations of the product through the cultural studies of Raymond Williams.

It introduces Mick Softley's lyrics and music to the critical archive through the functions of communication, wordplay, social comment, passion and imagination, and the creative enigma. My creative work centres on Softley, his life and works, and the contrasts in our respective social-historical contexts, as a catalyst for my own musical and lyrical output.

Reflections on my own songwriting further explore relations between songs, poems, and stories through the practice of the poet and critic Simon Armitage, and the combined interplay between words and music, extending practical examples from Donovan and Softley and considering ways of innovation while still recognising tradition.

The research as practice explores the language and style of delivery in the performance of live solo gigs with some reference, amongst others, to Richard J. Watts and Franz Andres Morrissey in *Language, the Singer and the Song* (CUP: 2019) and the interactive dynamics between the performer and the audience within the social context. This includes ways of engaging an audience, as well as ways of initiating songs for possible later development through spontaneity and serendipity based on Softley's oeuvre as well as from personal experiences.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

SFSS - *Songs for Swinging Survivors* (1965)

SR – *Sunrise* (1970)

SS – *Street Singer* (1971)

AMDG – *Any Mother Doesn't Grumble* (1972)

C – *Capital* (1976)

M – *MENSA* (1978)

WM – *War Memorials* (1985)

A or B relates to the first or second side of the LP, while the number specifies the track.

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INTRODUCTION – Research Context, Aims, Method and Questions.

I am interested in influence and, more specifically, influence in the creative context of music and song. The casual listener may comment that one lyrical or musical style may sound like another and may further state how certain aspects appear similar, concluding that one reason why an influence is present is because of an interest in the original work. This general view of influence involves the concept that one person or thing simply affects another. However, there are varying degrees of musical and lyrical influences, as well as theoretical perspectives that go beyond the immediate texts, which need to be explored in practice.

I am claiming Mick Softley and his lyrical music as an influence. His album *Sunrise* (1970) was my initial sustained listening to his work in 1987. The influence of his music upon me related sociologically to how I was living when I first heard it, psychologically to where my mind was at when listening to it, biographically to wondering about the individual behind the music, culturally to my perception of a musical and lyrical separation of Beat ideology from the more familiar hippie ideology of his contemporary Donovan, linguistically to what he was singing about, emotionally to how he was singing and playing, commercially to how the product was packaged, and orally to what we, as a group of listeners, began to talk about as a result of listening.

This chain of influences loses its logical sequencing into a web of effects. The combination of influences found its way into action as I eventually discovered all his other recordings, began to play some of his songs busking on the streets and at live gigs, and now find myself researching his life and times, his music and lyrics, and using them as a creative resource for my new adventures in songwriting. I pick up musically where Softley left off, and I propose that my resulting songs should reveal how the personal lived culture and the changes in society ultimately hold the largest influence over one's creative output. It is important to

remember that the creative work is not a homage or a tribute, only an influence, within the wider social and historical culture of production.

The title of this work is ‘Riffing on Influence’. The word riff possibly has its origin, in abbreviated form, from the concept of the refrain, which, as a noun, is a repeated sequence of music or lyrics, often used as a memory aid in Folk ballads.¹ As a verb, riffing is also recognised, possibly from twentieth century jazz/blues culture, as a way of playing or talking freely on a topic. The combination of music and lyrics in the creation of song is my creative focus, which can be found in the bridging section between insights into Softley’s world and lyrics in Chapters 2 and 3, and chapters 4 and 5 where I am riffing on my own lyrical music and performances as reflective of the research as practice.

The starting research questions which will be investigated throughout are therefore:

1. How do you write a song?
2. Is it helpful to use the works, life and context of a musician as an influence for one’s own songwriting?
3. What influences are experienced in live performance?

To propose that influence is a multifaceted process of an individual finding a voice opens oneself up to one of the most controversial and daring critical theories of the 1970s in Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and its companion book *A Map of Misreading* (1975), which demonstrates how the theory can be put into practice. Bloom’s focus on ‘the story of intra-poetic relations’² claims that a writer, in making poetic history and misreading prior

¹ Amusingly, refrain as a verb means to stop doing something. I recall this observation being voiced by the folk singer Derek Brimstone in the mid 1990s during a gig at The Song Loft in Stony Stratford. Interestingly, Brimstone had ‘a revelation’ at The Spinning Wheel Folk Club, which was started by Mick Softley.

<https://www.martin-kingsbury.co.uk/articles/derek%20brimstone.htm>

² Bloom, H. *The Anxiety of Influence*, 5

writers, will try to find creative space to justify his/her work in relation to the writers of the past.

Bloom's theoretical influences are wide and formidable and involve, with reservations, the aesthetics of Nietzsche and the defence mechanisms of Freud,³ via the poetry and humanity of Shakespeare, and his terminology for the Revisionary Ratios, which poets pass through in the creative struggle, cite Lucretius, ancient mystery cults, St. Paul, Neo-Platonism, Pre-Socratic Shamans and the neologism 'Apophrades'.⁴ Bloom's tendency for the antiquarian and the mystical in texts contrasts with his apparently simple aim, 'to provide a poetics that will foster a more adequate practical criticism'.⁵ This aim, with its focus on 'Great Literature', was a reaction to the growing influence of poststructuralist theorists of the era and their readings of literature in furthering political ideologies.

Another significant critic regarding the relations between texts, but from a female and European perspective, comes from the translator and linguist Julia Kristeva and her concept of Intertextuality. Intertextuality is a poststructuralist critical term used by Roland Barthes and explained by Kristeva in a way that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another. The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity, and poetic language is read as at least *double*".⁶ The first half of the definition suggests to me that all is a mixed pattern of previous texts or discourse, taken in and changed across genres. Kristeva explains further through an extension of Freudian developmental processes and the altering of the thetic into a new position. 'The new signifying system may be produced with the same signifying material; in language, for example, the passage may be made from narrative to text. Or it may be borrowed from

³ Bloom, H. *The Anxiety of Influence*, 8

⁴ *Ibid.*, 14-16

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5

⁶ Baron, S. *The Birth of Intertextuality*, 334

different signifying materials: the transposition from a carnival scene to the written text, for instance.’⁷

Bloom and Kristeva both wish to distance their concepts from traditional studies of influence, as Kristeva’s definition states, ‘The notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity’, and for Bloom, ‘poetic influence cannot be reduced to source-study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images.’⁸ Influence is termed ‘poetic misprision’ by Bloom, which is ‘the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet.’⁹ He therefore brings personalities or ‘precursors’ back into the study.

I also bring my perceptions of the personality, or attitude, of Softley into Chapter 2 as an influence, before taking an overview of a selection of his song-texts in Chapter 3, and therefore potentially making myself subject to Bloom’s revisionary ratios. However, I am interested in the cult status of musicians and their works, and prioritise social factors of context and performance, as explored in the longer chapters of 1 and 5, rather than intra-textual poetic battles and canons of ‘Great Literature’. The understanding therefore that intertextuality is more than textual relations into, ‘a way of discussing the inclusion of a text within the large signifying systems, codes and practices which make up particular sociocultural fields’¹⁰ appears to offer greater flexibility for the creation of song-texts.

As the research is essentially myself filtered through Softley, his lyrics and times, the first chapter on contexts will include some comments on his era from those who experienced it, highlight some significant moments from music culture in respect of Softley’s conflict with it, and interweave some of my own musical experiences. From the outset, it is not so much

⁷ Kristeva, J. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 58

⁸ Bloom, H. *The Anxiety of Influence*, 7

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Allen, G. *Harold Bloom: a Poetics of Conflict*, 36

The Anxiety of Influence, or even *The Ecstasy of Influence*,¹¹ but somewhere between Heaven and Earth, as I try to see a path between the man, his music, his culture and my own music and lyrical travails in the present.

CHAPTER 1: STARTING CONTEXTS

1.1. Getting On the Road

Reflecting on the twentieth century that had already seen two world wars, with the prospect of a nuclear war on the horizon, combined with facing a future of consumer mediocrity, part of the youthful restlessness found expression through lived experience and sought to shape its destiny before someone else did it for them. Rob Young, in *Electric Eden*, explains the social similarity between a group of folk artists:

Clive Palmer, Wizz Jones, Donovan, John Renbourn and Mick Softley all came from a generation whose parents had withdrawn into comfortable borders in the aftermath of the war, and they were now on a quest for enlightenment, trying to ‘catch the wind’ of the intuitive, impulsive, irrational side of life.¹²

This suggests that disparate individuals, picking up on a culture from word-of-mouth, auditory or visual media, could create a short-lived community, exchanging ideas and musical techniques, and furthering an emergent culture.¹³

I will refer to some comments and works of this group of folk artists throughout this chapter as a means of amplifying the musical culture for Softley. I will also incorporate aspects of my musical autobiography to offer a later historical perspective on cultural changes.

Softley’s impetus was from literature and the desire to write,¹⁴ and the need to travel and experience an intensity of the highs and lows of lived experience, which is essentially 1950s

¹¹ Harpers.org: Lethem, J, “The Ecstasy of Influence, non-fiction, etc.”, 93

¹² Young, R. *Electric Eden*, 170

¹³ Williams, R. *Marxism and Literature*, 123

¹⁴ Frame, P. “Mick Softley”

Beat culture, rather than 1960s Underground culture. However, he appeared to be disaffected with all of it and was termed ‘the preacher of discontent’.¹⁵

1.2. American Beats and European Existentialists

If the United States Beat philosophy and lifestyle of travels through the inner landscape of the individual and the external landscape of the search for America did not transpose itself onto the landscape of little Britain, then the UK wanderers had to broaden the map into Europe, where the philosophical movement of Existentialist thought was being redefined for the twentieth century. The Oxford writers, Iris Murdoch and John Fowles, wrote about Existentialism in the ‘50s and ‘60s respectively and, as often happens with reviewers or translators, the essence of the modern movement resulted in some accommodation through the filters of those writers. Nevertheless, the results in both cases helped to promote and explain the philosophy in Britain for a post-war generation.

French Existentialism is primarily associated with the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, who named it, Jean-Paul Sartre, who extensively wrote about it, and Albert Camus, who modified it. Although European, it also has connections with United States pop culture, which was influencing musicians and critics in both positive and negative ways.¹⁶ Existentialism, as a youthful movement, tried to define, self-consciously, youthful identity. Softley and Wizz Jones went busking in Paris in 1960 and Wizz Jones commented that Softley was particularly favoured by French audiences.¹⁷ Softley also played at La Fete a Malataverne in 1971 and sang French A Capella on his later albums. John Renbourn was also drawn back to instrumentals from French Classical culture. Their youthful, English origins were enhanced in lyrics and music through cultural absorption.

¹⁵ Young, R. *Electric Eden*, 177

¹⁶ Sinfield, A. *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 161

¹⁷ Psychedelicbabymag.com. “Mick Softley, a Rebel Life”

Sartre was writing in the immediate post-war period of the late 1940s. The trilogy of *The Roads to Freedom* was quickly translated into English to be accessible in the 1950s and the slow filtration of cultural absorption meant that the concepts explored in the novels were quite dominant in youthful minds of the 1960s, as they still are today. Some of the fundamental concepts, such as placing the ultimate value on the individual, freedom and choice, integrity and authenticity, found their way into spoken discourse through aphorisms, such as “existence precedes essence” and “people are condemned to be free” which helped to give a sense of currency and urgency to Existential writing.

There are, however, immediate questions posed by such an attitude: how can claims of free individuals, making choices, be balanced with the choices of others? How do we devise values from this system? How can individual claims be balanced with living in a society? How can people be authentic when they are possibly split in their desires and subject to social and psychological pressures? Such social questions have a response in that ‘it is on the lonely awareness of the individual and not on the individual’s integration with his society that his attention centres’.¹⁸ Iris Murdoch further comments on how Sartre’s Existentialism is different to the twentieth century interest in Depth psychology, which also claims to focus on individual differences, ‘Sartre, like Freud, finds in the abnormal the exaggerated forms of normality ... showing us something of the malaise of the human spirit in the face of freedom’. However, Sartre asserts that psychoanalysis aims to find ‘a relation of causality and a relation of comprehension between the phenomena it studies’,¹⁹ which ignores the matter of a person’s choice, returning the focus to the individual’s experience. Sartre replaces Freud’s unconscious mind with the half-conscious, unreflective self-deception which

¹⁸ Murdoch, I. *Sartre*, 34

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26

he calls 'bad faith'. 'All human communion is impure and opaque, and reflexion dissolves it without purifying it.'²⁰

The Roads to Freedom 'is a study of the various ways in which people assert or deny their freedom in that pursuit of stable fullness of being, or self-coincidence, which Sartre has said to be characteristic of human consciousness.'²¹ All the characters in the trilogy suffer from some degree of self-deception, and the phrase 'stable fullness of being' seems rather a false, or an unobtainable, state of being in the flux of human existence.

Sartre's literature of ideas, placed within its context, sets the reader on the road to a possible freedom and, as with any fascinating abstract term, there are no straightforward, simple answers. In popular culture there was a short dialogue about freedom in the 1969 film *Easy Rider*. Singers were singing about it within the social context of Civil Rights, even if the road to freedom meant different things to the protesters compared to the oppressed. Softley and some of the first wave of travelling folk artists, possibly mostly ignited by Woody Guthrie and Jack Kerouac, were, in their own ways, under the influence of Existentialism through a full, sincere, commitment to living. Clive Palmer claimed that his music was trying to elevate consciousness,²² but what is the basis of individual actions in relation to a collective political purpose?

'Through into the 1960s, Sartre's principle of commitment was a crucial intellectual influence in British culture'.²³ This idea of commitment was that literature should be engaged in an individual struggle against the community and struggle with the self. In 1962 Al Alvarez called for a new commitment to poetic efforts in his essay, 'Beyond the Gentility

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33

²¹ *Ibid.*, 24

²² Palmer, Clive. Interview

²³ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 86

Principle'.²⁴ This sounds like a heroic stand for literature with a clear purpose; however Sinfield also notes that 'Mander found that, properly considered, "commitment" was only what Coleridge, Arnold and Leavis had been urging all along'²⁵ and it may be observed that all UK governments have consistently promoted a retreat into traditional values at times of economic unrest and uncertainty. However, all of this was not good enough for what many young individuals were feeling and experiencing in the 1950s and '60s. John Fowles' literary statements in response to his situation capture the best of Existentialism when applied to Softley and his works:

There is an invitation in existentialism to reject traditional codes of morality and behaviour, especially when these are imposed by authority or society without any clear justification except that of tradition. There is a constant invitation to examine motives; the first existentialist was Socrates, not Kierkegaard. The Sartrean school has invented commitment, but blind commitment to religious or political dogma (so-called Catholic and Communist existentialism) is fundamentally unexistentialist; an existentialist has by his belief to judge every situation on its merits, to assess his motives anew before every situation, and only then to choose. He never belongs as every organization wants its members to belong.²⁶

Roughly at the same time as the US Beats, the disaffected writers of the UK had the rather awkward label of the Angry Young Men: John Wain, Kingsley Amis and, most interestingly in terms of Existential writing, Colin Wilson. In 1956 he borrowed *The Outsider* title from Albert Camus and combined previous European thought on existence with English literature through H. G. Wells and T. S. Eliot's 'The Hollow Men', to arrive at a mid-1950s portrait of the outsider man and his relation of inner individual thought to the wider society and the search for indefinable freedom. He concluded, 'Sartre and Wells have decided that man is never free; he is simply too stupid to recognize this.'²⁷

The crucial difference between the Angry Young Men and the Beat Generation is that the former still care, the latter are beyond caring. The former seek some connection with the world of Insiders, for within that world of false appearances is a truth of

²⁴ Alvarez, A. "Beyond the Gentility Principle," 17-28.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 89

²⁶ Fowles, *The Aristos*, 121

²⁷ Feldman and Gartenberg (eds.) *Protest*, 217

social reality. The latter completely abjure the Square's world and seek to create a new reality, one in which vivid experience is everything.²⁸

The Beats were associated with drugs to heighten the experience, jazz as a musical communicator of spontaneity and possibility, and Zen to explore the disciplined randomness of existence. One part of Beat philosophy is to enter 'the nirvana of sheer existence'.²⁹ Kerouac was a Catholic, but foremost a writer whose *On the Road* inspired generations with its lived experience and spontaneous writing style. It would have been one of the primary inspirations for Softley. Wizz Jones, when interviewed by Alan Wicker in 1960,³⁰ was surprised when his interviewer commented on some famous passages from *The Dharma Bums*, of which Wizz was unaware, suggesting, in a lightly reassuring way, that age should not be discarded, and experience has value over innocence.

Softley, with his Jesuit school background, is not deterred in proclaiming his views, which ultimately show a disaffection with the industrial world of apprenticeship, the managers and promoters of his first LP, the music business and those who partake in it, as well as, after meeting with some of them in Paris in 1959, the writers of the Beat generation.³¹ A true outsider one may think. Certainly not conforming to any system. It was expected for folk songs to have some social import in the early 1960s, as opposed to the pure musical entertainment of pop, but Softley claimed, 'No real message. Except, perhaps, to attack the popular misconception that people matter less than the organizations that employ them.'³² Such a stand for the individual is not far removed from Fowles' pure existentialism. In contrast his fellow traveller, Clive Palmer, took more of a quietist approach: 'The thing about my music is that I'm not directly influenced by anything, in other words I take in, I ingest all

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 18

³⁰ BBC tv "Beatniks at Newquay" <https://youtu.be/W3WfXA9JL9w?si=62fMsdd7sSMufibo>

³¹ Frame, "Mick Softley"

³² Eden & Stephens, "Mick Softley belongs to that new generation"

of this stuff around me, then something comes from that.’³³ Such unconscious processes of lyrical and musical composition indicate a cultural absorption rather than influence.

If the musical expression of The Beats and The Angry Young Men was jazz, Softley and his contemporaries, although absorbing some of the jazz culture, found identification with the equally antiquated but rural idiom of folk-blues, which allowed expression for the voice as well as the instrument. The simpler DIY approach of skiffle was ‘an offshoot (from Jazz), skiffle, deriving from the harsh experience of such as Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie, was even closer to rock music.’³⁴ Wizz Jones may be seen playing his ironic social comment ‘Hard Times in Newquay’ on a BBC film from 1960,³⁵ and his archive shows a photo of him busking with Mick Softley and Clive Palmer in Paris in 1960.³⁶

1.3. 1960 - 65, Folk, Dylan, Donovan, and Softley

Donovan quickly absorbed some guitar technique from the older Mick Softley in St. Albans, knew a good topical protest song when he heard one, and recorded two of Softley’s songs. Only a few years later Donovan passed on the same guitar technique to John Lennon, which can be heard on the songs ‘Julia’ and ‘Dear Prudence’ from *The White Album*, George Harrison contributed a verse to Donovan’s song ‘The Hurdy Gurdy Man’, which was about and recorded by Mac Macleod. Mac Macleod was later in the short-lived duo ‘Soft Cloud’ with Softley. It appears that there was a community of itinerant musical individuals and styles that cross-pollinated in the 1960s, but which dispersed and divided in later decades.

‘Folk music to its listeners was authentic unmediated and enmeshed in the salient social and political issues of the time, which included the fight for nuclear disarmament, the crisis in

³³ Palmer, Clive. Interview

³⁴ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 160

³⁵ BBC tv “Beatniks at Newquay” <https://youtu.be/W3WfXA9JL9w?si=D41lYeQbmJzEiudg>

³⁶ White, *Folk in Cornwall*, 38

leftist politics, fears of Americanisation and the continuing importance of class divisions.’³⁷

All affected Softley, except the traditional folky fear of Americanisation. Softley and the emerging folknik community did not see such a division between cultures, some looked back to the roots of American folk/blues from oppressed communities for authenticity, some explored European landscapes and thought, some looked to India and China for inspiration.

“The most important thing I know I learned from Woody Guthrie...I’m my own person. I’ve got basic common rights,’³⁸ Dylan told the interviewer on the back of *The Freewheelin’* LP.

So, regardless of any style of playing or performing, Dylan gained a confidence, a recognition of the self as an individual voice within any society; a political stance to express his thoughts and feelings regarding what he perceived going on around him. Dylan was crafting, in his pre-1965 stage, an attitude based on a living tradition, but one that was metamorphosed into responding to issues of his own era in a voice that was coming from himself. This is almost an approved basis for recognition as a folk singer, as set out by The International Folk Song Council, formed in 1947, which categorise folk essence as: ‘The product of a musical tradition that has been evolved through the process of oral transmission, (i) continuity which links the present with the past, (ii) variation which springs from the creative impulse of the individual or group, (iii) selection by the community which determines form in which the music survives.’ Julia Mitchell adds to this by recognising ‘That is a community uninfluenced by popular and art music ...music that has been absorbed into the unwritten living tradition of a community.’³⁹ The conditions form a circular definition which comes from, and goes back to, the oral tradition of the wider listening community rather than the individual artist, so traditionally it is the song that is important, not the singer, which was not quite the case for Softley who, having absorbed some of the folk-

³⁷ Mitchell, *Postwar Politics, Society and the Folk revival*, 16

³⁸ Bob Dylan *The Freewheelin’* (CBS)

³⁹ Mitchell, *Postwar Politics, Society and the Folk Revival*, 10

blues American songs, like 'Strange Fruit' and 'Plains of the Buffalo', only recorded his own material, some of which was aimed at the pop market. Neither Dylan nor Softley, although working at different cultural levels, different continents, and having different lyrical structures, wanted to be the spokesperson for a political movement.

By 1965 Dylan had released *Highway 61 Revisited*, an album that used electric guitars, and his UK tour to promote it in 1966 used a band and amplification, which drastically upset the sensibilities of Folk. The audience grumbled about betrayal. An articulate spokesperson for Civil Rights had abandoned the collective cause in favour of pursuing an individual, artistic move into language and personal expression. Despite the mixed reaction of audiences, the effect of the musical and lyrical styles of the ever-changing Dylan had a positive effect on many British musicians in the mid 1960s, either through directly playing his songs (John Martyn 'Don't Think Twice, It's Alright'), parodying his style (Roy Harper 'Girl From the North Country'), or lyrical imitation.

Mick Softley's first album from 1965 saw cultural borrowing from the past. Firstly, the title, *Songs for Swingin' Survivors*, which was offered by his beatnik associate Wizz Jones as a contemporary twist on the famous Frank Sinatra album from the previous generation, but now with an awareness of the nuclear threat. Secondly the song-writing themes on the album were obviously influenced by *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* LP from 1963: 'Blowin' in the Wind' is echoed by 'What Makes the Wind to Blow'; 'Girl from the North Country' by 'West Country Girl', Dylan's powerful 'Masters of War' is responded to with 'The War Drags On', the humour of 'Talkin' World War III Blues' may be paralleled with 'After the Third World War is Over' with its 'Dr. Strangelove' inspired subtitle, '(or how I learnt to live without myself)', the travelling 'Down the Highway' is responded to with Softley's experience of travelling with 'Keep Movin' On' and, to complete the whole album, 'Honey,

Just Allow me One More Chance’ is echoed with ‘All I want is a Chance’. It is doubtful that many listeners picked up on the lyrical borrowing, which offered an English audience the opportunity to continue the modern folk idiom.

Meanwhile Donovan, in 1965 as a fast-rising star, was also coping with comparisons to Dylan, both through the song ‘Catch the Wind’, and the Woody Guthrie hobo image of guitar and harmonica. However, a certain acknowledgement of the past is expected in the folk tradition, and the results both for Softley and Donovan were musically and lyrically different to Guthrie and Dylan, partly through cultural differences which Donovan observed as amounting to New York competitiveness, largely fuelled by barbiturate consumption, compared to the more laid-back, hashish atmosphere of London at the time.⁴⁰ The rivalry between Dylan and Donovan was ultimately a media construct, rather like the Beatles vs the Rolling Stones in the high court of pop groups, or Oasis vs Blur in the 1990s, designed to create teenage identity and tribal controversy, and sell media products. In the political protest period of 1965 Donovan was still singing the Softley composition ‘The War Drags On’ to British and American audiences. There may be further points of comparison between the styles of Softley and Donovan. Softley used one guitar and voice, recording the album in two hours in a very direct, live representation of his sound. Donovan released two albums in 1965, the second of these, *Fairytale*, featured over-tracking of guitar and some orchestration. So, even in that short space of time, there was a noticeable progression in musical style in favour of adaptability and commercialism for Donovan, which surpasses the principled world of Softley.

⁴⁰ Rossacher, *Sunshine Superman: the Journey of Donovan*

1.4. 1966 and 1967, Psychedelia and the Mainstream

Clive Palmer, one of the original Beatnik travellers, had left the Incredible String Band after the first album in 1966 to travel, and claimed that raising consciousness was one of his musical aims.⁴¹ Considering the spirit of the time this suggests cultivating his personal inner life through introspection and imagination and so heightening awareness in his audience. ‘Stream of consciousness’ is something that the Modernist writers, like James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, had sought to do in writing in the early twentieth century, but by the mid 1960s consciousness-expanding drugs had, within twenty years since their accidental discovery by Albert Hoffman in 1943, found their way out of the laboratory and onto the streets, only to be made illegal in 1966. The Harvard Professor Timothy Leary had become the prophet of the psychedelic revolution and, despite emphasising the importance of set and setting, used *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* for his own political aims, the message of which he proclaimed as: ‘Turn on. Tune in. Drop out.’⁴² A three-part structure, from Classical rhetorical oratory, employed by Shakespeare in Mark Antony’s speech in *Julius Caesar* and in 1997 by the smiling Tony Blair. Donovan, now on the international stage, returned from Greece to find that his 1966 LP *Sunshine Superman*, recorded under the guidance of his new producer, progressing the lyrical themes of *Fairytale*, was in tune with the spirit of the age. While Softley’s self-produced single ‘Am I the Red One’, although creating the sense of psychedelia in words and music and echoing the Beatles ‘Tomorrow Never Knows’ and The Stones ‘We Love You’, did not receive promotion and commercial acclaim at the time, and he departed from recording music to pursue other indulgencies.

The Beatles had retreated from the hysteria of live performance and emerged from the studio in the summer of 1967 with *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The result was a

⁴¹ Palmer, Clive. Interview

⁴² Leary, *The Politics of Ecstasy*.

lavishly produced and packaged product that both appealed to the counterculture as well as the mainstream society, suggesting that ‘rock music did convey values of personal freedom promoted by the underground to a wider constituency’.⁴³ *Sgt. Pepper’s* was musically experimental, using the latest studio technology, sound effects, sitars and tabla drums, it was also lyrically direct in a way which incorporated the past with the present and the personal with the collective. The Beat poet, Allen Ginsberg, who also visited London in 1967, offered a basic summary of its songs, so, from the twelve tracks on the album (1) starts with a nostalgic recall of good old times, (2) is a statement of communal purpose (3) is a statement of imagination (4) is a statement about positivity (5) is about the mind (6) the adolescent, having discovered the previous things, leaves home (7) is a magic show (8) offers a statement about illusion and the space between people’s minds (9) is about growing old (10) is about ordinary people (11) is about the working day (12) is a reprise of the first track, suggesting that the old tradition still continues (12) is the poem.⁴⁴ Therefore, universal life experiences presented in musically appealing melodies. Donovan knew how to do that, also Softley’s melodious voice and familiar chord sequences could, given the right setting, create a positive ambience through the music, and both characters, through offering reflections on lived experience, had the power to tap into shared life narratives, as well as offering new possibilities for the listener.

The poem that Ginsberg appreciates is ‘A Day in the Life’. It is really the turn on, as being part of the language of the time, combined with the unorthodox approach to the following orchestral music, that captures the moment and holds a lasting impression not only for an audience in the summer of 1967, but also for old and young years later. Ian MacDonald commenting on the ‘poetic consciousness’ of the song, whereby the ‘sighing tragedy of the

⁴³ Hewison, *Too Much! Art and Society in the Sixties*, 188

⁴⁴ Granada tv “It Was 20 years Ago Today.”

verses is redeemed by the line 'I'd love to turn you on', which then becomes the focus of the song. The message is that life is a dream, and we have the power, as dreamers, to make it beautiful.'⁴⁵ Like the rest of the album, it is 'an expression of mystic-psychedelic optimism ... The fact that it achieves its transcendent goal via a potentially disillusioning confrontation with the 'real' world is precisely what makes it so moving.'⁴⁶

After 'the turn on' the 'real' world could seem quite foolish. The upsurge of energy and consciousness produced new, or revived, activities, such as happenings and experimentalism in films, poetry and fashion. The mayor of Amsterdam banned happenings, which ironically only increased the turn out for them. Similarly in California, where the police unwittingly converted small random gatherings into happenings, and Stephen Stills, from the pop group Buffalo Springfield, used the song 'For What It's Worth' to comment on the rising tide of uneasiness between the authorities and the young people. These activities were largely based in the metropolitan areas of London, New York, California and Amsterdam, but the cultural absorption did flow out to others who experienced it and wrote about it, like Angela Carter in Bristol.⁴⁷ Music offered an opportunity for the solitary individual consciousness to develop into a communal purpose, even if that purpose was for the importance of the basic pleasure of personal freedom.

Although it was not mentioned on *Sgt. Pepper's*, love was the hippy ideology of 1967. Singers were singing it, poetry anthologies were printing it, everyone was exploiting it. Even three years on in 1970, Clive Palmer's band named their album *Spirit of Love*. George Harrison, quoting Walter Scott, believed it was our salvation,⁴⁸ and there it is, revealed in the word 'salvation', for it is not too long before the poverty of vocabulary in comprehending the

⁴⁵ MacDonald, *Revolution in the Head*, 182

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Carter, "Truly, It Felt Like Year One," 209

⁴⁸ Granada tv, "It Was 20 Years Ago Today."

spirit of love lapses into religious language or blissed-out silence. Ginsberg claimed that awareness was primary, because it is from awareness that love can be revealed.⁴⁹ Love and psychedelia reached its full flowering in 1967 through *Sgt. Pepper's* and, released on the same day in the US, *Electric Music for the Mind and Body* by Country Joe and The Fish, which contained some wondrous love lyrics, although seeds had been planted the previous year on Donovan's *Sunshine Superman* album and, for the Underground, Mick Softley's single 'Am I the Red One.'

I have referenced the Beatles as a link between the Underground culture and the mainstream, and Donovan's rapid rise to fame, and it is justifiable, considering his earlier lyrical influence on Softley, to briefly consider Dylan's activities in this period. In December 1967 Dylan released the album *John Wesley Harding*. Musically it is subdued and possibly the beginning of his foray into American country music, and, as such, does not appear to reflect the excitement and experimentation of the psychedelic era. Nevertheless, this only serves to foreground the diverse lyrical quality of the album. In 1967 Dylan had been in retreat with The Band, recording and re-discovering old American songs that would now be categorised as Americana. In both cases, he appeared to be looking back to folk and literary narratives from the past and incorporating them into sometimes ambiguous narratives for the present. The maverick attitude in personality, and sometimes in lyrical concerns, is something that will later reappear with Softley.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

1.5. 1968 and the Revolutionary Spirit.

In 1968 ‘life and theatre had become confused’.⁵⁰ Even in a country like Britain where no social revolution has taken place, individuals were beginning to unite in various artistic and political activities to question dominant ideologies. It was largely a battle involving the energy of the young against the established older institutionalised ways, set against the backdrop of the continual war in Vietnam.

Donovan accounts for the explosion of cultural activity in the mid 1960s by referring it to the population increase of the Baby Boomer generation.⁵¹ This is a short-hand term born out of print journalism, but if life and theatre were becoming confused as ways of defying the old order, then life and fiction have always been interwoven with contradictions, false memories and personal mythologies. Douglas Coupland opined: ‘How you identify has always been a big deal. In the late 1980s, I disliked being classified as a Baby Boomer so much that I had to reinvent my way out of it.’⁵² The Baby Boomer generation, like Coupland’s Gen-X and Gen-Y, may be somewhat categorised by the cultural events that surround it, but there tends to be some overlapping across the generations, so that broad generalisations cannot account for individual differences, except by businesses that wish to target an audience, so Coupland reminds us that ‘marketeers love to carbon date generations. But it’s not a hard science.’⁵³

In 1968, due to contractual constraints, Donovan released *The Hurdy Gurdy Man* only in the U.S, featuring his happy, reflective pop psychedelia containing songs about girls and in praise of the pastoral. John Renbourn released *Sir John Alot of Merrie Englandes Musyk Thyng & ye Grene Knyghte*, an instrumental album of English folk tunes incorporating acoustic guitar, flute and percussion. Both, in their own ways, were making past folk traditions accessible to

⁵⁰ Opher, “1969 was a good year.”

⁵¹ Rossacher, *Sunshine Superman: the Journey of Donovan*

⁵² Coupland, “The X Factor.”

⁵³ *Ibid.*

contemporary audiences, and offering more of a personal, peaceful alternative to violent revolution. Softley, Wizz and Palmer did not produce any recordings in that year; as experienced buskers around Europe, one could then surmise that making records was not necessarily their priority. I would like to think that this was a conscious decision for each one of them and so by not selling a product they were symbolically taking a stance against a commercial system. Such resistance would then be seen as the last resort of the spirit of Romanticism, but I may be indulging in my own revolutionary fantasy, which is explored creatively, and from my own personal experiences, in the commentary for my song ‘Bad Planning’.

1.6. 1969

Softley’s early travelling companion Wizz Jones was the only musician in our circle to release an album in 1969. It is an album of some variety on which influences can be heard from various traditions. The influence of music hall may be detected on songs like ‘I’ve Got a Woman with One Leg’ and ‘I Wanna See the Manager’, as comic songs for entertainment. These combine with songs of London life experience, such as ‘Earls Court Breakdown’. Both styles re-enforce a sense of the popular, or folk, tradition. John Osbourne, as a significant dramatist from the previous decade, had lamented the decline of music hall as a folk art,⁵⁴ elements of which were employed in the genre of pop music by McCartney on ‘When I’m Sixty-four’ two years previously, and even more effectively by the Ray Davies’ song ‘Dead End Street’ from 1966, the lyrics of which presented the other side of apparent mid-sixties affluence, and the accompanying black and white video of the removal of coffins from London slums upset the BBC who refused to broadcast it.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ London Theatre, “The Entertainer.”

⁵⁵ Davies, “Dead End Street.” <https://youtu.be/Q9ZW2YsxrIU?si=MtflirrSXkCS4JLP>

Other songs on Wizz's first album similarly reveal an affiliation with older styles of music, skiffle, jug band music and the blues, all of which were being exploited, transposed, rediscovered or amplified by musicians and managers throughout the 1960s. This amalgamation of folk-blues, the conveyance of lived, immediate experience, of good times despite relatively poor times, comes close to personal authenticity. The musical borrowing is once again noted on the instrumental 'Guitar Shuffle', credited to Broonzy on this album, but also played by Softley four years earlier on his first record and credited to Fulson. Either way, Big Bill Broonzy was a major influence on the guitar technique of Wizz Jones, and Lowell Fulson had also recorded the tune as early as 195; it is the transmission of feeling that is significant on this and later generations of guitar players. A version of 'Teapot Blues' by Wizz Jones and friends on improvised instruments had been covered earlier on the first Incredible String Band album from 1966 by the mercurial Clive Palmer and renamed 'Empty Pocket Blues', but still incorporating the line, 'Even my old kettle is whistling the blues for you'. Lastly, there is the lyricist and fellow traveller, Alan Tunbridge, who wrote the words for most of Wizz Jones's music, and whose song 'Can't Stop Thinking About It' appeared on the Wizz Jones album as well an alternate version on the first Famous Jug Band record which Clive Palmer contributed to in 1969.

In the wider media arena of film, 1969 saw Hollywood's take on the counterculture in *Easy Rider*, the anti-hero film of travels through America in search of freedom and self, which only revealed alienation, hostility and death, culminating in the open-ended concluding line "we blew it", which one may interpret rather negatively as individual ideals clashing inevitably with the dominant culture in America. This rather binary opposition between young individuals in search of freedom being blown away by the older established order is rather a simple way of depicting the effects of the wider culture on the individual. The film was probably designed to elicit empathy from the audience at the time, whereas in the present

cultural climate the ending is more likely to receive applause. The film has a relevant musical soundtrack for the time, featuring Steppenwolf and The Byrds. Interestingly, Bob Dylan, who contributed one song plus a starting verse for another, passed them on to Roger McGuinn, indicating a retreat from media involvement, a disassociation from folk-rock, and a desire to cultivate an independent image.

Most of the commentators on the sixties offer enthusiastic retrospectives, particularly by those who lived through the era. ‘Everyone was suffused with a strange optimistic outlook. Everything was imbued with change. All the old crap was being jettisoned – ideas – thoughts – careers – suburbia.’⁵⁶ The staccato style suggests the struggle to contain the enthusiasm. ‘It was an age of re-evaluation and individuality that engendered huge creativity in dress, thought, art and music.’ There are further comments on the uniting force of the Underground, ‘The Underground created instant identity. You were either a Freak or Straight. ... Straight society was superfluous. We had our own press, music, fashion, drugs, lifestyles and culture.’⁵⁷ Softley, however, was not satisfied with such geographical and cultural divisions, ‘there are a lot of so-called straight people that I get on with very well and respect where they’re at ... As far as hobnobbing with the musicians in the London Clubs, I don’t want to know. It’s all phoney – the whole lot.’⁵⁸ His disaffection with such matters, which in language terms is reminiscent of Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, appears to stem from his experiences with meeting some of the Beat poets in Paris in 1959. It took prompting from Softley’s younger associate Donovan to bring him back to rehearsing in 1969, after an absence of three years.

⁵⁶ Opher, “1969 was a good year.”

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Frame, “Mick Softley”

The novelist Angela Carter, who was in her twenties at the time, shares some of the enthusiasm and comments on the sense of feeling free from the fetters of the English social class system, which had been so negatively and bluntly expressed by Lennon in 1970 in his song 'Working Class Hero'. She writes, 'We thought at the time we were 'classless', or had become 'classless', but, in fact, we were involved in the creation of this unprecedented and exponentially expanding intelligentsia. ... And, intellectually, Britain was opening itself up to Europe at all kinds of different levels – or so it seemed to me.'⁵⁹ I have suggested earlier that the openness to European thought and literature was partly an inheritance from 1950s Existentialism.

Angela Carter, perhaps a little like Softley, is forced to wonder, 'where does all the Swinging London stuff fit in? I'd like to be able to dismiss it all as superficial and irrelevant to what was really going on',⁶⁰ nevertheless, she did observe one aspect of musical influence, 'One of the interesting things about the music boom ... was the way that young white kids from the most deprived parts of Britain ... took to the music of poor Blacks from the most wretchedly segregated and oppressed parts of the deep South of the U.S. like ducks to water.'⁶¹ This attitude may be heard in the guitar style of Wizz Jones, who was influenced by Big Bill Broonzy, as well as in the early folk-blues covers of Blind Boy Fuller and the Rev. Gary Davis on John Renbourn's first LP, but Jones, Renbourn and, in particular, Palmer, were also influenced by English and Scottish Folk songs and tunes absorbed from other cultures, sometimes played by anonymous individuals. Such an affiliation may partly be an absorption of an alternative culture, as well as an artistic and political stance against pop culture and commercialism, but contrary to such a principled standpoint, if song lyrics are believed to be able to affect a change in individual thought and collective action then they need to be heard

⁵⁹ Carter, "Truly, It Felt Like Year One," 211.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

on a platform that will reach the largest number of people. This was partly Donovan's view in prompting Softley back into the recording business. There was, of course, John and Yoko's 'Give Peace A Chance' single with its Yoko Ono 'b' side 'Remember Love', harking back and persisting with the 1967 ideals of love and peace, which gained mainstream recognition in the UK and the U.S. 'Remember Love' uses the guitar picking pattern that Lennon learned from Donovan in India in 1968, while 'Give Peace A Chance' has many folk elements in that it is simple, communal, elevating and has a refrain, all within the apparent spirit of spontaneity and humour. It was played at The Isle of Wight in 1970 when factions were protesting for a free festival. I would suggest that it also had an influence over The Famous Jug Band in 1969 in the lyrics to Pete Berryman's song 'The Main Thing', the message of which echoes Ionesco in 'The Observer' from 1958: 'No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, or thirst for the absolute.'⁶² Sinfield sees such pronouncements as rather complacent, and Lennon's message was only a suggestion to the violent revolutionaries of 1968.

1.7. 1970 and Onwards

The solo songwriters, Mick Softley, John Renbourn, Donovan, Clive Palmer and Wizz Jones, either released, or were rehearsing, albums in 1970. Some of the album titles, like Softley's *Sunrise* and Donovan's *Open Road*, have connotations of hope and freedom, others, like Clive's Original Band C.O.B.'s *Spirit of Love* and Renbourn's *The Lady and the Unicorn*, hint at a sense of the magical, while Wizz Jones' *The Legendary Me* suggests a slightly ironic celebration of the self. All may be associated with the inheritance of Romanticism,

⁶² Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, 93.

celebrating nature and travel, in search of experience and in search of the self, and through self-expression there may be an authentic, unmediated link to the world of the listener.

In music culture 1970 saw the deaths of musical performers Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix, icons of the counterculture and its values of freedom and expression whose music may have also infiltrated the mainstream, but these were performers from a larger arena of electric rock compared with the sporadic psych-folk output of Softley and his contemporaries. Sadly, their early deaths may have given the American authorities leverage to impose further restrictions on live performances and promote greater warnings about the use of drugs. In the quieter revolution of folk-pop, Simon and Garfunkel released their final studio album, *Bridge Over Troubled Water*, which became one of the best-selling albums of the decade. Commercial recognition, achieved by Donovan, has always had an uneasy relationship with folk music, but in 1970 Softley had gathered his resources to re-record with session musicians his own brand of the current commercial genre of folk-rock. The wider musical culture may have been affecting him, but it was Donovan who prompted him back to music, possibly from a sense of guilt about recording Softley's earlier songs, but also from a belief in Softley's musical and lyrical ability and with the wider receptive notion that the result would be good for the people. Softley, nervous about the process and suspicious from his recording experiences five years previously, this time arranged a contract to direct the whole album and play some completely solo songs when the listening ambience required it. The result, with the aid of a new, young producer, plus tolerant and talented session players, was *Sunrise*, which is arguably his most unified, musically dynamic yet lyrically thoughtful album. To make such a claim is possibly rather personal and subjective in the interplay between the product and the receiver, nevertheless, Softley appeared to be in tune with a section of the culture at the time, in a style that was his own, rather than rearranging titles from Dylan in

1965, or combining repetitive lyrics with pleasing images for young audiences in 1972, which was reminiscent of Cat Stevens and Donovan.

The First Glastonbury Fayre took place in 1970. At the time pagans, druids and curious minds were fascinated by the convergence of ley lines and positive energies in that place, and the Vale of Avalon was understood to be the resting place associated with the legendary king Arthur. The attendance at Glastonbury in 1970 amounted to little more than the atmosphere of a village fete, but by 1971 the event was filmed, capturing some of the spirit of excitement and abandon of urban young people in a rural setting. The continuation of the Glastonbury festival has been chronicled by the BBC and has now become a national institution, surrounded by tall perimeter walls and transformed into a theme park. Such a move is an inevitability, as the Romantic ideal meets the commercial reality. One may have thought that Softley, because of his free-spirit lifestyle and some of the lyrics on *Sunrise*, would have been part of the original Glastonbury spirit. However, the folk-blues players were of an older generation, adapting styles from Davy Graham and Jack Elliot with European and American sensibilities, rather than hippy ideologies which had died in 1967, or the excesses of pop/rock culture of 1970 which was being packaged by the media for an audience that was just catching up with it.

The electric Jimi Hendrix and the acoustic Donovan made appearances at the third and largest Isle of Wight Festival in 1970. A documentary film of the event, which attempted to give voice to locals, organisers, attendees, musicians and promoters, again revealed some of the unrest at the beginning of the decade, to the extent that written accounts resort to clichés of Romanticism by describing the event as ‘the final passing of an age of innocence’.⁶³ I imagine that Softley, like some of the disaffected and the protesters at the 1970 Isle of Wight

⁶³ Lerner, *Message to Love* video, VHS.

festival, thought that music and festivals should be free. He did play at a famous festival in the Netherlands, as well as La Fete a la Maletaverne in France in 1971, and so may be considered as being on the cusp between a residual and an emergent culture, the folk and the pop, rather like his more amenable travelling companion Wizz Jones, who appeared, playing and hosting workshops at UK festivals, up until his death in 2025. Wizz was described by Billy Connolly as ‘a wispy figure’;⁶⁴ but Softley was even more on the periphery, or on the cusp between the old and the newer styles, shaped by his original cultural and historical context, but reluctantly adapting somewhat to the new.

Al Stewart played at the first Glastonbury Fayre in 1970. His album from that year, *Zero She Flies*, the content of which is described as ‘narrative tales of romance and experience, sometimes third person and sometimes autobiographical,’⁶⁵ so not too far removed from Softley’s lyrical style. The album has a list of thanks and influences from Existential philosophy, as well as Gothic and Romantic fantasy literature, which functions to extend the possibility of such media and unite the artist with the potential audience creating the effect of re-enforcing a sense of communal identity. The idea of listing influences on an album cover was done by The Beatles, in pictorial form, three years earlier on the front cover of *Sgt Pepper’s* in a more direct way of associating the image with the influence. The Beatles possibly started the trend of printing lyrics on the album cover, which a whole host of musicians were doing in 1970, including Al Stewart and Mick Softley, suggesting that pop music could, as well as singing along with it, be given a little more critical attention. The critical issue that I see here is, if everything has already been done in the Postmodern era of late twentieth-century society, how can musical artists make something new, except by reverting to the personal and revisiting or re-working ideas from the past?

⁶⁴ Leman, Jan. *Bert Jansch, acoustic routes*.

⁶⁵ Rhythmone. “Al Stewart biography.”

One significant transition in the musical world in 1970 was the disbanding of The Beatles, who may be perceived as a product of the rapid changes of the previous decade. 'Though ultimately the product of influences deeper than pop, the Sixties' soaring optimism was ideally expressed by it, and nowhere more perfectly than in the music of The Beatles'.⁶⁶ The Beatles were influential for both the mainstream and the counterculture, both then in 1968 when Charles Manson over-analysed their lyrics and manipulated vulnerable idealists to commit murders, as well as in the last decade of the twentieth century, when the band Oasis absorbed their music and revived it as a pale imitation for a new generation. Once again, it appears that musicians were reverting to older influences, even if the musicians themselves were fuelled with a bit more of an aggressive arrogance and indifference inherited from the punk era of the mid 1970s.

The relationship between the musical artist and the wider culture appears to be a symbiotic one. Some, like Donovan, with the help of producers and promoters, worked together for commercial acclaim. Some, like Wizz Jones, appeared to be relatively content to be acclaimed by the rock guitar heroes, to release the occasional album, with friends or solo, throughout the preceding decades, and continue to play live. Clive Palmer continued to record his own cassettes and play the occasional live gig. Softley, however, was more uncompromising, recognized the exploitative nature of producers, the opportunistic nature of associates, as well as the difficulty of working alone, and tried to centre control within himself as he directed projects around him. The fact that his later visions from the mid '70s, although presenting some personally new lyrical themes in ways that were part of contemporary European life, did not match up with the dominant music culture of the time,

⁶⁶ MacDonald, I. *Revolution in the Head*, 1

which I perceive as being disco or punk, ultimately did not overtly concern him and his principled ways.

The relationship between dominant, emergent and residual cultures affecting historical eras is difficult to classify in the fast pace of late 1960s music cultural changes. Individuals may be making music and writing songs simply for their own amusement, to try to fathom a personal problem or obsession, such as the individual in relation to nature, concepts such as love, hope, God, the interpersonal relation between the dynamics within and between masculine and feminine, which were some of Softley's lyrical concerns. As the '60s apparent euphoria of love and peace evolved into the '70s spirit of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll, the '80s age of self, the slight return and post irony of the '90s, and the post-millennium domination of music into a standardized digital package of media control, there is still an undercurrent finding expression in varieties of wordy folk disquiet and musings, and musical expression through rather traditional blues structures. We just need to look for it or, better still, do it ourselves.

1.8. My Musical Autobiography

Personally, I have a similar desire to that expressed by Robert Hewison when he states, 'my generation in particular feels the need to understand the circumstances of an event which we have not really witnessed, but which has conditioned the rest of our lives.'⁶⁷ I was not culturally aware at the time when Softley and his contemporaries were most productive, but the audible innovations in musicianship and songcraft, coupled with reported optimism and enthusiasm of the era, transmit a lasting influence through me.

My musical influences are numerous and, as will be explored in Chapter 4, go beyond the consumable world into sound itself. In terms of records that I have acquired, and it is mostly records, which is another interesting factor as discussed by Simon Frith in *The Sociology of*

⁶⁷ Hewison, R *Too Much! Art and Society in the Sixties*, 300

Rock, the majority date from 1965 – 1985. The first record that I bought with pocket money was *Dougal and the Blue Cat*, an imaginative film soundtrack of story and songs. At the same time a primary school teacher allowed me to listen in the lunch break to *The Magic Egg*, which includes legends, myths and stories set to music by the folk group, The Barrow Poets. From story and folk beginnings, I was later inspired by rock, seeing Queen's 'Bohemian Rhapsody' on 'Top of the Pops', for nine weeks while it occupied the number one spot. The flamboyance, elegance and musicianship of 1970s Queen is rather at odds with the styles of the current investigation into those of folk-blues; nevertheless, their music from that decade remains a lasting influence and Queen was my first live concert. There were other groups and individuals, gradually becoming more obscure, that I discovered consciously or randomly. From hearing this music, it was not long before I wanted to do it myself, and began playing electric guitar in a pub band and imitating songs that we could agree on. At the same time as this was happening in the 1980s, I was also attending the music festivals of Glastonbury and WOMAD where, at the time, the atmosphere and micro-society was as significant as the music (see/hear 'Invisible Gold Bear' in Creative Output and Commentary) for, like Softley's rejection of the Beats and the Counterculture, I was not too inspired by the synth-pop and upwardly mobile culture of the 1980s and similarly, although for Softley it was in commercial terms and for me it was in terms of creative expression, I did not find much imagination, or even novelty, in the music of that era; contrary to this is the fact that our pub band was playing some contemporary songs! It therefore appears that the web of influences from fellow musicians, the audience, and the era, all filter in to create the output.

The acoustic guitar came into play for me when the electric band dissolved. It was obviously much more portable, allowing songs to be played in a wider variety of locations such as busking on the streets, trying out new songs at singers' nights in folk clubs, and later performing at my own gigs in pubs and private functions. With an acoustic guitar and voice,

the onus is then on the individual rather than the group identity. Softley and his contemporaries would appreciate this because, although they were willing and able to perform with other musicians, they could equally stand up and play their songs solo with an instrument and voice. An image rather ingrained now in the history of folk and Dylan.

1.9. Softley, his Contemporaries, and Me

Regarding the musicians under investigation here, I heard Donovan first, possibly the album *Sunshine Superman*. Then noted that 'Goldwatch Blues', from Donovan's first album, was written by Softley. I didn't really like the sound of 'Goldwatch Blues' on the Donovan record, possibly because of the production, but it didn't seem to fit with the other songs on the LP. What I did like was the sentiment of the song - here was a song that was saying something about the difficult process of getting work - having to go through interviews and form filling, to be owned by the company for a lifetime and, when of no further use, finally to be given a gold watch at the end of it all. So, a look at reality, a warning, the cult of the individual which could be subsumed by the faceless mechanics of the business world, a stand for the working masses, all sung with a sense of resigned inevitability and a sense of humour.

I heard Softley's second album *Sunrise* in the mid 1980s, while living in squats in Luton, from Jeff, our resident psychedelic outsider. Jeff alienated a lot of people by being intense and occasionally throwing knives around into the furniture, but our kinship was through the power of music and the imagination. Awakened by psychedelics and not finding the community that I was seeking, it was time to return to higher education through the polytechnic, university and teacher training college, which revived the language interest and offered a means of putting it into practice. Nevertheless, the pervasive influence of learning songs in an imitative style either to be played at Singers' Nights and busking solo on the streets of Cambridge, as well as playing the flute while a friend freely sang verses from

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan', enabled the combination of literature and music in practice. The literature and music connection developed further when teaching in comprehensives, as I developed schemes of work which included songs by King Crimson, The Beatles, Nick Drake, John Martyn, and Mick Softley. In all cases I appeared to be following my joy as advised by Joseph Campbell in *The Power of Myth*.⁶⁸

Purely focusing on the individuals from journalistic interviews or instinct, I could claim that there are certain adjectives that I could associate with the five acoustic guitarists mentioned in this personal retrospective that have resonance with my own character: Donovan suggests determination, adaptability, eloquence; Mick Softley and Clive Palmer are associated with indifference to commercialism, and the quest for personal freedom; John Renbourn is admired because of his guitar playing ability, while Wizz Jones has the honesty of the blues. These echo part of my own psyche as a shared form of influence associated with identity and self-perception. A complex collective of styles and attitudes, hence another reason for focusing on those of Softley, for even one person contains multitudes.

The influence of identification also has a social dynamic through geographical region. Folk was typically associated with the industrial north of England,⁶⁹ but Softley, Donovan, Wizz Jones and John Renbourn were, like me, based in the South-East of England when they were musically productive in their twenties, which also had its share of folk clubs. I would like to believe that the music, the lyric, and the performer's interaction can transcend any restrictions in outlook based on community, region, or even social class.

One noticeable difference between Softley and me is his restlessness and gathered experiences from travels. Admittedly I took the Supa Bus to Athens with a past girlfriend

⁶⁸ Campbell, "Follow your Bliss."

⁶⁹ Mitchell, J. *Postwar Politics, Society and the Folk Revival*, p.85-96

and travelled around the islands and into Turkey for two months (see/hear 'Island Hopping Man' as a musical recollection of this time), and later travelled with friends around Ireland, experiences from which could be accessed for song material, but it is a diluted form of cultural absorption in comparison to the travelling life of Softley or Clive Palmer. Part of this hesitation to explore the wider world as a solo traveller stems from my visual impairment and being included on the blind register in 1978. This not only affects the way I interact with the world, but it also affects the reactions of other people towards me. Negatively it means that general tasks take longer: positively it could mean that I could inhabit the world of imagination more fully. Such a condition, like my colour synaesthesia, may add to my creativity. On Romantic flights of fancy, I could feel a connection to Tiresias or John Milton, or the old blues players, like Blind Willie McTell, who were influential to some of the folk-blues players of the 1960s revival.

There may be similarities in musical influences, literary preferences and apparent social-psychological traits between myself and the individuals discussed, but the social-political context in 1960s Britain was very different to that in the 1980s. Naivety had been replaced with cynicism; communal action had been replaced with individual inertia causing greater divisions between social classes. When Donovan sang 'beatniks are out to make it rich' in his slightly paranoid song 'Season of the Witch', a 1980s sensibility may conclude that he was referring to money. Similarly, Lennon's third verse of 'Imagine' and the line 'Imagine no possessions' while he was living at the height of celebrity fame and wealth. As a product of my time, I am influenced by the cynicism of my era, when, apparently, Donovan meant the richness of beatification and Lennon was only asking the listener to 'imagine'.

The Movement writer, Philip Larkin, seems an unlikely and unnecessary inclusion for the current topic, since even as a jazz fan he favoured a traditional style; however, his comment

on writing poetry recognises a conditioning influence: ‘what one writes is based so much on the kind of person that one is and the kind of environment that one has had and has now, so that one doesn’t really choose the poetry that one writes, one writes the kind of poetry that one has to write, or can write.’⁷⁰ Therefore, according to Larkin, there are social constraints and language limitations that are formed around and within the individual. Part of the excitement in the pursuit of artistic freedom or the reinvention of the folk-blues idiom is to challenge this conditioning environment and reflect upon apparently unconscious processes of creative work that are referred to in Critical Theory.

1.10. Introducing Theoretical approaches

In this section on contexts, I am exploring the relations between the individual and the social, or the psychological and the societal.

Pete Frame praises Softley’s album *Sunrise* and wonders, ‘how much of my admiration for the music is connected with the man’.⁷¹ In the same interview Softley also sees the interrelatedness of the composer and the work: ‘I tend to align a person’s work with his personality – if their work is great, but they’re not together as people, then that puts a completely different slant on their work.’⁷² This notion of aligning a person’s work with aspects of their personal life remains a common approach among the general public when commenting on literature and media texts and it may be, for certain individuals, that one can illuminate the other. However, for literary criticism to be recognised as an academic discipline, biographical criticism was replaced by the New Critics in America in the 1940s and the functional criticism of F. R. Leavis in the UK. Both approaches look at language workings within a text, at the expense of contextual considerations. As I am to discuss the

⁷⁰ BBC tv, “Great Poets 2”

⁷¹ Frame, “Mick Softley.”

⁷² *Ibid.*

conjoined processes of music and lyrical composition for Softley in chapter 3 and myself in chapter 4 and have made references to our respective histories throughout this chapter, I consider the information that surrounds the text as paramount in shaping the text itself.

Within the disciplines of Literary Theory, ‘influence study has been variously charged with irrelevance. The New Critics had already disposed of its manifestations as outmoded biographical criticism or source-hunting.’⁷³ However, I would suggest that this is not strictly true in the case of creative song writing. We have already seen Guthrie’s influence on Dylan, not solely in composition but in an attitude to life. Also, the textual and thematic influence of *The Freewheelin’ Bob Dylan* from 1963 on Mick Softley’s first album. Additionally, there were the pictorial influences on The Beatles album from 1967 and the literary influences listed on the Al Stewart album cover from 1970, all indicating that the power of influences is multidisciplinary. In addition, we have noted the transposing, altering and interchanging of musical styles and lyrical ideas within the passing community of Softley’s contemporaries, and the same may be noted within the academic culture of critical theory, as Harold Bloom adapts T. S. Eliot, Roland Barthes’ Structuralism becomes Poststructuralism, and Julia Kristeva’s intertextuality was influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin. This all suggests that influence is a transitive, two-way process affected by historical and cultural factors, or that all art is a product of assemblage of intertextuality, influence and milieux.

As stated in the Introduction, influence is termed ‘misprision’ by Bloom and is ‘a charting of how *meaning is produced* in Post Enlightenment strong poetry by the substitutive interplay of figures and of images, by the language strong poets use in defence against, and response to, the language of prior strong poets.’⁷⁴ The ‘figures’ are rhetorical tropes and the ‘defence’ is psychological, so that in the first revisionary ratio of ‘clinamen’, the trope is irony and the

⁷³ Orr, M. *Intertextuality: debates and contexts*, 83

⁷⁴ Bloom, H. *A Map of Misreading*, 87

defence is reaction-formation, but they are, in Bloom's antithetical practical criticism, 'interchangeable when they appear in *poems*'⁷⁵, this allows him to utilise Freud's defence mechanisms but within the essence of poetry, 'I seek to take back from Freud precisely what he himself took from the poets (or from Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who themselves had taken it from the poets).'⁷⁶ This belief in the power of poetry and the personal quest for origination, combined with Bloom's rhetorical flourishes, 'what justifies this radical analogue between human and poetic birth, between biological and creative anxiety?'⁷⁷ offer engaging reading in the heroic spirit of Romanticism, but his antithetical criticism does not allow for considerations of sociocultural contexts outside of a poetic tradition.

Bloom's influence theory has been applied through the language features of metaphor and symbol in conjunction with psychoanalytic constraints by female critics to explore women's writing in relation to the dominant male tradition of the nineteenth century,⁷⁸ therefore it could also be applied to song texts to argue, in rather a traditional way, that Softley and his contemporaries were a continuation of a bardic, Romantic tradition, particularly the relationship between the works of Softley and the ephebe, Donovan. However, by applying the six revisionary ratios to their songs, I would be aligning myself with the media who created the Dylan vs Donovan battles in the music press in the mid '60s, simply to suggest that, according to the theory, one has superseded the other. Even Bloom, according to his colleague Paul Fry, once he had established his masterful theory of supremacy, no longer analysed texts through the revisionary ratios.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 88

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 89

⁷⁷ Bloom, H. *The Anxiety of Influence*, 58

⁷⁸ Gilbert, S. M and Gubar, S. "*Wuthering Heights*." 248-258.

⁷⁹ Fry, P. "14 Influence."

A large part of notions of influence is regarding the term ‘intertextuality’ and its application. Mary Orr, in seeking to restore Kristeva to her rightful place in the Poststructuralist canon, comments on how some critics, ‘By placing Kristeva firmly within the French critical and intellectual elite of Tel Quel, ... separate her brand of intertextuality, as specifically highbrow, from similar modes of cultural borrowing practised by popular culture. ... Film and popular music had quickly adopted recycling and sampling in distinctly non-French, and non-theoretical, ways.’⁸⁰ This separation on cultural lines and the modern reference to sampling hardly seems relevant for Softley or me, but ‘recycling in non-theoretical ways’ does appear to have resonance for what is essentially the popular culture of song.

In a compelling study, *The Birth of Intertextuality* (2020), Scarlett Baron traces the processes that led up to Kristeva’s term through Darwin, Nietzsche, Freud, and the two main influences of Saussure and Bakhtin, to reveal that, ‘The Saussure who spurred Kristeva’s theoretical imagination in the 1960s was not the linguist whose theory of the sign had subtended the Formalist and structuralist enterprises of the past five decades, but the quite different, “second Saussure” revealed by the publication of his freshly discovered work on anagrams.’⁸¹ Kristeva’s adaptation and abstraction of this through imposing mathematical theory onto language⁸² indicates how deeply her thought processes were involved with texts, and suggests a further influence from her discursive community, however, Baron concludes, ‘In even the most crystalline of its expositions, intertextuality remains paradoxically poised between self-evident banality and forbidding abstraction.’⁸³

Kristeva’s concept is also psychoanalytic but retains more currency for the contemporary Arts and is intriguing in other respects. ‘She defines intertextuality as *transposition* of sign-

⁸⁰ Orr, M. *Intertextuality: debates and contexts*, 20

⁸¹ Baron, S. *The Birth of Intertextuality*, 314

⁸² *Ibid.*, 317 - 321

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 345

systems, *not* in the ‘banal’ sense of the ‘study of sources’ but as part of the semiotic process which goes beyond the sort of rational control involved in ‘making an allusion’ or ‘using a source’.⁸⁴ This suggests that the unconscious processes of intertextuality are more pervasive or uncontrollable than the more conscious acts of alluding, quoting or translating. Selden also clarifies that ‘transposition can mean not only transference from written system to written system but also from non-literary and non-linguistic systems to a literary system ... Every signifying system is no less than ‘a field of transpositions of various signifying systems.’ Furthermore, this questions the past’s critical tendency for unity and ‘This in turn throws into question the unity and substantiality of the subject who is the site of this play of systems.’⁸⁵ Kristeva advocated the revolutionary potential in the unconscious or ‘semiotic’ of the prelinguistic disorganised world of rhythm and sound that may surface in some poetic language as being able to disrupt authoritarian discourses. The rhetoric of her writing is very persuasive, especially, but with a warning, for avant-garde music and theatre in the latter part of the twentieth century. Surprisingly, it reminds me of the old Marxist idea that theory should not simply describe the world but should seek to change it: ‘the renewal of the conception of meaning and of the subject as practice and process concerns an entire socio-historical horizon’.⁸⁶ Or as Kristeva, quoting Marx, writes; ‘The productive process of the text thus belongs not to this established society, but to the social change that is inseparable from instinctual and linguistic change.’ From here then her psychoanalytic-textual origins culminate in the socio-political possibility recognised by Marx as being achievable in “free time” or in “musical compositions” so that: ‘Within this apparent sociality, however, lies the social function of texts: the production of a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations, and thus joining in the process of capitalism’s subversion.’⁸⁷ Such

⁸⁴ Selden, R (ed.) *The Theory of Criticism*, 407

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 241

⁸⁷ Kristeva, J. *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 103

words ultimately convey the experimental excitement of Kristeva's community of theorists, and the socio-cultural spirit of 1968 among certain young groups, as containing the most significant influences, which may only exist now in the memory as a kind of 'intertextual dream' for, as Roland Barthes wrote in 1971: "The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text ... the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*."⁸⁸

Kristeva and her predecessor Jacques Lacan, although two of the most revelatory critical theorists of the twentieth century, were grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis and the pre-Oedipal stage, yet there is also Carl Jung's idea of the 'collective unconscious' whereby common experiences are transmitted through myths and legends and appear as archetypal images across all cultures. This was influential on me a long time ago and is mentioned in the song 'Invisible Gold Bear' (see song and commentary). The grounding in nature is claimed to be a significant influence on Softley's life and rhymes.⁸⁹ Northrop Frye developed a system based on these character types and narrative patterns in a form of genre theory and it was taken further poetically by Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, which again, may have a relevance for Softley's songs in his lyrics of love and women. However, types and patterns all appear now to have a limiting effect on human potential for me, despite the notion that sympathy and relation may appear somewhat prevalent in the emerging culture of mindfulness. There may be a break here between some of my perceptions of Softley's culture and lyrics and the functions and effects that I would ideally like a song to have. Ideally songs, because of their multifaceted or multimedia potential involving music, lyrics, pictorial artwork, and performance, can potentially affect listeners through feeling and

⁸⁸ Baron, S. *The Birth of Intertextuality*, 342

⁸⁹ Frame, P. "Mick Sotley"

emotion in myriad ways, which can go beyond any intention of the singer or expectations of the listener.

The issue that Softley seemed aware of, ‘an individual being completely subjugated to any organisation’,⁹⁰ even if it is bound up in his mind with his early 1960s song ‘Goldwatch Blues’, seemed to remain fixed with him throughout his life,⁹¹ and imports the issue of social control, creating an oppositional attitude between the creative individual and the organisations that then filter this creative output.

Raymond Williams wrote about the rapid changes in society in the 1960s. He defines communications as ‘the institutions and forms in which ideas, information and attitudes are transmitted and received ... the process of transmission and reception’⁹² and continues, ‘All the new means of communication have been abused, for political control (as in propaganda) or for commercial profit (as in advertising).’⁹³ Even for Softley, who somewhat abandoned conformist attitudes in favour of a commitment to living a life through lyrics and music, had to interact with these forms of communication, such as recording labels, promoters and managers.

Methods learned from the selling of things can be applied to persons. There can be a kind of manufacture and marketing of personalities, as in the powerful and expanding world of publicity. There can also be a kind of packaging of experience: putting it out with the right gloss or even making the gloss a substitute for the experience.’⁹⁴

Williams articulates this as a threat to democracy and ‘freedom’: ‘In the modern trend towards limited ownership, the cultural conditions of democracy are in fact being denied:

⁹⁰ Eden & Stephens. “Mick Softley belongs to that new generation”

⁹¹ Impartialreporter.com. “full interview, singer, poet, writer, Michael Softley, in his own words.”

⁹² Williams, R. *Communications*, 9

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 11

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24

sometimes, ironically, in the name of freedom.’⁹⁵ His convincing logic may then be seen as either a dire warning of an empty future or interpreted as a nostalgic yearning for a past ideal.

If the attempt is made to preserve old forms intact, and to denounce the new in their name, the old forms simply become irrelevant to the new problems. What can then happen is that control of the new forms passes to men who are not interested in the growth of the society, or in the human purposes the expansion is serving. Such men will see inexperience as an opportunity, and confusion as a sanction. Instead of a new culture emerging, a synthetic culture - meeting and exploiting the tensions of growth - will be devised for a quick sale. While such men rule, there will indeed be expansion but there will be no real growth.’⁹⁶

This sounds very much like Softley’s awareness of, and resistance to, the growing forces of control and ownership which he observed around him from the experience of making his first album.

Williams developed Antonio Gramsci’s notes on hegemony, whereby individuals, in positions of power and influence, use dominating ideas over subjugated individuals through gaining consent from them by language manipulation in an appeal to common sense.

Williams refers to the dominant systems which work through the selective tradition, but also recognises ‘the alternative to the effective dominant culture, as well as the oppositional forms of social life, which have to be recognized as subject to historical variation’.⁹⁷ This suggests to me that there is some hope in individual and communal folk patterns of expression, but that we are all subject to the changeable wider conditions of the culture and the era in which we are living.

One wonders what Williams the cultural commentator and Softley the lyric writer would make of society a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century – I imagine that they would use their arts to make people further aware of a situation and look for ways to subvert it. The sociomusicologist and rock critic Simon Frith, still retaining some belief in the power

⁹⁵ Williams, R. *Communications*, 26.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Rylance, R. (ed.) *Debating Texts*, 210.

of musical and lyrical expression in 1978, concluded that, ‘the industry may or may not keep control of rock’s use, but it will not be able to determine all its meanings’.⁹⁸ Folk and blues players recognise that the past is a great source for renewal, innovation, and inspiration: the blues offers an enduring, emotional musical form, while the diversity of folk uncovers narratives and offers individual idiosyncrasies that can charm and challenge the listener and the convention. Possible ways of adding to the research of the critics is for the practitioners of lyrical music to articulate experiences, which will offer insight into processes and contexts.

⁹⁸ Frith, S. *The Sociology of Rock*, 209.

CHAPTER 2: SOFTLEY BIOGRAPHY

2.1. Approaches to Biography

Stephen B Oates may write of biography as ‘The Human Heart of History’⁹⁹ and explain in simple prose and sparing quotations how it should be done, but such attention to detail is beyond the space and scope on offer here, especially as my primary focus is to utilise some of Softley’s life, lyrics and music as a stimulus for my own songs. Fortunately, he states there is no definitive answer, only interpretation. ‘The very process of biography – of one human being resurrecting another on the basis of human records, memories and dreams – precludes a fixed and final portrait of any figure’,¹⁰⁰ and on what form the writing should take. I have similarly acknowledged this view as a precursor to the main body of my biographical ‘Song for Softley’, which should be listened to in conjunction with this Chapter.

A further purpose for including selected biographical detail is to illustrate the experience of the rapidly changing music culture of the mid-twentieth century from the point of view of one who was a primary, but overlooked, individual within the folk-blues genre; an outsider’s perspective from one who continued to make lyrical music until being overtaken by illness. Lucy Riall holds ‘a faith in the capacity of historical inquiry to explain, analyse, or otherwise convey what had happened in the past, and retain a confidence in the cumulative progress of historical knowledge’,¹⁰¹ and it may be seen, from the few articles on Softley’s life, that each of them builds on the preceding ones, by identifying common lifestyle traits and beliefs that Softley had, either from his own words or from the observations of those who knew him. Lucy Riall concludes in a rather Postmodernist fashion, ‘on the state of historical scholarship

⁹⁹ Oates, S. B. “Lecture 1 Biography: The Human Heart of History.”

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰¹ Riall, L. “The Shallow End of History?”

as a whole, which currently accommodates an immense plurality of approaches, as well as an unprecedented range of themes and subjects.’¹⁰²

2.2. Limited Sources

There are three main articles that celebrate Mick Softley’s life. Pete Frame’s interview interweaves his own innocence in the folk era from 1963-65 with Softley’s personal experiences from 1959 to the then present of 1970.¹⁰³ Frame is my primary source. His publication *ZigZag* was dedicated to appraising rock, blues, and folk artistes that were often neglected by the mainstream music press. He was clearly into the music and took a personal, serious, and innovative approach to rock journalism.¹⁰⁴ His observation regarding the interrelatedness of the individual with the songs is another reason for prompting this chapter, and his perception of Softley’s satirical character has also found its way into my song ‘Bad King Nigel’.

In 2003 a reporter from a local newspaper in Fermanagh, Ireland, briefly interviewed Softley again, under the caption, ‘Poet, writer, eccentric, Michael Softley dares to be different.’¹⁰⁵ The article tries to integrate a colourful character into the local community but ironically serves to briefly accentuate some of his idiosyncrasies. Brian R Banks’ online article¹⁰⁶ suggests a music and language fan who, like Pete Frame, is interested in promoting the singer and his works. The article is a retrospective on Softley’s life and works and elaborates on some of the discoveries from the previous two interviews by incorporating comments from Softley’s musical associates, which helps to add further background to Softley, particularly on the intervening years from 1967 to 1969 when he had taken a sabbatical from the music

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Frame, P. “Mick Softley”

¹⁰⁴ As a trained architect, Frame also published the acclaimed ‘Rock Family Trees’ volumes, which was later televised, and explored the interconnectedness of musicians through different groups over time.

¹⁰⁵ Impartialreporter.com. “full interview, singer, poet, writer, Michael Softley, in his own words.”

¹⁰⁶ Psychedelicbabymag.com “Mick Softley: A Rebel Life with Friends and Music.”

business of recording albums, as well as bringing his musical legacy and life up to 2015.

These few resources of interviews and retrospectives may be limited, nevertheless they do allow me the opportunity to add to the gap in the archive both critically and creatively. An overview of Softley's life and career, formulated from these resources, is included in the commentary on 'Song for Softley'.

I plan to explore Softley's character under the headings of Attitude, Language, Music, Myth and, as Softley and his works are to be a stimulus for my own creative responses, Softley and Me.

2.3. Attitude

This is rather an unusual heading, as if I am expecting to sum up a person in a single attribute, when in truth a single person can contain multiple attitudes from a vast array of sources that can change over time. Attitude indicates a psychological term with many points of analysis. For any person playing a role in society, a certain amount of accommodation is necessary to work within the parameters of an organisation. I suggest that this is further accentuated for a musician or a writer, where a certain amount of self-invention may be required. In drama or performance, the critical theorisation may involve the use of terms such as persona, and by extension a combination of language elements can be analysed to encompass a writer's style. However, for a character like Softley 'Beatitude' may be a more appropriate term. Pete Frame enquired into this background as well, but Softley, who informs us that, 'When I was 5, I went to a school where all the teachers were nuns ... Then later I went to a Jesuit college, which had a phenomenally high standard of education',¹⁰⁷ redirects the interviewer by asserting that nature was more important than culture: 'the first 16 years of my life were spent living right next door to Epping Forest, which had a far greater

¹⁰⁷ Frame, P. "Mick Softley"

influence on me than anything else.’¹⁰⁸ Questions and statements regarding religious teaching, as well as the interrelatedness of the natural world, will later be seen to be recurring themes in Softley’s song lyrics in Chapter 3.

Another of Softley’s great passions, possibly as a reaction to his religious education, was women: ‘I love a feminine woman who’s prepared to use her femininity to get exactly what she wants.’¹⁰⁹ His exuberance of speech suggests the passionate nature of someone who was likely to soar to blissful heights and equally plummet to murky depths, hence the Beatific label. His reaction to The Spinning Wheel folk club was, ‘Yeah – those were really good times – I don’t know about how successful I was, but I was bloody happy, I know that – and that is what matters to me’, and in contrast his reaction to his commercially successful, but abandoned, wine business was, ‘there comes a time when you have to make a decision and it’s survival ... and by that I mean, survival of me, and that became a very real issue.’ He continues, ‘and after a 4-year absence, I got back to music, starting completely from scratch again, going through a lot of hells and no heavens, a terrifying amount of personal pain, and got a bit of it back together.’¹¹⁰ Throughout the 1960s he seemed to have a spontaneous, hedonistic, pragmatic approach to existence in his journey through innocence to experience as he sought to find what he saw as the reality of things. This may be a rather common attitude for a relatively young person both then and now; it is just that Softley seemed to take it further. He described his own character as ‘tenacious and principled’,¹¹¹ and recall that Rob Young captioned him in 1965 as, ‘The preacher of discontent’.¹¹² His actions and words suggest a certain uncompromising disaffection, not so much with the world but with the people around him, particularly organisations and institutions of power. He moved on from

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Impartialreporter.com. “full interview, singer, poet, writer, Michael Softley, in his own words.”

¹¹² Young, R. *Electric Eden*, 177

his apprenticeship, the Beat poets, the management of his first record deal and the business world of self-employment, and he even alienated many people within the transient folk-blues community.

2.4. Language

By 1959 Softley started his lifelong addiction to travelling. He headed for Paris, but his initial impetus was not for music: ‘In those days, I really wanted to be a writer ... I was just totally, totally entranced and enchanted by James Joyce¹¹³ – complete adulation for his writing and use of language ... and I thought that writing was the only thing worth doing.’¹¹⁴

To make a list of comparisons between individuals from different social classes and different historical periods may be a great challenge, and to draw comparisons between the high point of imaginative Modernist prose with a handful of songs is similarly highly incompatible.

Nevertheless, the Jesuit schooling, the lived experience of sex and drink, the voluntary exile for Joyce and the constant travelling for Softley, as well as the interest in and ability to play music, are certainly starting points for what could be a fascinating comparative study between Softley and Joyce.

Softley’s spoken language, particularly from the Pete Frame interview where he felt at ease to speak freely, was an Afro-American hipster jive, picked up from American Beat speak, jazz and blues players, the language of oppressed peoples and also the language that a lot of young music fans used at the time: ‘I moved into this room over a bookshop called The Mistral, which was owned by an American cat ... then I went out playing and singing and really hustling people and I started to make quite a bit of bread ... but I don’t dig the Pope’s trip.’ This was combined with an Anglo-Saxon monosyllabic directness from East London,

¹¹³ There are other musicians who have cited James Joyce as an influence. Syd Barrett, in 1970, recorded his atmospheric version of ‘Golden Hair’, which is an untitled poem from Joyce’s *Chamber Music*. Later, in the 1990s, a variety of Indie bands recorded a double album, setting the poems of that collection to music.

¹¹⁴ Frame, P. “Mick Softley”

‘... I’ll take the piss out of priests, monks, nuns, anyone – I don’t give a fuck. But they wanted me to get into the sacrilege scene – so bang, I just got out of the whole business.’¹¹⁵ The language of his songs uses a different register, ‘I work very hard at songs, I don’t just pluck them out of the air; I like to think of myself as a craftsman, particularly when working with words, because writing is one thing I hold in the highest respect.’¹¹⁶ He did not refer to himself as an artiste, which would have associated him with ‘the arty, crafty, phony crew’¹¹⁷ of the Beat writers, but preferred to keep his lyrics pared down, exploring abstract concepts in a direct style. Despite having the spoken language of the era, he is critical of the song writing lyrics of the time. In the era when so many musicians were taking flights of fancy in their song writing as an inheritance from Romanticism and the youthful exploration of inner visions, Softley still sought to emphasise what he saw as ‘the real’.

As previously observed in 1.10, Softley associates the writer with the text and sees the author as the authority, “I tend to align a person’s work with his personality - if their work is great, but they’re not together as people, then that puts a completely different slant on their work. It’s very hard, but it’s the only way I can look at it.”¹¹⁸ This rather humanist approach to texts is generally at odds with the emerging language as system views being proposed prominently by Roland Barthes in the often quoted ‘Death of the Author’ essay from 1967¹¹⁹ and the Poststructuralist psychoanalytic theories of the time, and possibly rather an unusual stance for someone like Softley who, in his musical offerings from 1965, ’66 and ’70, seemed to be at the forefront of an emerging culture of music. Possibly his Folk sensibility, his wayward lifestyle and his principled, uncompromising attitude all contributed to his approach to texts

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Frame, P. “Mick Softley.” My song, ‘Every Little Helps’, opposes Softley’s craftsmanship by simply throwing words together, to suggest that influence does not necessarily have to work positively.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* Contrary to the above, my song, ‘Eliot’s Field’ recognises this view.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Barthes, R. “The Death of the Author.”

and expression of his reality, which on later albums sees an abandoning of musical accompaniment in favour of a language focus in his style of poetic verses, as well as a re-working of earlier songs. This suggests an unwillingness, or an inability, to adapt to the emerging styles of post-modernity.

If the language of criticism changes over time, then obviously the language of biography changes also. Lucy Riall in ‘The Shallow end of History? The Substance and Future of Political Biography’ comments, ‘the hegemony of the new social history in Britain from the 1970s, with its Marxist emphasis on “laboring men,” displaced “Great Men” from their hitherto dominant role as the driving force of history.’¹²⁰ This was a necessary change for the time which, I believe, is still valid in the twenty-first century. Biographies should be taken from as many different experiences as possible to offer different accounts of social and historical eras; in the case of Softley, we are getting an historical crossover experience from The Beat Generation, through The Counterculture of the late 1960s, and through the dystopian musical expressions of the late 1970s.

2.5. Music

Softley’s best asset, as Pete Frame witnessed and noted, may indeed have been his distinctive and powerful voice, which is a good asset in the arena of folk for, before folk became an arena, individuals and collectives would simply sing. The inspiration for singing could be multiple: as a way of praising God or Creation, as a ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’,¹²¹ as a means of expressing solidarity in getting through a work chore, and many others. The voice was the original folk instrument, and it did not necessarily have to be tuned to a pitch perfect Classical doctrine. From this point of view, folk may be seen to have a

¹²⁰ Riall, L. “The Shallow End of History?”

¹²¹ Wordsworth. “Preface to Lyrical Ballads,” 1392.

democratic function so that the song, or the story, was important, not whether someone had the financial means to buy instruments, or even - the folk purists' nightmare - amplification.

Song may be one thing closely aligned to folk, but music was almost secondary for Softley, it was simply a vehicle to express his lyrics. On first meeting Softley in 1964 at The Spinning Wheel club, Pete Frame goes further: 'I could see then that he was more interested in wine women and song – literally, and possibly in that order – than trying to make a fortune from his talents.'¹²² Music in the mid 1960s was something that young people, like Donovan, could exploit if they wanted to make a fortune. Softley was not averse to money: 'I would really dig to have a lot of money – I could really employ it ... but I'm not going out of my way for it ... I've finished with all that.'¹²³ This is partly a Beatnik philosophy, partly an inherited attitude from certain elements of the old-style travelling community, and partly a belief from Catholicism. It is a respect for life and lived experience that appears to have been important for him. This is an impression I have through my lived experience of talking with Romani Peoples, talking with my neighbour, who is a Catholic priest, and jamming some music with one of his congregation who is writing a pamphlet on love. Love, as well as being a saleable commodity in 1967 as discussed in the previous chapter, is also part of the essence in Softley's verses. There are examples from literature and life where the pursuit and accumulation of money and material wealth do not lead to happiness. The world of material gain is empty compared with the world of the spirit is an aphorism expressing this view, which is a device sometimes used by Softley in his song titles.¹²⁴

However, what really concerned Softley was commercial exploitation. On the sleeve notes for SFSS he states, 'I don't like the idea that individual responsibility should be completely

¹²² Frame, P. "Mick Softley."

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Softley, *Sunrise* (1970), track A6, 'If You're Not Part of the Solution, You Must be Part of the Problem'.

subjugated to the demands of any organisation.’¹²⁵ This attitude persisted with him throughout life, and extended from organisations to individuals, as he explained to the local newspaper reporter in Enniskillen: ‘I don’t like people making money out of what I do.’¹²⁶ The source of this attitude is explained in the same interview when Mick explains his initial involvement in the music business: ‘I decided to get involved in it because I wrote a song as a child, which later was stolen from me by someone. It was then recorded without my permission and that person issued a contract for me to sign as if I had already issued them permission before they recorded it.’¹²⁷ I believe the song was ‘Goldwatch Blues’, recorded and included by Donovan on his first album in 1965, leaving Softley to include his version on his third album in 1971.¹²⁸ It may be reasoned that Softley was happy when he had control over a situation, which he achieved, this time being prompted by Donovan, with his three-year CBS contract: ‘no-one was trying to make a fast penny out of me, and they were prepared to let me do everything exactly how I wanted to ... CBS virtually gave me a direction contract.’ However, he also states, quite innocently in the same year, ‘I just wanted to play again and have people listening to me.’¹²⁹

Softley claimed not to like any of the current music in 1970, seeing it all as a closed, self-congratulatory circle. A person’s environment is normally a great influence on shaping an individual. The travelling Softley did not like the London music scene, which was considered a necessary place for recognition and commercial success at the time. There were musicians outside of the London scene, like Clive Palmer and to some extent Wizz Jones, who both shared the same CBS record label as Softley for a while, who faded from the

¹²⁵ Eden & Stephens. “Mick Softley belongs to that new generation.”

¹²⁶ Impartialreporter.com. “full interview, singer, poet, writer, Michael Softley”

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ Such opportunism in the face of naivety has been a frequent occurrence in popular music. Possibly the most famous example being the successful folk/pop singer Paul Simon placing a copyright on Martin Carthy’s arrangement of the traditional folk song, ‘Scarborough Fair’.

¹²⁹ Frame, P. “Mick Softley.”

limelight, largely due to the socio-economic changes in music culture, as discussed in Chapter 1. Nevertheless, they continued to perform live and record sporadically through European record labels and private cassettes. There were other more extreme examples, like Anne Briggs, also on CBS who, like Softley, favoured a folk attitude to music, rather than coping with the commercial demands from the industry. ‘The label seemed to have been searching for an English Bob Dylan.’¹³⁰ Although he kept an eye on the current musical scene, and there are similarities in subject matter with Donovan and Cat Stevens, Softley preferred to drop in on someone else’s gig or simply busk for immediate, communal enjoyment.

2.6. Myth

Classical Greek mythos indicated any fable or story. A biographer may be striving to get at the truth of a life, but if that life is relatively undocumented, what can be gathered is subject to memories and interpretation so that the interrelatedness of human activity creates a revised story. Some of the most effective biographies may be read in the chronicled journeys of literary figures which have then been replicated in the modern age through the art of Romantic Biography, as exemplified by Richard Holmes, whose empathetic treatment of his subject is recognized in the Stephen Oates lecture.¹³¹ Human life is built on interwoven stories, and I am aiming to amplify the life and works of Softley through the journey of music and analysis rather than a literal voyage.

In Softley’s rather serious approach to recorded music there are few, if any, direct references to classic Greek myth such as the stories of Icarus, Acteon, Persephone or even the musical deities Apollo, Pan, or Orpheus, but this does not mean that stories of the past are ignored.

¹³⁰ Psychedelicbabymag.com “Mick Softley: A Rebel Life with Friends and Music.”

¹³¹ Oates, S. B. “Lecture 1 Biography: The Human Heart of History.”

Despite his constant references to ‘the real’,¹³² Softley’s creative imagination inevitably took flights of fancy into the world of wishes and Romance and the supernatural, suggesting that the myths of the past have an unconscious ability to surface in the world of the present.

Raymond Williams, tracing the historical contexts of the term, asserts that myth, ‘coming into the language only in the last hundred and fifty years...has been used negatively as a contrast to fact, history and science’, and further ‘clusters’ it, ‘with the difficult modern senses of *imagination, creative and fiction*.’¹³³ It is certainly a resource for the creative mind: ‘Myths connect our inner worlds, and can help towards connecting our writing, towards the outer world. This is the world that seeks shape, meaning and depth in common experience.’¹³⁴

In the common usage of the present time, myth is generally considered as a falsehood, a story or belief which is untrue. In this sense there is the myth that the musician can consciously create around himself. One story from Mick’s friends that can illustrate this was when the owners of Scott’s Wine Bar in St. Albans wanted to open the basement as a burger bar rather than a music cellar - Softley was obviously indignant: ‘he was dressed in his full wizard outfit: long black cape with a mystical symbol on the back, long flowing hair and very long wizardy beard. He talked to the current owner and, basically, put a spell on the venue so that it would never have live music there again unless it was by them.’¹³⁵ There are also the unconscious forces of personal mythmaking. Softley’s associates noted how he was becoming ‘more and more allegorical in his speech’,¹³⁶ even though his music making appears coherent throughout his life. Further to the theatrical world of the individual is the illusory myth that can be constructed by the profit-making motive of the media within an historical era. We have already seen how Softley was unwilling to be a puppet for someone

¹³² Frame, P. “Mick Softley.”

¹³³ Williams, R. *Keywords*, 210.

¹³⁴ May, A. *Myth and Creative Writing*,

¹³⁵ Psychedelicbabymag.com “Mick Softley: A Rebel Life with Friends and Music.”

¹³⁶ *Ibid*.

else's ideas and 'he was never mainstream and hated the way they commercialised his music'.¹³⁷ Finally, there is the myth that a listener can construct from an amalgamation of those made by the musician and the media, which will be explored further in some of my own creative responses.

Like many of the musicians and friends who met him, I can appreciate Softley's strange, principled humanity. An individual cannot help being caught in the web of economic entanglement. Making some money from busking, as Softley enjoyed doing, maybe the purest form of musical expression open to him at the time, because making a record, as musicians did in the 1970s, would possibly have involved capital and would certainly have involved interaction with the means of production, as well as the system of commercialism, and consumerism. His defiant stand reminds me of the words of the spirit of Los confronting The Spectre in Blake's prophetic book, 'Jerusalem – The Emanation of the Giant Albion', 'I must Create a System, or be enslav'd by another Man's: I will not Reason & Compare : my business is to Create.'¹³⁸ These powerful words may have influenced Softley in his lyrical world of exploration of ideas and concepts on some of the songs on *Sunrise* (1970), and his later strange visions, particularly on some of the more supernatural lyrics on *Capital* (1976), but they are possibly more of a reflection of my own ideal in my creative struggle for expression and the desire to discover a lyrical voice.

¹³⁷ Psychedelicbabymag.com "Mick Softley: A Rebel Life with Friends and Music."

¹³⁸ Sloss, D & Wallis, J. (eds.) *William Blake's Prophetic Writings*, Vol. 1, 460.

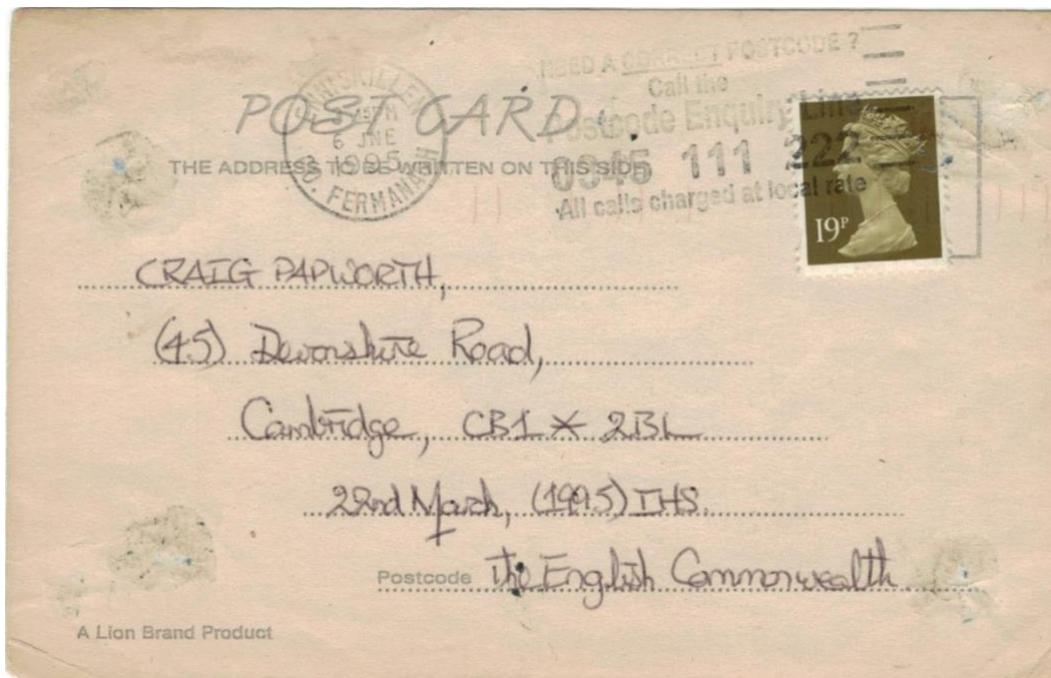
2.7. Softley and Me

‘Some biographers call for detachment and distance, others for compassion and empathy.’¹³⁹

From these rather binary oppositions, Oates is on the side of empathy, which he reminds us, ‘is not the same thing as hero worship’. I never knew Softley, and it is doubtful that anyone really knew him, which was possibly part of his life strategy, nevertheless, there was a serendipitous element to my association with him: from playing some of his songs in pubs and on the streets of Cambridge I was given his album *Sunrise*; then a journalist friend encouraged me to write to him in Ireland. A few years later an older audience member, when I mentioned the name of Mick Softley, told me that he had travelled with him in Spain in 1962; at another gig a younger audience member had vague memories of Softley visiting his father; then someone else used to visit his wine shop. These occurrences kept the character in my mind and added to the myth.

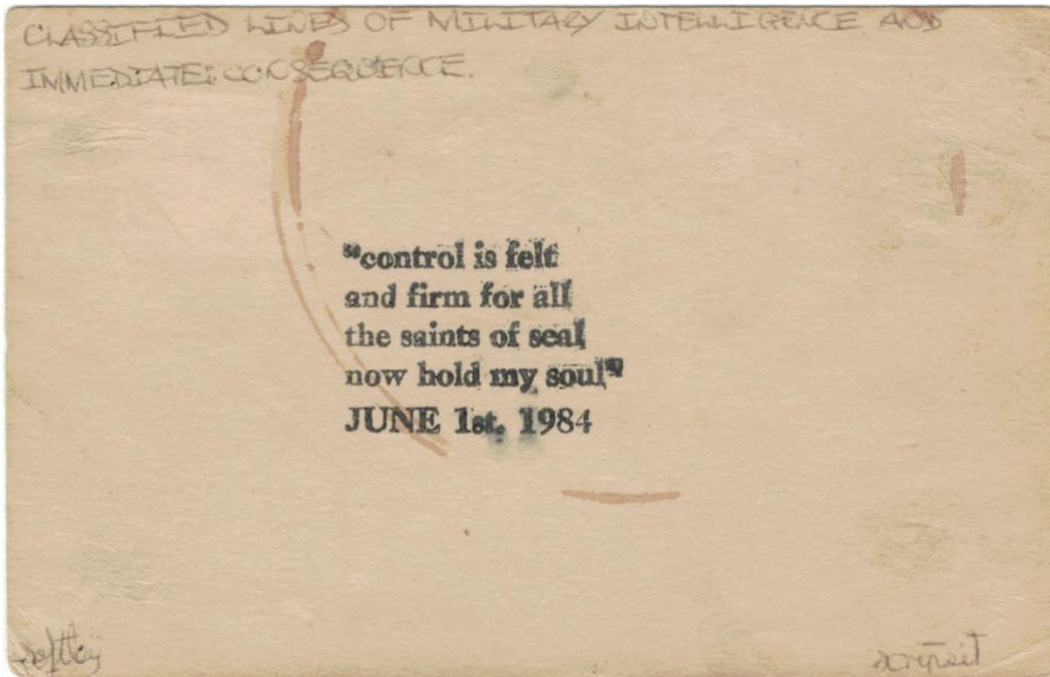
In 1995 I sent a letter to Mick Softley. The journalist, Rob O’Dempsey, a fellow musician, who was also a reviewer and promoter of folk music in Cambridge, had found out Softley’s address in Ireland from the editor of Folk Roots magazine and, knowing that I had an interest in Mick’s music, prompted me to write to him. At the time in 1995 I was playing flute in Rob’s latest music venture, ‘Music for the Small Hours’. Rob felt a kinship with Softley in being from Irish descent. I was simply enjoying playing music. My letter to Mick expressed a simple appreciation of his songs and how I played some of them in pubs and on the streets. It also said that I was playing some music with Rob, as well as solo, and wondered if we could meet up at the Belfast Folk Festival that year. I didn’t really expect a reply, until one of my housemates said that there was a strange postcard for me amongst our collective mail.

¹³⁹ Oates, S. B. “Lecture 1 Biography: the Human Heart of History,” 12.



The written communication on the front of the card appears to have four eccentricities of style: numbers in brackets, the inclusion of the date on a postcard, the initials 'IHS' from Greek as an abbreviation for the name Jesus, being the first three letters of that name at the end of the date line, and finally the destination, not just named geographically but politically as 'The English Commonwealth'. The language indicates an individual who was aiming to be mindful with his words, conscious of place, time, history, politics, and religion.

The second side of the postcard, which displays the message, takes the above to a deeper level.



There is the centred text, in parentheses, with a specific date. The handwritten ‘CLASSIFIED LINES OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE AND IMMEDIATE CONSEQUENCE’ and the handwritten ‘Softly’ and ‘Sanskrit’ in each corner.

A strange attitude for the common man to comprehend. A riddle. An allegory.

My initial reaction was that this was language deliberately contrived to confuse, disorientate, alienate or, in the lexicon of the time, designed to freak people out. At the time I was tempted to join in with the game and respond in equally paranoid schizophrenic style, something random along the lines of:

“The world is wide

Yet also small

I ride my bike

Through a waterfall”

JUNE 5th. 1978.

However, this would have been rather insensitive as the specific detail on both sides of the card indicated to me that this was a thoughtful and genuine communication. The actual message seemed clear enough: “do what you like, I’m now absorbed with sainthood”. ‘The saints of seal’ could simply have been a moment of creative exploration in his journey through experience, for by 2003 he claimed, ‘I live my life in a world of science. I’ve great admiration for Albert Einstein.’¹⁴⁰

In the same interview he expressed his opposition to the recent war in Iraq, suggesting a concern beyond the song of the self. In retrospect, the whole card appears to be fragmented, being from different sources. It contains handwritten lines from the Military, a typewritten proclamation drawing on Islamic mysticism, and the handwritten word ‘Sanskrit’ as the language of Hindu philosophy. The typewritten date may help to historically locate these opposing forces regarding real-world conflicts of military political battles that take place in the name of religion to further human rights. If we look to Softley’s song texts this concern is partly a personal unresolved conflict which dates back as early as 1965 and, on a wider scale, his allegorical writings may be interpreted as representing a peaceful protest to heighten awareness of the on-going warring factions of religious groups in the world.

¹⁴⁰ Impartialreporter.com. “full interview, singer, poet, writer, Michael Softley,”

CHAPTER 3: EXPLORING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS FOR SOFTLEY'S SONGS

3.1. From imitating an influence, to communicating your experience

Raymond Williams, as a thoughtful and reliable source, analyses the changing meanings of the word 'creative': 'We speak now of the artist's activity as "creation", but the word used by Plato and Aristotle is the very different "imitation". The general meaning of the Greek word *mimesis* is either "doing what another has done", or "making something like something else". In actual use it included the activities of the singer and the musician'.¹⁴¹ This is reassuring for it considers the medium of expression that Softley is part of, which is music and song, rather than the more usual critical approach of Literature and poetry, and the *mimesis* can be recognized within the genre of music through Bob Dylan's initial imitation of the style of Woody Guthrie and Softley's imitation of the lyrical themes on his first album in 1965 from *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan* from 1963. I have used *mimesis* in my song 'After HS2' as a direct imitation of the music, rhythm, rhyme, and some of the humour of Softley's 'After the Third World War is Over' but found the process to be lacking in personal authenticity (see Critical Commentaries). The concept of influence appears to be more pervasive than imitation and is more effective if it is less constrained.

There is some evidence to suggest this in Softley's work for, by the time of his second album, *Sunrise*, in 1970, even though the re-working of song titles is still in use on the opening song, 'Can You Hear Me Now' which has an intertextual link to 'Do You Hear Me Now?' by the Scottish folk-blues guitarist Bert Jansch from 1965, on the remainder of the album the sphere of influence appears to have broadened out beyond song titles and themes from other musicians into more of a personal world view based on experience.

¹⁴¹ Williams, R. *The Long Revolution*, 3-4

Musically, it could be said that Softley was inspired by the passionate delivery of Jansch's song, while lyrically recognizing that a song should communicate on a social level in respect of his young audience. Raymond Williams expands on this in relation to creativity:

'communication is the crux of art, for any adequate description of experience must be more than simple transmission; it must also include reception and response. However successfully an artist may have embodied his experience in a form capable of transmission, it can be received by no other person without the further "creative activity" of all perception'.¹⁴²

One ideal that I am reading into Softley's songs is for listeners to awaken from passivity into imaginative creativity. This seems a great onus to place on a selection of songs, but we are not writing a manifesto for social revolution, simply suggesting that song writing, through observation, reflection, humour, and social comment, can be enriching for the individual and the community.

The abstraction of art has been its promotion or relegation to an area of special experience (emotion, beauty, phantasy, the imagination, the unconscious), which art in practice has never confined itself to, ranging in fact from the most ordinary daily activities to exceptional crises and intensities, and using a range of means from the words of the street and common popular stories to strange systems and images which it has yet been able to make common property.¹⁴³

3.2. Attitude

As well as composing and overseeing the direction of his projects as much as possible, Softley always included some purely solo compositions on his albums, suggesting that, in the New Folk genre of travelling musicians, he was an independent, and sufficiently self-confident to convey a musical atmosphere through his solo performances. This is rather opposed to the convention of Folk, which remains preoccupied with traditional songs and is for the collective, not the individual. Contrary to this, regarding the music, is that, although Softley's playing is proficient, it is not particularly creative, which roots it in the world of

¹⁴² Williams, R. *The Long Revolution*, 29

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 39

traditional Folk. So, to return to the writings of William Blake, ‘without contraries is no progression’,¹⁴⁴ and the whole culture approach of Raymond Williams, the creativity exists as a whole way of life, so that the music complements the foregrounded lyrics.

Considering that recorded music is a product, and in view of Williams’ review of creative activity as being concerned with communication and community, it is necessary, as part of the process, and within the pre-internet culture of the 1970s, to consider the packaging of the album. Bob Norrington designed the album cover for *Any Mother Doesn’t Grumble* on which each lyric of the twelve songs is framed within an arched window and accompanied by a complementary colourful illustration by Ian Beck. Ian Beck is a notable illustrator of children’s stories and fairy tales, and was Master of the Art Workers’ Guild in 1999, which was established over one hundred years previously by a group whose ideas were associated with William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. I would imagine that such a Movement would be held in high regard by the musically self-taught Mick Softley who liked to see himself as a craftsman of words. As an extension of this, I would suggest that the simplicity and philosophical nature of the lyrics, with their accompanying illustrations and musical compositions, form part of a twentieth century inheritance in a watered-down style of what William Blake was depicting in the illustrated *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. Of course, Blake was an inspiration for all the Arts and particularly for the counterculture of the late 1960s,¹⁴⁵ but whereas other musicians and poets directly quoted his poems, Softley used his own language for a contemporary young audience.

¹⁴⁴ Sloss, D & Wallis, J. (eds.) *William Blake’s Prophetic Writings, Vol. 1*, 13.

¹⁴⁵ Horovitz, M. (ed.) *Children of Albion*.

3.3. Music

In considering Softley's music, I would ideally like to write about the whole package, from the processes of production through to the possibilities of reception, in a manner explored recently by Michel Faber in *Listen: on Music, Sound and Us*, some issues of which I will explore in Chapter 4 on my own creative song writing.

Allan Moore analyses popular song and considers how a relationship may be built up between the listener and the singer. He is interested in how the music feels through 'musical texture'. There is no visual score with popular music and so he refers to 'aural memory', which 'brings in the subjective analysis'.¹⁴⁶ He identifies the conventional concepts for analysis as the relationship between harmony and form, and that form, as with a poem, may include comments on rhythm and metre. In listening to popular music, we are affected by voice, to include range, pitch and pitch deviation, and the annunciating of lyrics. Also, how the voice is put forward through melody, for the listener to perceive a sense of the singer's persona.

Here is a little on how creativity may be working musically in one of Softley's songs.

The opening song from *Any Mother Doesn't Grumble* is 'The Song That I Sing', the music of which has two parts, firstly the introduction features solo acoustic guitar and voice. The first chord is Fmaj7, followed by taking Softley's familiar chord progression of descending notes in the key of C major scale with the relative A minor, before returning to the F. That is the basic form. The rhythm is played quite freely. The vocal melody is contained within the range between the two C note octaves of the chord for the first line, with the harmonising notes within the chord occupying the second line. This simple melodic pattern is repeated across the first six lines, before raising the pitch up through the F and G chords over the last

¹⁴⁶ Moore, Allan. "Aspects of Popular Music."

three lines. The annunciation of the lyrics is clear and melodic with a light, airy feel created through the Fmaj7 chord. A variation of the chord sequence is used on ‘Keep Movin’ On’ (SFSS, B1), the equivalent sequence of chords C, Am, F and G, in the verses of ‘Julie Argoyne’ (SR, A4), and again, but in Travis picking technique, on ‘Magdalene’s Song’ (AMDG, A5). The Fmaj7 places the guitar music in the key of C, which forms one of the most harmonically pleasing and hence popular sequences in late twentieth century Western pop music.

Recorded music does not happen in isolation: it usually takes place in a recording studio, possibly with other musicians, under the guidance of a producer who shapes the sound. Allan Moore refers to this as ‘the sound box’.¹⁴⁷ There will be some reference to this in the Critical Commentaries in the creation of my own songs, but here the second part of the ‘The Song That I Sing’ features the session musicians playing separately from Softley. Their change of time signature and chord notes forms a contrasting continuity, which has a dynamic effect, moving the music forwards into Folk-Rock.

¹⁴⁷ Moore, Allan. “Aspects of Popular Music.”

3.4. Language

To continue with the lyrics of ‘The Song That I Sing’

Come you kings and queens of the highway

A story I shall tell

It is not of the future nor of the past

You know so well

But of today and of tomorrow

And all that that could bring

Of the joy of life

Of the love of living

The song that I sing

These form a nine-line ‘poem’, serving as a preface or lyrical introduction to the listener, in which Softley sets out his lyrical intent. Stylistically, in the field of Literature, Robert Frost and Walt Whitman, amongst others, use such a device at the start of their more famous poems or collections. After hailing travellers in true mythical heroic style, ‘Come you kings and queens of the highway’, who are literally on the road or metaphorically on the journey through life, Softley invites them to listen to a story. Story is essential to Folk narrative and part of the fabric of life in writing and in speech that aids communication and helps us make sense of the world. Softley states that they are stories or songs of the relative present and that they will be life affirming. Here are some ways in which Softley uses language creatively in his songs:

3.4.1. Creative as Communication

The opening song on *Sunrise*, ‘Can You Hear Me Now’, functions in a lyrically similar way to ‘The Song That I Sing’. It implies that the speaker has something that he wishes to communicate to the receiver. Not all language works in this way, but here the personal

pronouns indicate that this is language for the purpose of communication. The social, historical, cultural, and psychological space across which he is transmitting may be fraught with misinterpretation, and misunderstanding. He needs to keep it simple. He needs to be repetitive, so, despite stating in 1965 that there was no real message in his songs, what does he have to say in 1970?

‘Can You Hear Me Now’ calls the listener to recognise God in nature through love and hope:

There’s a little bit of God, in everyone,
A little bit of God, on the wind and in the sun,
A little bit of God, in everything,
Can you hear me now?

Over the course of the song’s three verses, the abstract concept of ‘God’ is replaced by similar abstractions of ‘Love’ in the second verse and finally ‘Hope’ in the third. The repeated three-verse structure makes the need for a chorus unnecessary. The second-person pronoun ‘you’ and the question at the end of each verse combine with the relatively fast-paced strumming to engage, or awaken, the listener directly. The song serves as a means of offering the singer’s standpoint from the outset, without complexity. The complexity is apparent in the concepts of ‘God’ and ‘Love’ and what a listener may understand by them. One purpose then is to engage the listeners in the process of transmission, to engage a little thought and possible discussion beyond the album track.

The simple lexis, repetitive structure and dynamic three-chord composition suggest that the song can cross social, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Musically the guitar solo gives the track dynamism and the backing singers, echoing the key words, give the track a sense of gospel tradition. Those concepts of God, Hope and Love, are almost timeless in sacred and secular life, and in written and spoken discourse, by priests, poets, pop stars and regular folk.

It is good to tap into universals in song. However, the way in which they are dealt with is interesting. Firstly, they form part of a phrase that suggests an origin in common spoken discourse, ‘There’s a little bit of love in everyone’, is discursive and proverbial, functioning as a shortcut phrase offered as a summary in a conversation, having the effect that Mick could here be part of your listening community, breaking the barriers down between performer and audience in part of the true spirit of Folk. Secondly, the way he deals with the concept of God is interesting. A priest may tell you that God is all around you, so that ‘There’s a little bit of God ... in everything / Can you hear me now’ is acceptable, but to state that ‘There’s a little bit of God in everyone’ is, according to my limited religious knowledge, almost blasphemous, by using the preposition ‘in’. It is not far away from a reversal of ‘God created Man’ into ‘Man created God’. Maybe I am imposing too much of my own view on the concept of God here, but for Softley to further state that, ‘There’s a little bit of God ... on the wind and in the sun’, is also pantheistic. If one purpose of the song is to stimulate thought and discussion, then the lyric may serve to remind us of Blake’s ideology as expressed in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* that ‘All deities reside in the human breast.’¹⁴⁸

3.4.2. Creative Wordplay

Softley’s lyrics are creative in respect of his youthful audience, and this may be noticed through language manipulation and wordplay. There are three songs that I can immediately think of, from his three CBS albums, where this language play happens. The song ‘Julie Argoyne’ (SR, A4) refers to the subject metaphorically as a tomato. It is an English colloquial archaism to refer to someone as a fruit. The word ‘fructus’ means ‘enjoyment’.

¹⁴⁸ Sloss, D & Wallis, J. (eds.) *William Blake’s Prophetic Writings, Vol. 1*, 17.

There is the reference to ‘the Garden of Eden’, which is part of Softley’s backdrop of religion, but also simply denotes his subject’s origin as being from a place of divine bliss.

There is the unresolved mystery in the chorus of the reason for his love for her, but as it is part of the divine mystery of love, it ceases to matter in the simple enjoyment created.

The bridge in the song, like the verses, is twice repeated. Like the use of a refrain in an old English or Scottish ballad, the repetition aids the listener.

The flower before the fruit
Shows the way it grows,
The seed before the root
Shows the way it knows.

I like the way the first two lines deal with the visible part of the plant, as Softley ‘shows’ us the phenomenon of simple nature; while lines 3 and 4 deal with the part of the plant that is hidden beneath the surface as representing the instinctual force of life. The effect of the phonology, the consonance, assonance, and alliteration in the bridge conveys the sense of flow (line 1) and surprise or discovery (line 2). The metaphor from the first line of the verse, ‘Julie Argoyne is an edible fruit’ adds to the playful mystery of the song. Overall, the effect, when combined with the musical choices, aims for wonder in nature and from wonder comes simple joy.

We know, from the Pete Frame interview, that Softley’s live antics at folk gatherings in the mid 1960s involved manipulating lyrics of popular songs of the day for communal entertainment and this linguistic juggling or playfulness is apparent in one line in the rather formulaic pop song structure of ‘Ragtime Mama’, (SS, A2) which expresses happy togetherness by an economic use of language through grammatical misuse of pronouns: ‘I know she loves me, she knows that I do too / We knows we loves we, and that’s the way we groove’. So, although the grammar may be incorrect, the meaning may be understood in

a rather 1970s style of love and togetherness. In ‘She Says’ (M, A4) a similar technique is used, but this time through adjectives, ‘You’re my favourite funderful, favourite sunderful, favourite wonderful boy’. Creative language wordplay is seen again in the song ‘Sing while You Can’ (AMDG, A3), the first verse of which is:

Sing while you can, sing while you can

A bird am, a bee am,

A flower am, a tree am,

And I am and you am,

And he am and she am,

And we am and they am,

Everyone am everything am a song.

There are four verses in all, with a lot of repetition. The repetition of the first line ‘Sing while you can’ is almost an urgent reminder of the brevity of life, although the song has a relaxed flow to it. The most interesting thing in this rather pretty little song, is the use of the verb ‘to be’, for everything, the flora and fauna of the first 2 verses, as well as the expansive and apparently random natural phenomena, ‘wind, wave, cloud, sky’ of the third verse, are all associated with the first-person singular of that verb. I can therefore only assume that everything on the Earth is united in the immediate, essential ‘I am’ of the first-person singular: everything is the same, or everything is as one. OM. This unity does not only relate to the natural world but to humankind as well, from the ‘I am’ the conjugation of the verb in Softley’s vision is, ‘I, you, he, she, we and they’ all ‘am’. As the final line of each verse tells us, this vision extends to ‘everyone’ and ‘everything’. The harmony and unity of such a vision presents us with a religious belief system, for some to sing is to praise God, but for others to sing may be all that they are able to do in life.

The tone is light-hearted, or whimsical, which questions whether the song is considered as creative or simply as novelty or, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge would phrase it, a result of mechanical ‘fancy’ or organic ‘imagination’. More relevantly, the song has proven to be a somewhat preconscious influence on my own lyric of ‘Surprised by Song’ which, because of its ‘mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space’ and its ‘receiving all its materials ready made from the law of association’, appears to spring from the notion of Coleridgean ‘Fancy.’¹⁴⁹

This playfulness in the use of language, which is a feature of much of the psych-folk fraternity mentioned in Chapter 1, is a recognition of the experimental, learning language acquisition of the child. Jonathan Culler, more specifically, reflects on this particularly on ‘Rhythm and Repetition’:

Verse is closely related to dance and song; it is also closely related to the child’s own speech, which is full of chanting and singing, as well as of primitive verse forms like the war cry and the taunt song. Young children generally like poetry: they are engaged by its rhythm, entranced by its repetitions, and perhaps at some level deeply pleased by a regime of adult language so full of nonsensical rhyming and chiming. By the time they leave school, they have generally come to avoid it, perhaps because it has been linked to a poorly orchestrated practice of interpretation, even though their attraction to rhythmic language has not diminished. Their attention has shifted to music but, strikingly, songs with lyrics are vastly more popular among the young than music without lyrics – a fact that ought to be suggestive for thinking about lyric in general.¹⁵⁰

The playfulness may also be seen as a folky step into the realms of the poetic which, until the 1960s, was almost the sole domain of the public-school middle class, for those who wrote it, and its readers. The language play is also an unconscious challenge to the dominant use of Standard English and the accepted codes of formal communication. Its simplicity is its ‘message’, suggesting to a young audience that they can do this creative thing as well; they do not simply have to be passive recipients, they can also be active participants.

¹⁴⁹ Abrams, M. H et al. (eds.) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Sixth Edition, Volume 2*, 387.

¹⁵⁰ Culler, J. *Theory of the Lyric*, 170.

Communication and play become mixed in the song ‘Hello Little Flower’ (AMDG, A2) which, as an innocent song, is full of the language of play, nature, and their positive effects. It encourages the listener to consider the world from new perspectives. In verse 2 the speaker encourages the flower to see the ‘smiling bluebell’ in the nearby landscape. When he imagines himself as a worm in the third verse, the flower, from that perspective, would look like ‘a giant in disguise’. Victor Shklovsky termed this act as defamiliarization, by ‘making the familiar seem strange’,¹⁵¹ although for Softley and a young listener willing to take a single step into the world of ‘what if...’, it is encouraging imagination through a mini drama.

3.4.3. Creativity Comments on Society

‘If You’re Not Part of the Solution, You Must be Part of the Problem’ (SR, A6), may have been a political slogan from 1968, but the encouragement of Softley’s down-to-earth, colloquial final line, ‘so come on in and lend a hand’ suggests that the primary impetus for the song is for the individual to join the collective, rather than violent political power, as the song welcomes unstoppable change through solidarity.

In the song ‘Ship’ the euphoria of exploring space is tempered by the destruction that man has brought upon his home planet of Earth. The most lyrically interesting part of the song is how the certainty of verse 7, which states, through tight musical performance and vocal delivery, that Earth is, ‘where we all are living’ and ‘where we all belong’, is questioned in the final line, ‘Or can nature be wrong?’ Ecological concerns of the 1970s and 80s are now coming to the fore in direct action by Extinction Rebellion and all political parties being pressured to put the issue of climate change as a priority in manifestos. The song, ‘Water Sister, Water Brother’ (SS, A3) warns ‘don’t let it turn to sand’ with reference to the life-giving power of water. The spoken word middle of the song refers to Buckminster Fuller’s concept of

¹⁵¹ Lemon, L & Reis, M. (Transl.) *Russian Formalist Criticism*, 5

‘Spaceship Earth’ and is another ecological plea, ‘the Earth is all we have, we must look after it and cherish it, because it’s home.’

With his Catholic background, Softley returns to questioning the teachings of Christianity in the post-industrial world of urban sprawl which develops at the expense of the natural landscape in ‘Magdalene’s Song’ (AMDG, A5). He disregards the immoral label attached to Mary Magdalene in favour of the essential femininity and sympathy offered by her: ‘when the joker walked up Calvary it was her who shed the tears.’ The song talks about whores, heroin and cocaine, things that society tells us are bad, but the needles and the cocaine are a by-product of what the new lifestyle is bringing. Escapism is only necessary when people are confined in small spaces doing meaningless, repetitive work. So, at the end of the song Softley associates himself with the marginalised, outsider figures of society, ‘stick that needle in my arm, I really wish you would’, some of whom may be his listening public.

Even on his final cassette, Softley would comment on contemporary social issues. The song ‘Octaves’ (WM, 4, 1985), in which he sings in acapella style, intoning a Northern accent, is a direct representation of the life of the coal miners working underground, as their livelihood was being eroded by the pit closures constantly in news stories during 1984.

3.4.4. Creativity through Passion and Imagination

Softley often sings about his passion for women, from the “pop love song” (SFSS liner notes) of ‘All I Want is a Chance’, through travelling to see a girl in ‘West Country Girl’ (SFSS, B5), the blues wordplay in ‘Shucks Blues’ and romantic yearning ‘Went Down to the Sea’ (SS, A5 and B5), to the happy togetherness of ‘Lady Willow’ (AMDG, B1) and then perhaps more symbolically in ‘Lady May’ (C, B1) ‘And the harvest song is for Lady May and her flowery crown’ which may suggest the wreath from Christianity as a symbol of the victory of life over death. There is also the little love song, wrapping up a lady, memory, music and

poetry, of 'The Fair Rose' (C, B3) and similarly the power of womankind is often expressed through flowers and nature, 'Flower of orange, I heard the high wind sing / Flower of orange my lover on the wind' (Flower of Orange, (M, A1). Then, to break the innocent spell, 'Transylvanian Highway' (C, A6) takes the timeless 'boy meets girl, and they fall in love' saga of popular stories and songs and transposes it into a description of fulfilled sexual desire. The title, as well as having the Bram Stoker association with vampires, is a real road opened in 1974, which Softley may have travelled along. The opening line, 'As the moon shone through the wychwood', places us in a magical setting. There is the manifold symbolism associated with the moon again, which echoes back to 'Ode to the Fair' (C, A1) and then there is the witchwood, which was a mythical tree with magical qualities. The repeated chorus, after each two verses of the narrative, has the final line, 'I know the art of love is the finest art - that Heaven did inspire', which combines much of Softley's essential interests - 'art', or the process and creation of song poems set to music, 'love', which has timeless, universal appeal, as well as 'Heaven', where religious questioning has proven to be a part of all of his albums so far. I should think it was part of Softley's game to make a listener wonder whether the story was from reality or basically a fantasy. The sexual imaginative fantasy regarding a shop mannequin in 'Lady's Looking Good Today' (M, A5), is much more obvious and humorous, and there is the more down-to-earth sexual excitement that could be had by ignoring all telephone calls in favour of visiting a lover, 'Well she took me by the hands and kissed me on the lips / and the thunder and the lightning came out my fingertips' in 'Telephone Call' (M, A6).

3.4.5. The Creative Enigma

The second verse of 'The Minstrel Song' (AMDG, A4) describes the minstrel's art in who speaks, how, to whom and for what purpose. The voice is described as clear and musical, the message is a timeless one, harking back to medieval times, 'with a work held high, like a

sword that flies'. The second verse, through flowers and jewels, tries to place the creative impulse, and finds surprise in something apparently small, insignificant, and momentary, 'a drop of dew on a spider's web, with the sun a shining through', so that the function of the minstrel's song is as a courtly love lyric, praising the beauty of the listener.

There are two works on *Mensa* (1978) that are words without music. The first narrative contains mystery in a story, 'Pride of Pearl' (M, A3) is told in the style of a Folk story and moves from observation of a ship in the first verse, to fantasy, 'in romance I travel with her' in the second, while the beginning and ending contain the mystery of 'Through the rigging climbs a briney young and stalwart pride of pearl'. The second, 'The Power House' (M, B3) as a Folk poem, contains multiple interpretive possibilities spanning the struggle of the two-way creative imagination 'though I stand in torment before the mirror of your tomb', to speculations on 'love' and 'the poet' to conclude that all is to be washed away 'down to the rivers and the oceans to where at last the sea holds sway'. It is not necessary to explain everything in a song, sometimes the creation of mystery can make the process more interactive.

3.5. Myth

Part of Softley's creative repertoire, expressed by treating Nature almost as if it were a religion, is a form of Paganism. Paganism, although it is associated with an irreligious outlook, is the origin of festivals, rituals and observances which were later taken over and renamed by the Christian belief system. Blake was aware of this and created his own mixed mythology to combat the injustice of organized religion, which Softley reflects upon in 'I'm So Confused' (AMDG, B5).

There is transmission of the myth making of the self, through powerful questing language, to the listener. 'You Go Your Way, I'll Go Mine' (S, B1), through a rather strident, insistent

rhythm, contains simple verses with images of romantic heroism and allusions to mythology, 'To ride upon a fast, white steed / Wind through your hair / Like some winged messenger / and up into the air'. Also 'Knighthood' (C, B2), in which there is a heroism of the world-weary traveller: 'I'm a rider – of the high wind – shadow of the sun / A knight on horseback, and alone I'll ride along / Through the forest of Many-way – by the lake of not-forgot / With a casket of Quicksilver, and a jar of Moorish love.' The imaginative mix of words in the chorus adds to the enigma of what he claims to be carrying, which is essentially life, death, and love.

And through observations of and reflections upon the natural world, 'Eagle' (S, A3), in a communication of power and wonder, 'The eagle sees all / but is rarely seen at all', as well as reflections on science-fiction in the song 'Time Machine' (S, B3), which speculates on the possibility of what an individual might have been in the distant past, 'you could have been me', to the endless potential of what an individual could be in the far future, 'a star tripper, maybe'.

'If Wishes Were Horses' (AMDG, B3) cites Classical myth directly, 'They'd drop from the Trojan horse or stand and fight beside Hercules' / They'd defeat the Spartans', as a means of inspiring the listener in a song that inquiries into the whereabouts of today's heroes.

3.6. Me

I have simply indicated above some ways in which Softley's lyrics may be seen/heard to be working creatively, aspects of which later will be seen to have an influence on my songwriting.

Raymond Williams' further comment, 'In many societies it has been the function of art to embody what we can call the common meanings of the society. The artist is not describing new experiences but embodying known experiences'¹⁵² is pertinent in view of Jesse Darling's exhibit that won The Turner Prize for Art 2023, which visually depicts the UK from a geographical vantage point and consists of 'sculptures made of commonplace objects conveying "the messy reality of life"' and unsettling 'notions of labour, class, Britishness and power'.¹⁵³ This is something that many people understand, it just takes an artist to represent it for them.

I am typing this on a MacBook Air which apparently, I am told, incorporates a program system popular with creatives. I do not use it creatively. As a product of my time and subject to a seeping nostalgia from those around me, I would favour an Imperial Black typewriter, or Romantically, one of those typewriters used by Kerouac. I could use the Mac to write this enquiry using speech – just think of the beautiful mess that I could produce!

Creativity tends to adapt with the times to human needs. Forty years ago, creative expression was not a realistic part of the education system for many of us. Higher education courses are now accessible in popular music, folk studies, and acoustics. Surely this must be a step in the right direction.

¹⁵² Williams, R. *The Long Revolution*.

¹⁵³ Bakare, "Jesse Darling wins the 2023 Turner Prize."

THE BRIDGING SECTION

THE INTRO - Exploring the title, recording, sequencing, and presentation.

There are twelve recorded songs. Softley had twelve songs on *Sunrise* (1970), which indicates that twelve is an acceptable number of songs for an album.

Poetically the number twelve is believed to hold significance in cosmology, ‘in nearly every mythology and religion, in fairy tale, legends, and the manner of measurements and traditions, the number twelve figures significantly’.¹⁵⁴ Such a line of interpretation equates with some of the supernatural lyrics that Softley explored on *Capital* (1976), which also had twelve songs. de Jongh’s pamphlet proposes a means of developing human consciousness through dramatization of the twelve archetypes in a manner that was rather in keeping with the exploratory nature of Underground culture in 1969. It retains an interest psychologically and critically through Carl Jung’s theory of the Collective Unconscious, which was discussed briefly in Chapter 1.11 ‘Introducing Theoretical Approaches’ and incorporated into the psychedelic reflection song ‘Invisible Gold Bear’ (Track 06).

The title of the collection is, *What about Reuben?* One may find religious significance in this in the life and deeds of Reuben, the son of Jacob from the Old Testament, which could, in turn, be associated with Softley’s life and Catholicism. One may equally find musical significance in the title from the American bluegrass song, ‘Reuben’s Train’, which I first heard from another cult musical outfit called The Holy Modal Rounders. The Rounders retain the traditional fiddle and guitar tune, but add some contemporary verses of their own, in a manner not unlike my sometimes-spontaneous musings at live gigs (see Chapter 5).

What about Reuben? also has associations with the title of Softley’s fourth album, *Any Mother Doesn’t Grumble*, in that they are both spoken word responses to a chain of thought

¹⁵⁴ de Jongh, Tammo. *The Magic Circle of the Soul*.

or discourse; when faced with comments from critics about the content of his album, Softley's response may well have been, "well, any mother doesn't grumble", whereas my question, "what about Reuben?" was a later reflection after a discussion that I had about the power of music with a group of Gen Z individuals, one of whom claimed to have little or no interest in playing or listening to music at all, thus negating any notions of influence or identity from the point of view of the listener.

The sequencing of the tracks begins with a live recording at a music festival from 2018 of my first song which I used to play in the 1990s. My live gigs do not have a set list, as I maintain a commitment to serendipity and catching ideas that emerge by chance based on the atmosphere of the gig, a wish to involve the audience at various levels, and a certain belief in the immediacy and possibility of the live event (again, see Chapter 5). In the tradition of Folk, the remaining eleven songs were recorded simply in one or two takes as rather outdated MP3 files on a small, hand-held digital recorder. I could have been even more archaic and recorded them onto cassette, but there would still have been the transference to digital files to make them accessible to a potential listenership. Softley gave permission for his tape *War Memorials* to be uploaded to YouTube.

Serendipity and spontaneity remain a feature of my live gigs, but the home recordings have been sequenced chronologically, roughly in accordance with when they were written. What emerges from this reflects the changing cultures observed throughout the project, as song themes and attitudes move from psychedelic reflection ('Invisible Gold Bear'), suggestive symbolism ('Fire Revisited'), gentle satire ('Bad King Nigel'), revolution ('Bad Planning'), which were discussed in Chapter 1, to biographical homage in 'Song for Softley' as a summary of Chapter 2, to aspects of Softley's musical and lyrical style, starting with the direct imitation of 'After HS2', to the lyrical realism of 'Eliot's Field', the musical influence

heard on ‘Diffusionism’, to a combination of musical and lyrical styles in the memories and song focus of ‘Surprised by Song’, which were discussed and explored in Chapter 3.

Researching Softley’s style has informed my approach to song writing and has been influential in developing my own song craft.

My own music making, whether it is meditative guitar instrumentals, guitar noodling between songs at live gigs, an improvised fragment of a song in response to an occurrence at a live gig, or a conscious effort of sitting in front of a laptop screen and typing a few rhymes along a theme for later musical accompaniment, mostly reflect aspects of my own folk culture.

They may incorporate aspects of classical, pop, rock, blues, the experimental avant-garde, or other music of the mind, but they are all from outside of the music academy, being self-taught, homespun, as an amateur desire for expression. Some of the lyrics, such as the literary devices in ‘Fire Revisited’, may reveal the experience of a little remembered training in content and form from within the Higher Education system, but there is also the unavoidable influence of overheard words and phrases from one’s immediate context, which can lapse into musical cliché, as in ‘Every Little Helps.’

Some conscious compositions, such as ‘Fire Revisited’, ‘Invisible Gold Bear’, and ‘Song for Softley’, have yet to be performed live. My hesitancy with these songs is firstly that I have not internalised the lyrics yet, and secondly, related to that, is that they did not emerge out of the social context of performance. These songs were consciously written, as opposed to emerging from the mode of speech. Such issues were explored in Chapter 4.6 on my own song writing processes, but it may be sufficient to comment here in relation to performance that these songs, as well as ‘Bad King Nigel’, which was refined after the original impetus was laid down socially, are more lyrically intense and are songs for listening to, rather than songs to encourage spontaneous reactive processes. These written songs communicate a

more intimate atmosphere, possibly for a Folk Club setting, rather than in the variable contexts of entertainment at pubs or private parties. They may even be most effective on a vinyl album or CD where they may be heard by individuals or small groups at home.¹⁵⁵ This recalls some of Softley's songs, which communicate an intimate atmosphere through solo performance on the *Sunrise* album, and which I imagine were not part of his live gigs.

Accompanying artwork could have been included here as digital images or videos, but for a thesis based on lyrics and music, these may have been seen as a distraction. The overall idea is to promote auditory listening and imagination, rather than the more familiar culture of passively looking.

An album product may be thought of as being like a book, in that the product has permanence, which is not found in the mutable flow of live sound. Negotiations with the producer regarding the sequence of songs could equally be a consideration to convey musical cohesion for mood or juxtaposing musical or lyrical themes for audience impact, resembling the demands of editors and publishers for the book format, although both forms may represent a totality. In the future, if the artefact were to be channelled as a product, I could possibly embellish the tracks by playing flute or electric guitar on certain songs, or hire a recording studio, other musicians, and graphic designers, but this takes us into commercialism, which neither Softley nor I am in favour of. It is probably best to see the twelve songs as a starting point on a songwriting journey; besides, the current musical culture may be wholly indifferent to such music and lyrical musings, leaving us to reflect, 'What about Reuben?'

¹⁵⁵ The broadest comparison for this within a mainstream, group context, is when, in 1967, The Beatles retreated into the studio, while The Rolling Stones continued touring.

THE SONGS - MP3 recordings of 12 Songs, with the overall title: “What about Reuben?”

<https://essexuniversity.box.com/s/ut4q01c7ts1uiqxft8tmf3jheurgpqr>

THE LYRICS AND COMMENTARIES:

01. The One Chord Song

Well, you can't go wrong with a one chord song

It's not too short and it's not too long

Well, you sing it loud and you play it strong

Cause you can't go wrong with a one chord song

Well, you can't go wrong with a one chord tune

Please don't worry it'll finish soon

This is the music that they play on the moon

So, you can't go wrong with a one chord tune

(Guitar solo, free-form section of vocal noises, and the 'yes/no' interlude)

Still, you can't go wrong with a one chord song

It's not too short but it's much too long

Well, you sing it loud and you play it strong

Cause you can't go wrong with a one chord song.

And you can't go wrong with a one chord tune

Please don't worry it'll finish soon

This is the music that they play on the moon

Cause you can't go wrong with a one chord tune.

OM.

Commentary

Folky foundations, freedom of expression, anti-art, ironic reaction to the times, or just “a mere piece of rubbish in the vacuum of life”

‘The One Chord Song’ is included here because it was my first step into singing one of my own songs. This is rather a difficult thing to overcome; not because of some Bloomian anxiety of psychological competition with past writers, but simply because it is outside of one’s zone of experience. Therefore, a starting point, once the musical rhythm was in place, was to talk as freely as possible, and it just happened that I had been thinking about composing a song so that the subject matter was in my mind and the spontaneous moment found its way to the simplest end-of-line rhymes. This approach is foundational in my attitude to music. This attitude is a simple recognition of rhythm and rhyme in music and lyrics, a hope for some communal bonding and involvement from an audience, and a slightly satirical attitude, which is possibly one of my main influences regarding the purpose of creative lyrical music.

Rhythm, repetition, and simple end-of-line rhymes are effective ingredients for reaching an audience. Short, direct phrases, and short pauses, while the rhythmic music is present in the background, are helpful in allowing time for an audience to assimilate the information. Confusion, an individual stance, or inhibition may obstruct the first call and response line, at which point further emphasis, gestures and a second take, may be used to encourage involvement.¹⁵⁶

The song emerged for me when almost everything else had failed, approximately thirty years ago now, and was fondly recalled by a fellow musician on a chance meeting in Cambridge

¹⁵⁶ Recall the character in the film, *Dead Poets’ Society*, who was exercising his right not to join in, as well as the persistent, infectious rhetoric used by Sly and the Family Stone at the Woodstock Festival in 1969.

recently. In performance it benefits from a preamble to explain its call and response structure and announce that it has a freeform middle section in which the listening audience can do exactly as it pleases. Once started, the song incorporates a series of asides, firstly to draw attention to the one-note guitar solo, which claims to be learnt from Eric Clapton, and secondly as a self-referential element to highlight drugs references in the lyric. Both may be interpreted as ironic comments on classic rock and pop musical culture for comic effect, but, as if to disappoint the critical theorists, there was no conscious attempt in the 'writing' of the song; it simply evolved that way over a series of live performances. The song has been performed in different musical contexts, at festivals and at pub gigs, although it confused many of the guitarists at a Folk Gathering who, encouraged to join in, were desperately trying to find the chord, only to be told at the end that it was a modal chord consisting of two notes rather than the familiar major triad. This was an oversight on my part, rather than a deliberate deception, nevertheless, the Gathering joined in with the call and response lyric.

The song began from the ringing of the modal chord, which came first, then the forward-moving rhythm, then some spontaneous spoken lyrics, which were made potentially effective and memorable by the constant end-of-line rhyme and the persistent rhythm. As a performance song it became embellished over time with a varied preamble, directions for possible audience involvement, a one-note guitar solo, and a free-form middle section, concluding with the cosmic OM.

Initially, when the song came into being in the mid 1990s, it included a comment as part of the preamble about 'getting back to basics' which was one of the slogans that our then prime minister John Major was using to gain the public vote, so in essence I was ironically following the advice of our leaders. Although I thought that his slogan was too simplistic in its hope for some imaginary past ideal, I nevertheless insisted that this was what I was doing

through the constant use of one chord. In a self-contradictory way I also saw the constant one chord as a reaction against those musicians who insisted on only performing their own compositions, without realizing the influential debt to the past.

Its oral origin, its simplicity and its call and response structure indicate a debt to the Folk tradition, and the song is most effective for a listening audience at a folk club (see the video at www.craiglive.co.uk), rather than a large gathering of people at a one-day festival, as is the case on the recording included here from 2018. Although the song may have a debt to the Folk tradition, it is influenced more strongly by the new folk idiom of the mid 1960s and a need to move beyond the reinterpretation of traditional folk songs into a personal authenticity expressed in one's own lyrical voice.

The debt to the past can be heard in the rhythm, although I was hardly aware of it at the time, which is borrowed from Bo Diddley back in the 1950s. The song may be interpreted as taking a political stance, as musically it opposes the familiar verse-chorus structure of the pop song. It goes beyond forming a rapport with the audience in encouraging individual free expression in the middle section and reflects sincerity and authenticity, as I was the one who created it. Once again, we halt at it going beyond the level of entertainment, as 'The One Chord Song' is lyrically empty, except, perhaps, in its encouragement for individuals to try to create something themselves. This playfulness in language and music is recognised in a similar way to the conclusion reached in *The Language of Jokes* (Chiaro: 1992 p.123).¹⁵⁷

The song is dissembling, ironic, self-mocking and self-reflexive as it refers to music culture and other musicians. This style may be heard in the asides that can be used in the song, as in the comment "that's the drug reference" on the line, 'This is the music that they play on the moon', as well as the comment "I learnt the solo from Eric Clapton" after playing a one-note

¹⁵⁷ Chiaro, D. *The Language of Jokes*, 123.

guitar solo. Such silliness may be noted as a form of irony in literary terminology or, as the song is performance based, may be closer to the character of the *eirōn* from Greek comedy, disrupting conventions of song and the expected passive role of the audience in a manner rather like the archetypal Fool from cosmology, all with the ‘artistic’ effect of momentary liberation from convention through music, in that the song only consists of the one modal chord, and lyrically, in that the middle section encourages vocal expression which is only limited by convention and physiology.

Musical and lyrical spontaneity are, however, only a starting point for a song. ‘The One Chord song’ is conscious of this as it reminds the audience, ‘please don’t worry, it’ll finish soon’. There are other elements, such as melody, variety, and complexity, that can be effective as further ways for personal satisfaction or for audience engagement at a more subtle level, which can be developed with song crafting. Nevertheless, the song is out there, was remembered by fellow musicians thirty years later, and remains as a foundation in my approach to song creation. Certainly, more time has been spent writing about the song, or theorising the practice, than was spent on its composition. Is it an ‘artistic’ statement or, in a phrase that I would often use at the time, “a mere piece of rubbish in the vacuum of life”?

02. Every Little Helps

I was born to be a traveling man

I've been to Tesco's and back again

I walk everywhere, I don't have a van

Coz I was born to be a traveling man

I've got no direction in my life

My best friend just ran off with my wife

I thought I knew them both pretty well

But now I'm sure that we will meet in Hell

(Repeat chorus)

I've got no money coming in

I've got no food and I sure am getting thin

And the bailiffs, they won't let me forget

That I am fifteen million pounds in debt - I don't fret though

(Repeat Chorus)

My old dog died yesterday - howl!

And I can't think of nothing more to say

Still, there is one place left to go - can you guess where it is?

And that is down the road to Tesco - let's go there!

(Repeat Chorus)

Commentary

Pathos to bathos or, “some people just sling words together”

The discarded is a symptom of the age in which we are living. Frederic Jameson and the postmodern capitalist society, technological development, a faster pace of life, the wasteful consumer society, the way songs are consumed through the popular resource of YouTube.

‘Every Little Helps’ is a song, consisting of a few verses with a repeated chorus, which may fall into the category of “it’s so bad, it’s good”. The verses tell of a narrator’s awful life - my woman left with my best friend, I have no money and I’m in debt - and, in the final verse the mock-hopeless country song cliché of ‘my old dog died yesterday’, before a breakdown in language as a form of expression, ‘I can’t think of nothing more to say’. The narrator has dreams of travelling but, in each chorus, can only make it as far as Tesco, where he is continuously reminded of the supermarket’s slogan, ‘Every Little Helps’.

The song originally started as an improvisation along the romantic blues theme of travelling, which reflected life for some of Softley’s songs on his first four albums, but I had abandoned it because it lacked any artistry, craftsmanship, subtlety, development or interest. However, in the right live setting, which may be a small pub gathering of mildly interested people, the song, because of its musical familiarity and lack of lyrical skill, can sustain interest and receive a favourable response.

The text can be approached with some basic literary terminology from Greek rhetoric. The character’s acceptance of his situation could be termed as Pathos and intended to evoke pity from an audience. The character’s life is at such a low depth that this literary trope could equally be termed as Bathos in its descent into the trivial. The character’s continual acceptance of his situation may even prompt listeners to reflect on the philosophy of Stoicism. A casual listener can easily understand the lyric, the essentially direct blues

structure of the music, the repeated chorus, the waiting for something good to happen which never quite arrives. There is also the lyrical assurance that the listener's life is not as bad as that of the character's, so perhaps the song should not be discarded, given an appropriate setting.

If the song were to be influenced by Softley's trajectory, it would be part of the blues atmosphere of the *Street Singer* LP from 1971 which, as well as continuing his lived theme of travel, has songs in the blues idiom. Some of his blues songs suggest that, because modern man has so much unrecognised wealth, he is unaware of the true feeling of the blues 'Peoples Talking 'Bout Hard Times' (SS: A7), while others, like 'Shucks Blues', employ innuendo for comic effect (SS: A5). Some of the black humour in the content of 'Every Little Helps' can be found in exaggerated expression of the mundane, 'And the bailiffs, they won't let me forget / That I am fifteen million pounds in debt'.

The title, 'Every Little Helps' makes the consumer wonder whether the seller or the buyer is the one being helped, which adds to the exaggerated misery of the song. At best, or most pretentious, the song effect could be cathartic, which is an overused Freudian term, originally from Aristotle, for the purifying of the emotions through art. At its worst, the song is something that Softley would dislike: 'One of the things I've got against a lot of the modern music is the way that some people just sling words together' (Frame: 1970), and this does appear to be what has happened. In the moderate pace of modern life, the song could be considered as an exaggerated product of modern existence, clothed in humour to absorb the blow.

03. After HS2

Back in 2010 it began to be planned

To be new and fast and unite the land

Linking London, Brum, Manchester, Leeds

City to city, it's what everyone needs

And the train may run along the high-speed track

But how will they put the landscape back?

In 2020 a virus took hold

But they carried on building the new for the old

To unite the country, whatever that means

Turning ancient woods into Milton Keynes

And the train may run along the high-speed track

But how will they put the landscape back?

Ninety billion, a high price to pay

For twenty minutes in the business day

But in 2030 Brexit came back

And we stopped thinking 'bout the cost of the track

And the train may run along the high-speed track

But how will they put the landscape back?

Now in 2040 the line is nearly done

The people lost and the government won,

But the cities are empty, there's no need to roam

Because those left alive are all working from home.

After The Third World War Is Over

(Or How I learnt to live without myself) (Softley)

Rain falls, no-one's around,
No grass or trees anywhere on the ground,
Just a great desert, it's all black and white
And the days seem to be just as cold as the night.

And the wind blows, rain and shine,
Oh God, why didn't we stop in time?

Sun shines, up blows the dust,
Showing all the metal all turning to rust,
Bricks and mortar, they slowly sink down,
There lies a skull and it's perfectly round.

And the wind blows, rain and shine,
Oh God, why didn't we stop in time?

Seas's gone, it's almost a lake,
My body's all sore and beginning to ache,
The pain in my head is driving me mad,
It hurts me so much I no longer feel sad.

And the wind blows, rain and shine,
Oh God, why didn't we stop in time?

Fire's been and gone, burnt everything to the ground,
Put my hand in my pocket and I pull out a pound,

I laugh to myself, though it hurts my face,
'Cause I've got a pound, but there's no human race.

And the wind blows, rain and shine,
Oh God, why didn't we stop in time?

Commentary

Imitation invites comparison, rather than creative innovation

‘HS2’ is an imitation of the music, as well as the language and delivery, of the opening song ‘After the Third World War is Over’ (or How I learnt to Live without Myself), on Softley’s first album from 1965. As it is a direct imitation, I have included the original song for comparison. This was my first conscious venture into sitting and writing a song, compared to spontaneous improvisation, with the initial idea that I would take one or two songs from Softley’s seven album-length recordings and purposefully replicate, as closely as possible, the lyrical content and forms, the musical style, and the delivery of the tracks.

I do maintain that it is productive to bring Softley’s songwriting and attitude into the critical domain and believe that by focusing on his works it will help me to channel my rather nebulous approach to guitar playing. However, the concept of direct imitation was quickly abandoned. Firstly, as explored in Chapter 1, Softley’s music is only one influence on me from within a particular cultural era. Secondly, as explored in chapter 4, I would like the imaginative guidance from a fellow solo musician to be a means of discovering my own musical and lyrical ‘voice’, rather than, in contemporary music cultural terms, creating a tribute album. Finally, it became clear after writing and playing ‘After HS2’ that a direct musical imitation was inaccessible and the resulting lyrical output was personally unsatisfactory, largely because the process invites a comparison through influence, rather than the more liberating concepts of empathy, absorption and innovation.

My original notes, after listening to Softley’s song, were:

The Music - played in dropped D tuning, quick repetition of 2 chords, D and Em. The style is more folk orientated than anything else, in the sense that the guitar playing is secondary to

the lyrics. The relatively quick repetition of the chords is like early Bob Dylan in its earnestness.

The language - light tone, heavy subject, combining the idea of trying to be entertaining yet still having something to say, both within the time frame of less than 2 minutes. The delivery of the song, or how it is played, as well as the content, or the simple language and rhyme, are contrasted with the seriousness of the subject, which is imagining what the planet would be like after a nuclear war.

The Form - 4 verses in song. 4-line verses, rhyming couplets. Question in the 2-line chorus, inclusive pronoun. Simple description moves to effect. Slight humour, absurdity of situation.

Some observations on my imitation:

Firstly, there is the problem of the original subject matter. The complexities of on-going, warring nations is an issue that I find so distressing, almost as an innate force of mankind, contrary to one's individual nature, that it defies comprehension, and becomes immobilising in how to deal with it. Consequently, I brought the issue down from a global to a national level and settled on the ongoing government project of HS2 and what I perceive as its unwanted destruction of the ecosystem in favour of commercial profit. So already the imitation of the subject matter had dissolved, even if the imitation of form, style and delivery are still present.

I imagine that Softley found the process of writing his song challenging, which is why he chose to situate the observations in the verses in the future, after the nuclear war is over, and introduce some darkly comic situations into the narrative as a coping mechanism and to emphasise its absurdity. In comparison, 'After HS2' sets the four verses in specific decades,

indicating the length of time that the project is taking. By verses 3 and 4 there are some serious objections to the cost and longevity of the project, set against the then more urgent international issues of COVID and BREXIT.

At the time of writing 'After HS2' I complained about the difficulty of uniting the lyrics with the music and how I attempted to use similar chords and a similar rhythm to the original, despite it not being my natural way of playing - I typically wanted to make the guitar playing more intricate to engage the emotions, not to simply use the guitar as a vehicle for the words.

Anti-war songs and war warnings were in vogue in folk, rock and psychedelic music in music culture up until the late 1980s. Are people still writing and singing them? Has my musical awareness lapsed back into the familiar? Is the standardisation of music culture preventing such songs from reaching the public? Are we unable to make effective lyrical comments on war in the present world situation?

04. Island Hopping Man

If you look in my face you will understand

That I'm an island-hopping man

Never at home in one single place

Away with nothing planned

.....

Some people say we are not made this way

And that we're all just part of the land

With our head in the sky and our feet in the clay

And the water by our hand

.....

(Middle bit)

Come down to the sea with me and Rosemary

And take a trip out from the strand

With the blue in your eyes into eternity

Join the island-hopping man

.....

(Repeat second verse)

Commentary

Some borrowing from literature, life and song, plus slight musical wandering

'Island Hopping Man' is more of a standard song in its familiar verse-chorus structure, but the chorus, rather than consisting of words, takes the form of a chant. This makes it easy for an audience, if encouraged, to join in with it. The rhythm is in a slightly jazz style, and again, because of its open, relaxed feel, allows space for an audience to add rhythmic percussion

from the musical box, particularly in the instrumental middle section. The lyric, although a little personal, may be considered as a communal possibility, and is accessible because it is undemanding on the listener's attention. Paradoxically, because it is undemanding on the listener's attention, it suggests that it can equally be ignored. At approximately three minutes and thirty seconds, the song is of a similar duration to a radio-friendly pop song and claims to offer nothing more than, in my case, a memory, and for an audience, a relaxed possibility.

You could ask, how did that song happen? and I could reply that it came to me in a vision, or some other Romantic notion, and that would not be too far from the truth. Maybe it was the weather, being rather quiet, rainy and grey, or perhaps it was waking early and drifting unconsciously around the house in a vague breakfast routine. Anyway, the chords came first, then a melody, with the dotted line here representing a wordless sound chorus, which potential listeners would be encouraged to join in with in the traditional participatory manner of folk song. I felt that this 'chorus' melody was like the rising and falling of a sea wave. Next, I was in my kitchen and had a passing observation that the two tea towels both depicted scenes from islands, one from the island of Madeira and the other showing the flowers of New Zealand. Mick Softley had an unreleased live number entitled 'I'm a Leaping Man' and the two things coincided into 'Island Hopping Man'.

Then it was from a memory of when I was about twenty traveling around the Greek islands with a girlfriend.

The first line 'If you look in my face you will understand' is, on reflection, reminiscent of 'Wooden Ships' by Crosby, Stills and Nash: 'If you smile at me, I will understand....', while the third line, 'Never at home in one single place' is similarly expressed by Softley in one of his songs which is a sentiment that I share as well. It would be my dream life to live on an ocean-going boat and travel from island to island.

The first two lines of the second verse are a slight reflection of a John Donne poem, while line 3 of that verse includes some elemental opposites, before the final line which is partly taken from the Softley song 'From the Land of the Crab' (AMDG: A7), therefore slight borrowings from Literature and song.

It has a middle instrumental section to alter the flow of the music. Softley's songs, which we are using as a creative stimulus, often do not have a chorus (or even a middle instrumental bit) in their focus on one thought or image, but 'Island Hopping Man' uses this instrumental break and hops around slightly to create a relaxed atmosphere and to add a transitional moment between the first and the second parts of the song.

The third verse is an invitation, again from an actual memory when my girlfriend, now named in the song, and I were sharing food and drink down on a beach - I think we were on the west coast of Turkey by that time. There were a group of locals who had discovered a large turtle shell which we were looking at, and I wondered momentarily while typing the lyrics, if I should include something about it in the song, but it didn't happen naturally so it was omitted. There is the literal or psychedelic reference to 'the trip', again as used by Softley in his song 'Time Machine' (SR: B3), while 'the strand' could be a poetic word for the shoreline or could refer to an over-commercial seafront bar in Torquay many years later, which was very popular for many, although quite repellent for me, preferring my own form of escapism. Finally, there is the interpersonal 'you' in the song, with the neutral distance of the colour blue and the other-worldly possibility that can be found in another person's eyes or simply on another island.

As well as the seldom repeated chorus, Softley does not often repeat a verse in his songs.

Furthermore, when singers repeat a verse it is typically the first one. However, I've elected

to repeat the second verse, mainly because it has a bit more of an enigma about it. The whole thing took about 20 minutes.

05. Song for Softley

Intro: Hey Mick Softley, I wrote a song for you

Just trying here to sum you up, it's what I shouldn't do

'Cause you can't contain a lifespan in a list of broken lines

With poverty vocabulary and a dash of simple rhymes

A travelling folk singer, before folk had been revived

Standard music numbers - the romantic beatnik kind

Yielded to your own voice, you cast your worries to the winds

And headed on the road to find what freedom brings

Find me by the sea down along the coast of France

Pursuing wine and girls and song in the love of life's true dance

Leaving Europe on my dream horse, across the frozen Bering Straits

Onward through Alaska and down into the States

You gave the finger to the factories, disillusioned by the Beats

Left the money with the business men to find freedom on the streets

You ask: 'Am I the Red One' or 'The Catcher in the Rye'?

More questions fewer answers on Earth under the sky

With songs becoming poems and increasingly obscure

To the lyric ways of Ireland you find a better shore

In forty years of playing, through Sunrise and through rain

The folk goes through the Spinning Wheel and the song begins again.

Commentary

Softley as a catalyst for songwriting

In this commentary the focus is on the influence of Softley's religious schooling, his escape into the nearby forest, which he claims to be even more influential than his formal education, his literary interests, his symbiotic relationship with the folk-pop icon Donovan, his impulse to keep moving on to new places and new ventures, and the ultimate overriding influence of changes in society which affected him.

After a period of uncertainty from Internet sources regarding the date of his birth, possibly due to the outbreak of the second world war, it is now generally acknowledged that Michael 'Mick' Softley was born in South Woodford, Essex, on 26th September 1939. His mother was originally from a small farming background in County Cork, Ireland. His father was from West Ham and worked as a mechanical engineer. Softley was taught by nuns at his local primary school and attended a Jesuit College in Tottenham. The first sixteen years of his life were spent living next door to Epping Forest which he saw as his playground. After leaving school he began an engineering apprenticeship but was dismissed for absence, so he took an unskilled manual job to earn some money to facilitate travel. Entranced by the writings of James Joyce, Softley travelled to Paris, stayed for a short while in The Mistral bookshop where he met some of the American Beat poets, but found a more fitting community amongst the emergent culture of the folk-blues songwriters and stayed playing on the continent for three years. On returning to Britain the 1960s folk music scene was flourishing so he started his own folk club called 'The Spinning Wheel' in Hemel Hempstead in 1964, where his association with the overnight folk-pop sensation of Donovan led to the recording of his first album *Songs for Swingin' Survivors* (1965) and a single 'I'm So Confused' (1965). Disaffected with the management Softley then produced his own psychedelic single 'Am I The Red One' (1966) which went unnoticed at the time, so he put

some royalties into a do-it-yourself wine business, which was financially successful but personally unrewarding and so abandoned. In 1969 Donovan once again proved to be the catalyst that brought Softley back to music, and a new record company and producer saw a three-year contract with CBS, resulting in *Sunrise* (1970), *Street Singer* (1971) and *Any Mother Doesn't Grumble* (1972). There were sightings of and encounters with Softley from friends and musicians throughout 1973 to 1975, as the singer continued his beatnik life traveling and busking around Holland, France and Belgium, before he released the solo LPs *Capital* (1976) and *Mensa* (1978) via Doll Records of Zurich. At the beginning of the 1980s Softley was living with the travelling community in England but, largely because of County Court rulings on travellers living in the lanes, he moved to Northern Ireland in 1984. He performed songs and poetry at The Belfast Folk Festival and recorded his final album *War Memorials* on tape in 1985. He continued living in Enniskillen for the remainder of his life, still writing unpublished poems and stories, until a recurring stroke confined him to a nursing home where he died on 1st September 2017.

Is song an effective medium for capturing the essence of a character's life?

Writing a song homage to a respected singer is not new - David Bowie did it critically, cleverly and respectfully in his 'Song for Dylan'. Loudon Wainwright III also paid homage to Bob Dylan, on the poet's 60th birthday, in an informal, relaxed style, involving some mimicry and retrospective on the varying quality of some of Dylan's albums over the years, but again ultimately concluded the song with sincere respect.

Bob Dylan was asked to write a tribute to his, then very unwell, folk hero Woody Guthrie. He ended up writing a long, poetic travelling tribute of fourteen pages. Treading similar paths to Guthrie, only thirty years later, Dylan expresses a shared dissatisfaction with lived experience, through life's bombardment of the senses and how one can be pushed out of

shape or into an unnatural way of being through commercialisation and interpersonal relations. He concluded, as I vaguely recall, by referring to the eternal abstractions of ‘truth’ and ‘God’ along two possible paths: ‘the church of your choice’ or ‘Woody Guthrie in Brooklyn State hospital’ before uniting them both in the natural landscape at the closing of the day.

Mick Softley is not a great hero - I do not model my live music playing on his words, music, lifestyle or attitude. Nevertheless, his character, travelling life, style of playing and lyrics are worthy of recognition. I imagine that Softley would have approved of an elegy, or at least a dirge, as a form of respect after his death, and these are appropriate poetic forms if one had known the deceased, as ways of honouring an individual’s passing. I only know some of his music. Homage was originally a means of paying respect to one’s feudal lord and so that term does not seem appropriate either. I would have perceived Softley and myself to be social equals. Ultimately, Softley recorded songs of his experiences throughout life, therefore it seems appropriate to respond in song as a means of commemoration. A song is, after all, the celebration of life.

‘Song for Softley’ has five sections which are largely descriptive of his life and attitude. The narrative description is used as the simplest and clearest means of informing the listener about the subject. There are some more obscure references in the content regarding ‘Am I the Red One’ single, *Catcher in the Rye* novel, Softley’s *Sunrise* album and The Spinning Wheel folk club, which may result in a listener inquiring further, but overall the focus on some of Softley’s events and attitudes keeps the tone informative and unsentimental.

The first line starts casually enough, like Loudon Wainwright’s tribute to Dylan, but the remainder of the verse reveals my hesitancy regarding the nature of the task, as well as my genuine insecurity about my ability as a songwriter. The first verse is best expressed as an

introduction to the song if one were to perform it to an audience, as it is a precursor to the main content and consequently has a slightly different pace and register from the whole.

Verse two, or the starting of the actual song, is descriptive of the early folk singer, heading out on the road. The third verse refers to Softley's expressed, but seemingly impossible, wish to travel by horse to America. Verse four shows his attitude to manual work, the commercial world, and includes references to a single that he produced, a fictional anti-hero of similar discontent and wonders about the question forms that were a frequent part of the singer's songs.

The final verse closes the life by his departure for Ireland, but there is the mention of his folk club, 'The Spinning Wheel' from 1962 and the cyclical nature of songs, which is also observable in nature and possibly in life itself.

Regarding the music, the guitar is tuned down a semi-tone which was common for blues players, as well as for Softley and his contemporaries, like Donovan. The chords are basic first-position ones of C, G, Am, F, placing the song in the key of C major, which is a very pleasing and harmonious key and one that Softley used often, particularly on his second and fourth albums. There is the addition of the Dm, to give the melody a little lift, as well as a basic finger-picking pattern between verses, used by Softley and Paul Simon from the era, to musically link the verses and provide a momentary pause for listeners to assimilate the lyrics of each one.

Mick Softley's life, times, and music are my primary influences for this songwriting project and they have helped in creating a sense of self belief at the start of the journey.

Other lines and ideas that were rejected along the way...

It's like listening to a bird's song at the dawning of the day

Or remembering a lover's touch, now many years away

...with a voice of gold and blue

Voice ringing like a bell

To Heaven or Hell

He fell out with the factories

And beatniks are out to make it rich

Don't believe the business men

But a dream will hit reality

Just some dream of my own

Without contradiction no progression...

In the search for real, live people

To tell it how you see it and be true to yourself as well

And Softley's words that could have been a chorus -

'Control is felt

And firm for all

The saints of seal

Now hold your soul'

06. Invisible Gold Bear

The voice is heard from darkness calling forth

Awaiting the return now round the Earth

The time is fast approaching - drawing near

It fills your cup with wonder laced with fear

And still the goodly sun is pouring down

And the rhythm of the day goes round and round

Your archetypal friends all play their part

In this momentary journey of the heart

The Lesser and the Great Bear in the sky

Then suddenly it shakes you with surprise

Lumbering, magnanimous and kind

Behold! The Golden Bear walks through your mind

Glittering in splendour from the sun

Is the feeling here the same for everyone?

No reason for to question or explain

Such reaching after reason is just vain

And still the goodly sun is pouring down

And the rhythm of the day goes round and round

Your archetypal friends all play their part

In this momentary vision of the heart

Tickles in the brain to make you smile

You know he's only with us for a while

No need to speak or even words to tell
know everything just is and all is well.

Commentary

Psychedelics, the Collective Unconscious, and the preconscious nature of writing

The suggestion was to write a psychedelic song.

In 1966 musicians sought to communicate the psychedelic experience in sound. The Beatles did it with Lennon's 'Tomorrow Never Knows' and Softley followed almost immediately with 'Am I the Red One'. The Beatles were still working together as a band and communicated the psychedelic feeling with George Martin's manipulation of sound in the recording studio. Softley may have directed his single but he also had recording technology at his disposal, plus the addition of backing musicians on drums, bass, piano and vocals. For me to attempt to imitate a song from the dawning of British psychedelia may only result in an awkward parody of the 1966 sound of underground pop. 'Am I the Red One' is Softley's only psychedelic pop underground single, but I believe that the influence of psychedelia permeated some of his later albums and thought, therefore what has emerged in my attempt is more representative of something from Softley's folk-rock period, particularly from the ambience of his fourth album from 1972, in the sense that it is more of a reflective, meditative acid-tinged acoustic song.

My offering here is following the principle advocated by Wordsworth in his preface to 'Lyrical Ballads' as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', although I am not looking at 'a host of golden daffodils'! My song is not focused on an externally perceived object; rather a feeling, or an hallucination, 'Behold! The Golden Bear moves through your mind'. I have used a few passing adjectives, to describe its movement, appearance and intent, which help to charge its effect so that it may even be interpreted symbolically.

The hallucination is linked, at the start of the second verse, with the concept of astronomy, or mankind's place within the Universe, which Softley explores on his second album.

There is a momentary question in the third verse as I briefly wonder about shared humanity, brought about by vague notions of Jung's collective unconscious, but this is almost immediately dismissed as being from the ego trying to assert itself. Such psychological considerations are inevitable under psychedelic conditions.

The twice repeated chorus in the song employs another Jungian concept of archetypes, but more relevant for me were two books that I had been reading at the time, Tammo de Jongh's *the Magic Circle of the Soul* and Richard Gardner's *The Purpose of Love*. The first two lines of the chorus point to the fact that, although things may be different in the mind, the external world continues regardless. Such reflections on binary oppositions, such as the individual vs the collective, the inner vs the outer world of perception and the small Earth within the vast Universe, are further issues in the song, but the 'conclusion' points to integration rather than division.

The psychedelic experience is a Romantic pursuit and yet ironically the form of my lyric surfaced into a traditional, Classical form almost of pentameter lines with rhyming couplets. This was not a premeditated decision - the first line set the rhythm and the end of line rhymes are the natural approach for a song writing novice. It appears that my song writing adventures, like the psychedelic experience, or even life itself, may have some basic guidelines, but the outcome cannot be foreseen. It is like the pre-conscious nature of writing. I have another vague recollection of 'The Thought-Fox' by Ted Hughes working in a similar way.

The register in the first verse of the song, like some of Softley's lyrics, has a slightly elevated, literary style, which is a result of the significance of the occasion and perhaps the constraints

of the metre. Nevertheless, this is not sustained or developed, as may be seen in the final verse where the need to be sincere in plain language is more apparent.

‘The Invisible Gold Bear’ may not communicate the exuberance of the British underground of 1966, but it attempts to show some of the idealism, light and even humour of the awakening that such an experience can bring. By 1968 many musicians were communicating the darker side of psychedelia as the culture moved from innocence to experience. Twenty years later in 1987 the culture had been reduced to the repetitive beats and dance of ‘Acid House’ raves. Nevertheless, I would suggest that the influence of psychedelics on Anglo European and American music resulted in a great flowering of creative output - a mythical Golden Age of music - to which even twenty-first century musicians and song writers make a slight return.

When Softley’s single from 1966 failed to have any impact he disappeared from the music world for four years, re-emerging in 1970 with the *Sunrise* album. One wonders, without resorting to any biographical detail, what sort of music he would have produced in the four-year absence if he had not become disillusioned with the commercial world. Such speculation offers a certain amount of creative freedom - freedom being a concept close to Softley’s heart - for my creative section of this project.

07. Fire Revisited

The colour of the past
Like November fading fast
But the fire from inside burns ever on
In the huddle of the cold
Drawn by flames of pink and gold
And were dancing in the dark until the morn

And as the spark did leap
To hear the fire angel shriek
Exposed by licking flames of dark desire
And suspended outside time
In a bowl of crimson wine
Consumed both by the flames of mutual fire

The morning silver sun
Caused the fire witch to run
To the security of hearth or to be free
Forced to wear the cloak of flames
Life may never be the same
Now united in the fire eternally

In the flat white of the day
All the colour burnt to grey
But it comes to everyone as no surprise
Formed both in the flames
Of the pleasure and of pain

The phoenix of the fire will ever rise.

Commentary

“Simply selected because they sounded good”, or psychological outcome from sociological interaction

Many songs from the era that I am exploring have been written about fire. Literally as a heat source, but more often in a figurative or symbolic way as an inner fire of passion, or by drawing on the literature of myth or religion. The elemental potential of fire is a great resource for music as well as lyrics. The enigma, energy and power of fire can be expressed powerfully and persuasively through music.

There is a narrative to fire - out of darkness, the spark, the building intensity, the warm glow, the dying flames, the ashes, and this appears to be what is happening in ‘Fire Revisited’. We can trace the colour imagery from ‘flames of pink and gold...crimson wine...silver sun...flat white of the day...burnt to grey’, to show the movement from multicolour to monochrome.

Similarly, we can trace the movement of time through ‘the past...November fading fast...suspended outside time...the morning...of the day’ and into the future as symbolised in the final line of the song. The interweaving of colour and time into the story is for continuity or cohesion to help the whole thing hang together and heighten the overall dramatic atmosphere.

We could identify borrowings from other songs and places. ‘Dancing in the dark’ is the title of a Bruce Springsteen song. ‘The fire witch’ is almost like an archetype taken from ‘In the Court of the Crimson King’ by King Crimson. ‘The fire angel’ is the brand name of a smoke alarm. ‘The cloak of flames’ is a modification of an album entitled *Bag of Flames* and ‘dark desire’ is from William Blake. They were simply selected because they sounded good, which was also given as an explanation for the effectiveness of his poetry by Bob Dylan in his Nobel Prize for Literature speech.

So apparently that is all that needs to be said about it. Songs can be of all shapes and sizes, they do not need to impart philosophical explanations, religious epiphanies or even psychological insight, however, this one may imply a psychological outcome from a social interaction. It seems that there is an attraction in the first verse, 'drawn by flames of pink and gold', a fulfilment in the second 'consumed both by the flames of mutual fire' and an accepted parting in the third, 'to security of hearth or to be free'. Both characters are similar in their elemental origins as they are 'formed both in the flames' and in their actions, as they are 'united in the fire eternally'. The feeling is almost of a mutual, inevitable, harmonious balance, but no state can be so pure as to totally exclude the other, so they now carry with them the knowledge of experience and are 'forced to wear the cloak of flames'. Nevertheless, the experience is less of a Promethean torment and more of a flamboyant radiance as symbolised by the mythical phoenix.

08. Bad King Nigel

Bad King Nige came to my place
Along with our friend Steven
For to go and drink Mill Race
Eat pizza crisp and even
The night was dull to tell the truth
After quite a strange day
When they saw a sprawled-out youth
Lying by the highway.

“Look there Craig” King Nigel said,
“What is this man’s problem?
That’s a strange place for a bed,
Someone might have robbed him”
“Sire I think he might be drunk
Just seeking attention,
Prob’ly smells just like a skunk
I guess he’s from Northampton.”

“Bring me food and bring me wine,
Both to help my thinking,
I think he is a friend of mine,
We used to go out drinking”
Craig, he wandered off alone
For to get provisions
Nige stayed looking at his phone

While Craig had quite poor vision

“Nige, the time is getting on,

The Mill, it does close early,

If we wait, we’ll see the sun

And I’m really thirsty”

“Down here past the church of God

And don’t fall in that hollow

I feel just like a blind man’s dog

I lead you always follow”

(alternative final verse)

(Alternate verse)

Both thought it was pretty odd

The youth back on the pavement

Just a silly homeless sod

Making a bold statement

When they got up to the door

The Mill was all in darkness

Therefore heathen men be sure

Your sins prevent your access.

Lo! an angel did appear

Not usual in this carol

Filled them all with mortal fear

And chilled them to the marrow

Denounced them as ‘three men of sin’

In Hell to be frustrated

Banished from the bar within

And excommunicated.

Good King Wenceslas

Good King Wenceslas looked out
On the Feast of Stephen
When the snow lay round about
Deep and crisp and even
Brightly shone the moon that night
Though the frost was cruel
When a poor man came in sight
Gathering winter fuel

“Hither, page, and stand by me,
If thou knowst it, telling
Yonder peasant, who is he?
Where and what his dwelling?”

“Sire, he lives a good league hence,
Underneath the mountain
Right against the forest fence
By Saint Agnes fountain.”

“Bring me flesh and bring me wine
Bring me pine logs hither
Thou and I shall see him dine
When we bear them thither.”

Page and monarch, forth they went
Forth they went together
Through the rude winds wild lament

And the bitter weather

“Sire, the night is darker now

And the wind blows stronger

Fails my heart, I know not how

I can go no longer.”

“Mark my footsteps, good my page

Tread thou in them boldly

Thou shall find the winters rage

Freeze thy blood less coldly.”

In his masters step he trod

Where the snow lay dinted

Heat was in the very sod

Which the Saint had printed

Therefore, Christian men, be sure

Wealth or rank possessing

Ye, who now will bless the poor

Shall yourselves find blessing.

Commentary

“A satirical Heart”

“Bad King Nigel” is a parody of ‘Good King Wenceslas’, I have included the original here for comparison. As an enduringly popular form of burlesque within the genre of satire, this one imitates the musical and lyrical style of the original but transposes the noble characters of legend to the common man of modern Britain.

Like the original, which is based on the life of Saint Wenceslaus, this parody is based upon the real characters of Nigel, Steve and myself who like to visit The Mill Brewery, which is just over the road from my house. I play music there once a month, Steve enjoys the Mill Race beer and Nigel looks on the garden there as an earthly Heaven from his toil of the working week. The dialogue, however, is a total fiction - the words and actions are simply a reversal of those in the original hymn, which was written by John Mason Neale in 1853.

The form, or structure of the parody, is largely the same as the original, for both have five verses with eight lines in each one. The rhythm, or metre of the line, has a four-stress beat, or a trochaic metre, which uses a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one and has the effect of creating a jovial atmosphere. Similarly, the end-stopped lines have an abab cdcd rhyming pattern that is used throughout the original and the imitation. Furthermore, the original rhyme is structured to have single-syllable so-called masculine rhyme contrasting with the double-syllable feminine rhyme of alternate lines, some of which has been observed in the imitation.

The reliance on, and reaction to, the original in terms of content is rather self-explanatory, for example, the unusual name of the good king ‘Wenceslas’ is taken to its opposite by the apparently now unpopular name of the bad king Nigel; the ‘feast of Stephen’ is reduced to

‘our friend Steven’ and the harshness of the winter snow is replaced with a pun used on a modern-day comic Christmas card.

The dialogue in the second verse, rather than being succinct and helpful, as it is in the original, now reveals the two characters to be rather stupid, ‘that’s a strange place for a bed’ and dismissive of another person’s misfortune, ‘just seeking attention’.

The third verse originally sees the monarch instructing the page to bring food, wine and fuel for them to carry to the poor man, but the modern version sees the bad king demand food and wine for himself while he concentrates on his phone.

The dialogue of the fourth verse, where the page complains and is fortified by the footsteps of his king, is modernized by Craig whinging in a selfish manner and Nigel complaining about Craig following him, again a reversal of the encouraging words of the king in the original carol.

One thing that I liked lyrically in this carol since early school days, apart from the strange word ‘dinted’, was the word ‘sod’ in the last verse.

One thing that I disliked, or was suspicious of, since early school days, was the moral of the last four lines - the idea that those of wealth or status could be absolved from responsibility simply by offering a kind word to the less fortunate once a year did not actually seem very Christian to me.

Therefore, with these things in mind, there are two possible options for the final verse of the parody, although both have a similar outcome. The first option retains the use of the word ‘sod’, but as a slang word for obnoxious, rather than its poetic use indicating the ground. The second option forgoes the schoolboy whimsy by introducing an angel, like Ariel as a

vengeful harpy in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, here denouncing Nigel, Craig and Steven as 'three men of sin' and barring them from beer and Heaven.

On reflection I think I prefer the alternative ending. Firstly, it reminds the listener that this is supposed to be a Christmas carol by introducing the motif of 'an angel'. Secondly it uses the comic device of stepping outside of the narrative to acknowledge that such phenomena are 'not usual in this carol'. The literary allusion to *The Tempest* asserts the overall song into a tragicomic genre and offers an intertextual reference to the often-moralizing world of Shakespeare. Finally, the second ending does not moralize generally to exclude mankind based on the fact that a person does not follow the Christian religion, it simply condemns the characters in the song excluding them from community and church in the finality of the word 'excommunicated'.

Satire should have some corrective purpose to highlight some folly or injustice, therefore anyone abusing their power would be obvious targets. Our three characters have the power to help the homeless youth but choose not to do so. Parody may be one of the easier forms of satire as it simply involves an adaptation of the original source. My objection is not with the source legend, but with the Victorian lyrical treatment of the material, and it appears that I am not alone in this view, as Elizabeth Poston, in *The Penguin Book of Christmas Carols*, was similarly unsympathetic, referring to Neale's 'ponderous moral doggerel' and how that it 'sounds ridiculous to pseudo-religious words.' Therefore, the gentle satire of 'Bad King Nigel' is diminishing the carol by making it an object of amusement and is deriding the stupidity and selfishness of my fictional self and by extension the possible attitude of mankind as a product of modern society.

Softley, with his religious education (Chapter 2) and his questioning of the ways of religion in his songs (Chapter 3) drew the line at commercial manipulation for activities that he saw as

sacrilegious for the promotion of his single 'I'm so Confused' in 1965. What these activities were was not revealed, but sacrilege amounts to much more than simply questioning the ways of religion or making a bold statement about man's relation to God. Sacrilege amounts to robbery or defiling of holy ground. Therefore, his objections amount to a disagreement with the ways of commercialism, rather than to man's personal relation to God. Pete Frame comments on Softley's 'satirical heart', which equates with Wizz Jones's comment on his 'cheeky persona', yet the overriding influence of Softley's formative education resulted in a defiance of individual influence for the motive of profit or fame.

'Bad King Nigel' is simply a slightly satirical song. It is not sacrilegious. It is the closest way that I could relate my own secular world with the ways of Softley's religion. His songs which use religious concepts are a means of resolving religious confusion within himself and potentially may have the influential effect of prompting some sort of thought or discussion among his audience. Similarly, my song is self-satirizing which, from a humanist point of view, has the potential to amuse, engage and potentially influence an audience.

'Bad King Nigel', as a seasonal parody, means that it can only be played at Christmas time. However, it does have the potential for a small choir of volunteers, with the aid of song sheets, to sing it together in this way, particularly as Carols are traditionally sung communally without musical accompaniment, which would make it acceptable for a performance in a Folk Club. I have sung it, solo with guitar, at an Open Mic, where the expectation is for a relatively polite listening audience, and received a favourable comment from someone who understood the humour and recognised the local references. However, there are also those who, being sensitive to the Christian message, would find it offensive to disrupt the words of the original Carol, when in truth the song was only intended as a comment upon the selfish nature of modern secular society.

09. Bad Planning

For the end of the news, and I know you'll agree,
The worst town to live in is now Aylesbury,
Not Luton, or Hemel, or Corby or Slough,
Aylesbury is worse than the rest right now.

If that is the case, I want to move there
We'll live in The Green Man on the market square,
Come to the commune, we'll reclaim the place
The culture is formed from out of the base.

We blame the media, big business and planners,
Attack these people with sharp words and spanners,
All ages and races, it's time to unite,
Redress the balance: Charles Manson was right.

We've passed 'The Wasteland' and mortal despair,
The true revolution is now on the air
Be free from your labels and those who wield power,
Give them a bullet, a kick and a flower

You think it extreme? Or I don't have a clue?
But how do you know if it's really my view?
Is this a song that is just badly planned?
Then it must be like Aylesbury, the worst in the land.

Commentary

Revolution for the Hell of It; My Own Private Revolution.

This may be a good opportunity to talk about my own live music involvement with the word ‘Revolution’ in relation to the more mainstream musical offerings of songs by the Beatles and The Stones. In the late 1970s I recall listening to the Beatles song ‘Revolution’ on juke boxes, preferring it to the long, tedious, sing-along chorus of ‘Hey Jude’ on the ‘A’ side, despite the latter being one of the best-selling singles of 1968. I liked the distorted guitar, screams, and vocal ‘In/out’ uncertainty of whether we were up for a violent revolution or not. I later incorporated the song ‘Revolution’ into my live song repertoire, changing the ‘Chairman Mao’ lyrics for a more contemporary grumble about recent prime ministers, ‘If you go voting for people like Tony Blair / You ain’t gonna make it with anyone anywhere’. I would also mock the song, as well as the idea of revolution, subverting Lennon’s assurance of ‘You know it’s gonna be - alright’, with ‘D’ya wanna cup of tea? Alright’. Sometimes I would simply play half of the song, joining it up with ‘Revolution’ written by Tracy Chapman twenty years later in 1988. Tracy Chapman’s song still has a greater resonance with live audiences; it is more easily imitated than the Beatles song for one guitar and voice, being more recent it has greater currency, and is a simpler more direct lyric. Additionally, I was asked to play The Stones’ ‘Street Fighting Man’ at a friend’s wedding, where we had shared visions of the two families starting a food fight over the buffet! It therefore appears, in these contexts, that the confused commitment of 1968 had been replaced by my own personal word-play humour, along with public indifference, in the twenty-first century.

The Beatles and The Stones are essentially rock music and Hewison asserts that ‘rock both shaped and mirrored the values of the cultural revolution ... its primary effect was indeed to transmit feeling rather than thought ... the political ideology of rock – and by extension that

of the counter-culture – remained almost entirely personal.’¹⁵⁸ The emphasis on the personal, unfashionable for the era in critical theory terms, which was for the multiplicity and playfulness of the text, opening its possibilities, is significant for Softley who, in more realistic, practical terms, saw the writing as reflecting the writer.¹⁵⁹ The emotional impact may direct us back to notions of Romanticism put forward by Wordsworth in his ‘advertisement’ for *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) and the undercurrent of feeling implies a connection to the oral folk tradition. Softley was not recording in 1968 and he was disdainful of the divisions being created by the counterculture, in favour of a more individualistic but accommodating perspective, but it appears, for Hewison at least, that other art forms, such as drama and film, were more effective in creating change in society.

One is tempted to take issue with Hewison’s view. It may be true that the sense of sight, which drama and film are so dependent upon, occupies the largest area of the brain, and the verb ‘to see’ has entered spoken language as a means of acknowledging understanding. However, the effects of sight and image are instantaneous and short-lived, whereas the relatively unexplored effects of hearing and sound may provoke a deeper, more lasting, response. I can accept the two-way flow of influence between the music and the counterculture, with the music and/or the lyrics instigating emotional responses in the individual, but Hewison maybe underestimating the power of music as a personal, emotive force - it is simply that individuals have not found ways to harness the power yet. The power may be glimpsed from marching bands, at political rallies, at rock festival gatherings, or illegal raves - if the music ‘strikes a chord’ with the individual through to the collective and then is enhanced with the power of persuasive language, the feeling may be articulated into thought and action. I have experience of individuals organising themselves into collectives

¹⁵⁸ Hewison, R. *Too Much! Art and Society in the Sixties*, 184.

¹⁵⁹ Frame, P. “Mick Softley.”

through a musicians' co-operative in the 1980s; the idea was that we would share out the resources we had, being equipment and knowledge, for the benefit of the whole. It worked for a while, until a group of skinheads smashed the place up, which forced its closure and subsequent takeover and reopening as a chain gastropub.

The song 'Bad Planning' starts off as if it were the last story on a local news report, which is where I heard it from originally in 2022. There is the half line, 'and I know you'll agree' because those who live in the named towns outside of Aylesbury may be momentarily pleased to hear that it is not their town this year, while those who live in Aylesbury will not be surprised either, as in rather typical Aylesbury style, they were largely responsible for the outcome of the vote. The sense of playfulness is intended to continue throughout the song, which is dedicated to the people of Aylesbury and their sense of humour. John Otway, one of England's great rock and roll clowns, is from Aylesbury, as is the musician and craftsman Wild Willy Barrett, who wrote his own comic song about Milton Keynes. Other towns in the south east of England are mentioned - I've lived in Luton, Mick Softley used to live in Hemel, I've played a gig in Corby and of course there is Slough which, as well as reminding me of 'the Slough of Despond' from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, was also immortalised by John Betjeman who ironically got his wish a few years after writing his poem about the place when he called for bombs to fall on it.

The fourth line paraphrases the news from the second line. Modern media does this kind of thing a good deal - I guess that it thinks people are stupid, with minimal attention spans, so it has to re-cap and hit them with the same piece of information multiple times for the information to sink in - even if what is being reported is largely

meaningless, such as the creation of lists. Devising lists from the best to the worst is perhaps good for the media but not for the people. Those at the top tend to develop a feeling of smug self-righteousness and can be condescending to those at the bottom of the list. Of course this could then transform into a feeling of detached complacency. An additional verse for 'Bad Planning', if we were concentrating on this issue of Englishness and social class and identity, could be:

The worst town in England? We don't think that's fair

You're safe in the village so I guess you don't care

Affluent people have always looked down

On the young and not wealthy who live in the town.

There must be some interesting sociological research on this. From a literary/musical standpoint it reminds me of the song, 'What You Do with What You've Got' by Roy Bailey. The concept of place is a significant one in poetry and song, as people can gain a sense of identity from where they live. Perhaps this is rather an English trait. Softley, in the lyrics to 'Traveller's Song' (AMDG: A6), presents the now clichéd binary in songs from the early 1970s, contrasting the goodness of the natural environment with the alienating effects of the cities. On a more locally specific level, the Aylesbury rock band Marillion celebrated town sensibilities in the song 'Market Square Heroes' in the early 1980s.

The first line of the second verse, 'If that is the case then I want to move there', is intended to create a sense of surprise and should indicate a comic tone to the remainder of the song.

There is the sense of empathy with the people of Aylesbury, as the personal pronoun 'I' moves to the collective 'we', for I used to play regular gigs at The Green Man pub, which was a site very close to the original Aylesbury Friars music venue and now stands empty on

the market square. However, the few lines in the song that are based in actual memories are soon replaced by imaginings of political idealism and fantasy.

There is a political naivety in lines like ‘the culture is formed from out of the base’, which is a notion from Marxist literary theory of conflict between social classes, or those who hold power and those who do not. Not only a political naivety, but a lack of semantic coherence between the lines, ‘come to the commune, we’ll reclaim the place’ and ‘the culture is formed from out of the base’, for they imply that ‘the base’ is the commune itself and not the rather awkward concept of ‘the base’ as defined by Marxist theory.

The blame, at the start of the third verse, as the people are encouraged to gather for the revolution from the preceding one, is placed firstly upon the media, which is from where the story originated, secondly upon big business, which typically prioritises profit over people, and ultimately upon planners, for it appears that there is a division between what the people of Aylesbury would like for the town and what the town planners have given them. The erosion of the past, replacing green space and historically significant buildings with slabs of concrete construction, is a classic theme of complaint from songwriters of the second folk revival. Cat Stevens’ song ‘Where Do The Children Play?’ and Mick Softley’s ‘Magdalene’s Song’ (AMDG: A5), both question modernity. The Folk purists before them sang songs warning against industrialisation and modernity. All this amounts to a kind of hazy nostalgia, based upon unreliable memories, rumour, a yearning for lost youth, or a wish fulfilment for some idealised Utopia. Nevertheless, it does not stop the impetus of this song which, if change is the only certainty, seems to be putting forward an idea inherited from Abbie Hoffman’s *Revolution for the Hell of it*.

Confusion and enthusiasm are continued in the third verse, with lines that alternate between sensible idealism, ‘all ages and races, it’s time to unite’ and urgent revolutionary impulse,

‘attack these people with sharp words and spanners’. The restrictions of the literary convention of rhyming couplets by using the word ‘spanners’ as an easy rhyme for ‘planners’, suggests the bad planning of the song as well as the revolution. The same technique is used in the last two lines of the fourth verse, which is idealistically concerned with the relationship between concepts of freedom and power but, when theory meets action the result is apparently a mixed message of violence, excitement and peace, ‘give them a bullet, a kick and a flower’. The flower, apart from offering the easy rhyme with power, was used as a protest symbol to military warfare by groups of young people hesitantly pushing flowers into the barrels of guns.

Central to the song graphically, in that it is almost structurally in the middle of the text, and semantically in that it part of the contradictory ‘message’, as discussed above in verses three and four, is the ‘redress the balance: Charles Manson was right.’ A charismatic and manipulative figure, Manson distorted the minds of his ‘family’ through exaggerated interpretations of song lyrics and disorientating cocktails of drugs, which culminated in the followers committing murders of the rich and famous. It is a slightly controversial statement, mainly used to provoke thought and discussion about inequality in society and the nature of too much individual power and influence. After all, there are political leaders in our current century who are committing similar crimes on a much larger scale. The line presents itself like a political slogan, or as an attention-grabbing device, and therefore similar in style and effect to the populist slogans of media news headlines and so it could be said that it is as guilty as the systems that it is deriding. However, it is saved from this categorisation hopefully by the form of song and the playful register that is used throughout.

The song makes four references to what one might call revolutionary texts of the twentieth century. Firstly, there is the economic treatise of Karl Marx alluded to in the last line of the

second verse, then the distorted violent revolution as put into action by the Manson family in the last line of the third verse. The fourth verse sees a direct naming of the modern epic poem *The Wasteland* by T S Eliot, suggesting that, as it is now, at the time of writing in 2022, one hundred years since the poem was first published, it should be firstly commemorated and secondly transcended, implying that regeneration is now possible. Finally, there is a passing reference to Erving Goffman's labelling theory in the line 'be free from your labels.' They are all one-line references, as the scope of a song, unlike the sustained argument of an essay or political speech, does not allow any space for elaboration. The references could potentially work along the lines of hope, so that a reader or listener may pick up on them and explore new areas of personal or cultural awareness.

The final verse deflates the enthusiasm of this short lived, ill-planned revolution. It attempts to anticipate the reaction of the reader/listener, by posing the obvious questions about going to extremes or enthusiastic naivety, before the narrator retreats into a position of being unreliable, questioning the nature of authenticity and point of view. Nevertheless, the last two lines still suggest that 'the nature of the base will determine the cultural forms that it supports', or 'society determines the production of literary texts,' because, having a close connection with the culture of Aylesbury, it is predetermined that the song will be pretty much like Aylesbury itself. The title of the song is a comment aimed at the town council, who seem to be the main cause of the residents' disaffection. Verses 2, 3 and 4 contain irony in the narrator's idealistic naivety in organising any real social change, while verse 5 concludes with self-irony regarding the writer's lack of song craft. Therefore, like the parody 'Bad King Nigel' which preceded it, this one also has a satirical purpose, although more directly stated. It is written in rhyming couplets, a common form for eighteenth century satirists like John Dryden or Alexander Pope, but unlike those English poets, 'Bad Planning' is coming from the arena of modern song which has abandoned the iambic pentameter line of

the heroic couplet, in favour of a more down-to-earth language of the common people of Aylesbury. There is a rhythm to the lines, but a lack of artfulness and grace, so from a traditional poetic point of view they would be described as doggerel. In poetry this is rather a disparaging term, although W. H. Auden made great use of the style and there is a regular metre to the line of the verse which is quite acceptable for the medium of song.

10. Eliot's Field

There's a place I know, not far from here

It only happens once a year

So, wear your green wellies, the ones with the heels

And come on down to Eliot's Field

The sun was yellow and the sky was blue

I played some blues by the bar and bought some clothes for you

We hoped the people would put down their shield

To make the party at Eliot's Field

We met a couple who seemed quite proud

To be living in a town called Stroud

They disappeared, somewhere else concealed

Somewhere else, on Eliot's field

The moon was silver and the night was clear

We moved closer to the stage, so that we could hear

The rhythm of the music that was being revealed

At the party down in Eliot's Field.

Commentary

Alchemy, Englishness, and The Shipping Forecast

‘Eliot’s Field’ is a description of my experience of playing at a one-day local music festival. It was written almost spontaneously, with minimal lyrical alteration, the day after the mini festival. There is a slight contrast between the moderate pace of the music, to communicate the generally pleasant atmosphere of the event, and the repetition and verbal isolation of the repeated location at the end of each verse, to emphasise the potential energy that could have been engendered in a rural location which is not typically associated with music events.

There is usually a certain amount of excitement and anticipation built up amongst performers before going to play a live gig, as well as an atmosphere of a shifting energy dynamic between the musicians and the audience while playing. This ‘alchemy’ of the two-way influence is further explored in Chapter 5.

The song uses colours, ‘green wellies’, ‘yellow sun, blue sky’, ‘silver moon’, as a visual description of the people and the passing of time in the day, in a way that suggests an influence from Donovan’s folk song ‘Colours’ in 1965, rather than the more psychedelic style of Softley’s ‘Am I the Red One’ from 1966.

The ‘green wellies’ in verse 1, the hope that ‘the people would put down their shield’ in verse 2, and the proud couple from Stroud in verse 3, also communicate a certain degree of English reserve that is noticeable in some villages. Consequently, the day influenced me in a way that could be summed up by a phrase from The Shipping Forecast as ‘moderate or good’.

The moderate pace of ‘Eliot’s Field’ is reflected in a three-chord minor key, playing down too much excitement and allowing space for the simple narrative to unravel.

The language too is accessible and may be heard to contain a few mild comments on my perception of the clientele to add a little colour to the narrative, as was my experience of the day. Overheard responses to the lyric, when playing it at a gig later, included speculation on the location of Eliot's field, which is understandable as the song points an emphasis by suspending the music and repeating the location at the end of each verse. There was also a shared experience regarding the other location in the song in the sense that someone picked up on the line, 'We met a couple who seemed quite proud / To be living in a town called Stroud.' It appears that there was a pre-conscious language manipulation on my part to focus attention onto the location title of the song and, in contrast to its repeated emphasis, it also appears that a lack of lyrical detail regarding people and places was also able to provoke a shared identification from listener experiences.

11. Diffusionism

It is the year - 2025

We are here - we're still alive

The year uncoils - you watch and wait

It is the year - of the wood yin snake

You are charming - you are wise

Sense the snake - time to arise

Transformation - and rebirth

Healing through - the living earth

Like the snake - we shed the skin

That the world - has shaped us in

The snake will know - (when) the time is right

In the silence of the night

It was the year - 2025

We saw clear(ly) - how to thrive

The year slid by - it took its course

Making way for the - year of the horse.

Commentary

2025 is the year of The Snake

Softley has some unusual song titles that at first glance do not appear to fit with the subject matter, such as ‘The Anti-Gravity Device’ (C, A3), and even the album title *MENSA* (1978).

Diffusionism is an anthropological theory about the influence of different cultural traits across the world. It was not my starting point for the song. Initially I wanted something that was in the present moment that also had some mystical import and settled on the year of the snake from Chinese mythology.

This song takes a conscious look at a moment in time from a very basic understanding of Chinese Astrology. A person’s birth sign, depicted by an animal, appears once every twelve years. There are further wheels within wheels, as the animal signs combine with one of five ‘elements’, which are expressed through the dual energies of ‘yin’ or ‘yang’.

Softley’s mystical or supernatural musings can be read as an expression of sexual energy ‘Dragon in the Sky’ (M: A2), ‘Supernatural Woman’ (M: B1), but the power contained in ‘Diffusionism’ does not work like that. It does have the alliterative ‘sense the snake’ and the potency of potential energy that the twelve-year cycle can create for snake people through ‘transformation’ and ‘rebirth’, but they are set within something wider than the individual, which is ‘the living earth’. It is mostly concerned with taking stock of the past and renewal for the future, awareness of the power of the Earth, and the unavoidable trappings of the societal human world. The significance of the year can, however, create new possibilities with the shedding of the skin.

The short, staccato, two-part lines allow for clear annunciation of the words, which contrast with the flowing, unassuming, continuous rhythm of the descending musical sequence. On reflection, the form of the song and the quiet musical accompaniment are reminiscent of

Softley's 'Birdie, Birdie' (SR: B2). I have challenged myself and the attention of the potential listener by basing my subject matter on largely unfamiliar Chinese Mythology and the associations of the symbolic snake, whereas Softley's subject matter begins with the universal familiarity of a bird, feels a sense of wonder in its song and flight, and creates a little wishful love vibe through focused reflection on the subject. Nevertheless, the influence of Softley's quieter lyrical and musical musings is noticeable in 'Diffusionism'. Lyrical influence also goes further than Softley's style, for the last line of the third verse was originally, 'in the forests of the night', but the direct imitation of William Blake's 'Tyger, Tyger' was too obvious.

The first two lines of the final verse aim for the Softley optimism in song, as in 'Hope' (SS: B1) which, in turn, is influenced by the Bible, 'hope springs eternal', before the final snake image of 'slid' is forced to recognise that 'time and tide wait for no-one', and the cycle looks forward to the next year in Chinese astrology, with a momentary change of musical rhythm.

There is Softley's song 'The Great Wall of Cathay' (AMDG: B2) which I have played at gigs previously, and I have played 'Diffusionism' at an Open Mic, with the preamble, "Is anyone born in the year of the snake?" One person, who was born in 2001, was aware of her Chinese horoscope and, as the song emphasised some of the snake's positive characteristics 'charming' and 'wise' in the second verse, she found part of her identity through it. The preamble also claimed that, in terms of Christian mythology, snakes are typically seen in a negative light. Such mythology has influenced popular, spoken culture, as a person described as a snake is typically deceitful, secretive, or poisonous. This may have been partly accountable for the title 'Diffusionism', which hopes to raise awareness of other cultures and systems outside of one's familiar context.

12. Surprised by Song

Sometimes I hear you singing

Sometimes in my dreams

And though you're not now living

It helps me through these scenes

As you skipped over the railway bridge

All singing the chorus lines

The film and bridge are over now

But the song defies the times

Songs of loving memory

Through good times and through strife

A glimpse of true reality

Affirming your sweet life

Once I overheard you singing

It caught us by surprise

Singing in the city

Opposing its disguise

You said that you were singing

Across the desert in a jeep

The freedom of the open land

A feeling you should keep

Songs of loving memory

Through good times and through strife

The song comes to the surface

Affirming your sweet life

I was singing on the open road

Singing on my own

In the cool light of the morning

Trying to get home

Not knowing how to get there

Isn't that the way?

But singing almost freely

And rejoicing in the day.

Commentary

The power of song and the feeling of freedom

The basic structure and idea for this song came about relatively quickly in early morning reflection. The verses are memories, or snapshots of reported realities. The first is the voice of my mother overheard in dreams, the second is a reported memory from my sisters, the third is a shared memory with my current partner, the fourth is a reported memory from the same past girlfriend who featured in 'Island Hopping Man', while the final verse is my own memory of walking home after an all-night party in the woods. What unites them all is that they are all memories of the act of singing. These memories then function to suggest the power of song, which can be experienced to reassure (verse 1), to unite (verse 2), to defy (verse 3), and to express a feeling of freedom in life (verses 4 and 5).

Softley does not delve back into the past too much. A song like, 'Went down to the Sea' (SS: B5) communicates a nostalgic yearning for past friends, but generally his songs keep within the positive present. Some of them, like 'Flower of Orange', hear memories in the elemental world (M: A1), while others, like 'Sing While You Can' (AMDG: A3), reveal that everything and everyone is a song. A similar idea is communicated in the slight move from the first to the second chorus of 'Surprised by Song', for the 'glimpse of a reality' in the first becomes the instinctive song-memory which 'comes to the surface' in the second. Therefore, the song is not so much about memory, as about the power of song and the feeling of freedom.

There is the sense here that, through close reading of Softley's lyrics and listening to his music, there is a sustained yet simple idea in 'Surprised by Song' which can communicate a more personal voice for songwriting and its continuation.

CHAPTER 4: MY SONGWRITING

4.1. Folk, the Avant Garde, Medieval Music, Progressive Pop, and Me, or what are you listening to?

In 2024, to broaden my musical horizons, I forwent the usual rock festival of watching and listening to old bands, in favour of a slight return to a folk festival. Admittedly the festival website was full of persuasive folky togetherness and revival, nevertheless the experience, simply packed into one day, had a Softleyesque life-affirming quality. I was involved at a folk session, chatted with a fellow guitarist about musical interests, live musical involvement and shared time at Nottingham University. I played songs by Pentangle and Mike Absalom at the Open Mic and heard the humanitarian style of Rory McLeod and the political set by Billy Bragg encouraging the crowd to support the workers and join a union.

On the other side of the coin, I attended a concert by Fred Frith and Tim Hodgkinson at Café Oto, of avant-garde, spontaneous, instrumental music. Art music, where the discussion of the aesthetic possibilities is as significant as the music itself. I imagine that Softley would have hated it; my companion did not favour it; I loved it for my perception of the freedom that the music offered.

Next was a fortuitous appearance by Sirinu, a name which symbolises the convergence of different myths, cultures and ideas across history through the inspiration of music,¹⁶⁰ at a local village church. A music played on assorted medieval instruments of learnt interpretations from historical sources. This revivalist spirit of reinterpreting the older music is not too far from my own desire to play forgotten tracks to the community, it just takes a longer historical perspective.

¹⁶⁰ ‘The group takes its name from the Andean word for the treacherous water spirits that, as the source of all music and knowledge, both inspire and ensnare mortals with sounds of their springs and waterfalls.’ Sirinu, *Bold, Fearless & Rash* (Forties Recording Company).

In contrast to this was my experience of a progressive pop genre of mostly instrumental music but with vocal samples from public information films, through the music of Public Service Broadcasting. I suggest that the style was influenced by Big Audio Dynamite from the 1980s but taken further. Creating the musical ambience for language reports that are already in the public domain is rather a fun possibility, especially when so much musical commentary is either linked to likes or dislikes, so much of social language is concerned with the one who is speaking, or full of cycles of repetition. A song like 'Monsoon' by PSB may not be too far from Softley's desire to transmit the old poetic trope of the power of the natural world.

4.2. Sound, Atmosphere and Aims

Looking back, I have always enjoyed sound. As a child I was shouting about, excited by discovering an echo, or using found objects to recreate the sound of a storm. I was very turned on by the radio, and vice versa. Television had the pictures on the screen, but radio gave you pictures in the mind – voices, different languages, shortwave atmospherics, even music. When does sound become music? It largely depends on one's involvement with music: do you perceive the Universe as a musical place, with the rhythm of the rain, the timbre of the wind, the melody and cyclical nature of birdsong, or do you perceive them in a more literal sense of being wet, cold, or through the sense of sight? Do you notice when someone accidentally speaks in rhyme, or the rhythm and cadence of a person's utterances, or are you more aware of what they are saying? This all suggests that music is all around you and within you and it can be perceived this way,¹⁶¹ but for songwriting purposes, and in the present evolutionary context of capitalist society, it needs to be discussed in more of a practical manner.¹⁶² This chapter is about song, and 'song that is a synthesis of music and

¹⁶¹ Kerouac, J. *Big Sur*, 169-188.

¹⁶² Faber, M. *Listen*, 2.

language.’¹⁶³ It will look at the songs, life and attitude of Softley as an inspirational resource for my own songwriting processes, and will consider matters of identity, perception and reception, and the song as a media product. It will be a journey of discovery for me; simultaneously it aims to be a songwriting resource for others.

4.3. Tracing my Original Context; Common Perceptions of Music-making; My Current Context.

My musical playing came about through listening, liking and imitating.¹⁶⁴ Like a lot of people, it was the music that attracted me initially.¹⁶⁵ The desire to play saw my music-making move from the private to the public domain to include playing for family and friends, at folk sessions, at singers’ nights, busking on the streets and eventually being encouraged to sing and play on a semi-professional basis at solo gigs, and the reciprocal process of the social dynamic then caused an adjustment to what was produced. Does this mean that the social force of people is more powerful than the psychological power of music? Perceived individual identity through music and acceptance and inclusiveness from and within a social group can create a tension in the mind.¹⁶⁶ Possibly a way out of such concerns is through the ancient arts of love, peace, persuasion and imagination, filtered through fluidity, not simply for the styles of voices for the delivery of a song,¹⁶⁷ but through a more recent recognition of individual fluidity in society.

As well as the shared observation that listening to and the playing of music changes within the social context, it is also a common perception that people, although lending an ear to new music, essentially favour the music that they were listening to as young adults. Memories of

¹⁶³ Watts, R. J and Andres Morrissey, F. *Language, the Singer and the Song*, 29.

¹⁶⁴ Williams, R. *The Long Revolution*, 3-4.

¹⁶⁵ Hodgkinson, T. *Music and the Myth of Wholeness*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Faber, M. *Listen*, 205.

¹⁶⁷ Watts, R. J and Andres Morrissey, F. *Language, the Singer and the Song*, 224.

a former self, however distorted, can also be accessed through music. My recent line of musical exploration is to (re)introduce people to lesser-known music of the past. This fits in with the current revivalist, nostalgic trend in popular music culture, whereby older people look back to the music of their youth and younger minds inquire into a mythical golden era of music and songwriting. To revive and relive songs from cultural memory is also a characteristic of folk music and folk sensibility.

The fact that I appear to have Softley as a musical and lyrical guide serves to impose some boundaries on the phenomenon of music and the concept of song which otherwise can lead an inquiry down all sorts of rabbit holes or into black holes in space; besides, I like some of his songs.

My own music making is bound up with economic necessity in that I go out and play ‘a wide range of music and styles for pubs, clubs, weddings, wakes and parties’.¹⁶⁸ The different locations suggests that I have some musical variety, adaptability across musical genres, interaction when necessary, and perceived familiarity between songs, and places what I do in the commercial role of entertainer.¹⁶⁹ However, after playing these solo gigs for the past seventeen years, I have begun to experience a growing restlessness with their expected dominant mode. Possible ways of development within this role could be to change one’s context setting by performing at folk clubs, forming a band, organising a spontaneous jam session, or, more organically and realistically, start writing my own songs and filter them into live gigs. There would be no extra financial reward in this endeavour, in fact it may have a detrimental effect on re-bookings, however, for the sake of personal growth, and a belief in the power of words and music, I will have to try. Unlike Softley, I do not perceive myself as

¹⁶⁸ See www.craiglive.co.uk

¹⁶⁹ Frith, S. *The Sociology of Rock*, 164.

a principled artiste; I am at a very grassroots level, unfettered by the machinations of the music media industry and feel that this offers a good starting point for writing a few songs.

4.4. Revisiting some of Softley's Themes; Popular Views on Songwriting; Some Ways into It - the spirit of song, finding the voice, surprised by song; Writing from Individual Experience.

I have already played cover versions of some of Softley's songs at live venues, but to entirely base my songs on Softley's vocal and musical delivery is beyond my range and his lyrical themes are often too personal. The whole enterprise has the feeling of being untrue to myself to the extent of being parasitic and, despite the current nostalgic trend for rediscovering older music, I do not think that the listening world is yet ready for a Mick Softley tribute. As we have noted from previous chapters, Softley's subject matter may be religion and belief, nature and humankind, descriptions of travel, aspects of love, wishes and fantasies - in fact, rather like the traditional ballads from oral culture¹⁷⁰ although he did not resort to them, as well as themes noted in the spirit of the blues¹⁷¹ - the content of his songs covered varied and traditional subject matter, but with an essence of joy for life in all its manifestations.

The popular perception of songwriting is that it should be easy. Afterall, pop songs are typically short with a bit of end-of-line rhyme, possibly a repeated chorus, or at least a lot of repetition, all set to a catchy rhythm. Once the apparatus of the acoustic guitar has been acquired and the six open chords of Am, Em, G, C, Dm and F have been learnt, Donovan offers a method for 'the circumstances of song and melody to appear'.¹⁷² He alleviates any anxieties of finding a topic from the endless subject matter by the suggestion to take a phrase from a poem, magazine, or your own songbook, and indicates that the challenge of sustaining

¹⁷⁰ Sargent, H. C. and Kittredge, G. L. (eds.) *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.

¹⁷¹ Garon, P. *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, 62-151.

¹⁷² BMI.com. *A Songwriting Master Class with Donovan*.

an idea may be overcome by the constant repetition of the phrase over a 4-chord sequence of open chords. The repetition can then be slowly embellished by gradually introducing one's own phrases over the sequence, and through the enjoyment of the playful language instinct and an awareness of the sound, some phrases will stick and the repeated music will fit with the embellished lyrics to achieve a level of personal satisfaction.

I could add to Donovan's suggestion of taking a phrase from printed media to include taking a phrase from spoken discourse. Music is about listening and song should equally come out of lending an ear to conversations and comments from the world around you. Perception in this way enables a writer to find a discourse that is not entirely his/her own and incorporate it into song.¹⁷³ Softley also took some popular slogans of his era, 'You go Your Way, I'll go Mine', 'If You're not Part of the Solution, then you must be Part of the Problem' (SR: 1970) as titles to be used for further exploration. Even a phrase from contemporary discourse like 'it is what it is' could be utilised, which for me might materialise into a song expressing an unsettled sense of the gradual erosion of expression into dead-end, meaningless phrases.¹⁷⁴ There are also practical examples of how voices from the elemental, natural world can be used, 'Flower of orange I heard the high wind sing' (M, A1). I too have unconsciously started a song through the sense of hearing, 'Voices from the darkness calling forth' (Invisible Gold Bear).

Language is recognised as an instinct¹⁷⁵ and human music-making preceded it,¹⁷⁶ therefore pre-linguistic language-less song, through a series of 'musical' sounds to express an emotion, is a further way of evolving a song into being. Softley's song 'New Day, New Way' (SS, B6)

¹⁷³ Comments were taken in this way for Dire Straits' pop song, 'Money for Nothing'. BBC Radio 4. "Desert Island Discs - Mark Knopfler."

¹⁷⁴ Orwell, G. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 54-55.

¹⁷⁵ Pinker, S. *The Language Instinct*, 18-22.

¹⁷⁶ Watts, R. J and Andres Morrissey, F. *Language, the Singer and the Song*, 29.

can be heard to be working in this way, whereby individual sounds metamorphose into a communal chant accentuating positivity. I have also explored the idea of sounds into speech in the potentially interactive middle free-form section of ‘the One Chord Song’.

Sociolinguists maintain that speech always has a social context, but I find speech or sounds overspilling without it being aimed at anyone. Psychobabble therefore may be recognised as a resource for lyrical expression. Singing alone, without the context of performance and therefore from instinct, may be reminiscent of ‘the overflowing of emotion’, but not necessarily with the ‘recollections in tranquillity’.¹⁷⁷ The learnt response is usually to suppress it because of surprise, but the effect of singing can be cathartic¹⁷⁸ for the individual, and for Softley and myself much of what is written and sung, even if it has relation to others and we are separated by period and lifestyle, reflects and reflects on experience. This observation is present in ‘Surprised by Song’, the commentary to which explores the partial origin of songs from dreams as a means of capturing personal experience, as well as overhearing the momentary, personal experiences of other people from the present and the past.

The music of song may be understood as, ‘a fundamental narrative about human experience’,¹⁷⁹ which appears to return the focus to a Bloomian Romantic-humanist perspective whereby songs are written by humans for humans. Uncertain story writers of all ages are often encouraged to write from personal experience, and this can also be the case for songwriting. The era of the confessional songwriter was very popular in Softley’s era of 1970, and allows for listener empathy, although to sing in such a mode may be over-personal, so, according to the learnt experiences of the poet Simon Armitage from his songwriting days in the mid 1980s, one should not be too verbose and should allow space for emotional

¹⁷⁷ Wordsworth, W. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 1392.

¹⁷⁸ Aristotle. “Poetics”

¹⁷⁹ Mitchell, J. *Postwar Politics, Society and the Folk Revival of England, 1945-1965*, 131.

omissions to be supplied through the music and by the listener.¹⁸⁰ Softley can be economical with language to simply narrate an experience, ‘Traveller’s Song’ (AMDG, A6), ‘Introducing my Lady’ (M, B1), therefore, in an attempt from Softley’s example and Armitage’s lesson, my song ‘Eliot’s Field’ narrates a few recollections of an experience playing at a nearby one-day festival (see critical commentary on ‘Eliot’s Field’)

4.5. Perception; Literary Criticism and Critical Approaches; Songs, Poems and Stories

Everyone can engage with a little social criticism, yet such value judgements usually amount to likes and dislikes, particularly where music is concerned, and especially in ways that re-enforce perceived social identities. An alternative listener to ‘Eliot’s Field’ may have equally picked up on the comments about the clientele which I termed as adding a little colour, there is one in each of the first three verses to imply an ‘us and them’ attitude, which could result in discussions of alienation and false consciousness in relation to the ideology of capitalism, and so be more revealing of a conflict model of society. An over-reading or misreading, or the listening equivalent, may even begin imagining about T. S. Eliot, which was not my intention. Consequently, songs and lyrics may represent narratives about human experience, but experiences are potentially cumulative, boundless and unknowable.¹⁸¹ There is an attempt in the final verse to unite, or find the essence of the experience, through a focus on the power of music itself ‘We moved closer to the stage so we could hear / The rhythm of the music that was being revealed’. The possibilities for ambiguity and plurality of the text were kept to a minimum, in a similar way that Softley does in some of his songs, ‘Eagle’, ‘Birdie, Birdie’ (SR), even if the subject matter provokes different associations. My perception here is that song is immediate and fleeting and so the lyrics need to be simple. Any casual comments on

¹⁸⁰ Armitage, S. *Never Good with Horses*, intro.

¹⁸¹ Laing, R. D. *The Politics of Experience*, 6.

the song however can have the effect of broadening narratives of perceived identity and may further discussions of experience.

The whole ethos of folk is traditionally an oral, rather than written, culture of remembering songs and stories and retelling variations of them to live gatherings, but the new folk format of the album meant that songs could be made permanent, lyrics could be printed on the album cover, as on *Sunrise*, *Any Mother Doesn't Grumble* and *Mensa*, and the record buying public could engage in a little literary speculation of the media text. However, I maintain that a song-text like 'Eliot's Field', although it is recounting some personal idiom, should not be the subject of laboured analysis. This sounds like the attitude of the structuralist critic Jonathan Culler, who writes:

In sum, readers appreciated poems much as we do songs. We listen to songs without assuming that we should develop interpretations: we take them to illuminate the world, and we sing them to others or to ourselves, point out what we like about them compare them to other songs by the same and different artists, and generally develop considerable connoisseurship about songs without engaging in interpretation.¹⁸²

This then, perhaps like the impulse of folk, seems to be a return to a pre-war attitude of literary appreciation. Producing a new interpretation of a text is at least a partial act of rewriting. I am advocating that people should write creatively and am trying to explain some of the ways in which the process can be made more accessible in relation to song. If it is perceived that I am side-stepping the issue of interpretation I will include an account of how some of my songs came into being to be included as commentaries alongside the song lyrics. It is simply that songwriters do not usually concern themselves with explanations of the meaning of their songs, preferring to leave that to the critics.

From a functional language perspective, a song could be subjected to a clause analysis through the system of transitivity as a means of illuminating the functions and effects of the

¹⁸² Culler, J. *Theory of the Lyric*, 5.

represented experience,¹⁸³ but this would only account for the language use, not the effects of the accompanying music, and not the effects of the possible received experience of listeners.

There are gaps between the processes of literary criticism and the processes of writing songs.

The critical view when Softley was writing in 1970, and even more so now, suggests that it is not the writer or the song that are up for scrutiny, but what the lyrics reveal about the

listener's experience,¹⁸⁴ but this only reflects the surface level of lyrics and music as

communication. Others, such as the musician and anthropologist Tim Hodgkinson, look far

more deeply into the theory of aesthetics and music¹⁸⁵ whereby different streams of

information are in process which accounts for a divided experience of musical listening.

Three competing mental processes of attention and memory are 'The locutionary, or talking subject, generated in the serial stream of language' in relation to rhythm and social

interaction, 'The sintonic, or gazing subject, which is built up by the changing world of

sensory experiences', and 'the oneiric, or dreaming type' of subjectivity, and its involvement

with the collective social imaginary. Hodgkinson cites Kristeva's work to remind us that, 'the

normal subject is thetic, that is, generated in acts of linguistic affirmation, so by subverting

the symbolic function, poetic language subverts the subject. This is done by the interference

of rhythm, colour, texture and nonsymbolic association and causes a reversion to the primary

processes by which bodies and subjects begin to constitute themselves in childhood.'¹⁸⁶

Hodgkinson recognises the 'primary processes' in Kristeva's work on the symbolic and the

semiotic, despite its 'pessimistic fixities' of psychoanalysis, to be, 'part of the generative

energy for the new forms of subjectivation arising in the aesthetic experience.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Halliday, M. A. K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 106

¹⁸⁴ 'at the point that they see themselves in it, the communication is complete'
BBC Radio 4. "Joni Mitchell: Verbatim."

¹⁸⁵ Hodgkinson, T. *Music and the Myth of Wholeness*, 9-11

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 104

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Critics who are also poets, such as Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney, recognise the power of common language, the oral tradition of the Anonymous lyric, and the folk power of incantations, chants, and popular sayings.¹⁸⁸ This approach simultaneously recognises everyday language use and opens poetry and song up to and from different social classes and different cultures.

I have started using poetry and song interchangeably here because it is claimed that Softley had written collections of poems in his later life.¹⁸⁹ As well as the wonderful writings of Hughes and Heaney which I might say, as the topic is about music, is ‘My Generation’, critically, there are those who deal with the lyric writing but not the musical composition,¹⁹⁰ and those who analyse the possibilities of music rather than the stylistics of the lyrics.¹⁹¹ Looking through lyrics as a stimulus for writing only represents half of the experience unless the reader can listen to the song: the two forms need to be considered together. Simon Armitage recognises the shared origins and overlap between poetry and song (Armitage released an album entitled ‘Born in a Barn’, which is proverbial, idiomatic, like the original title of my collection of songs, ‘Dragged through a Hedge Backwards’), yet he claims to still be trying to process the relationship between the two styles of expression,¹⁹² and announcing poetic lyrics to atmospheric music¹⁹³ may be an exciting venture for self and attracting audiences, but ultimately still creates the impression of two separate forms of expression in which the poetic voice lacks the melody and varied delivery of song. On some of his recordings from the mid 1970s, Softley wrote lyrics that were designed to be sung, ‘Le Monde des Amants’ (C. B4), so that the melody came through in the voice alone, and by 1978

¹⁸⁸ Heaney, S and Hughes, T. (eds.) *The Rattle Bag*.

¹⁸⁹ RhythmOne. “Mick Softley biography”

¹⁹⁰ Davis, S. *The Craft of Lyric Writing*, 7.

¹⁹¹ Hodgkinson, T. *Music and the Myth of Wholeness*.

¹⁹² Armitage, S. *Never Good with Horses*, intro.

¹⁹³ Lyr, *Call in the Crash Team* (Mercurykx)

the quality of some of his writing, even if not a strict definition of it,¹⁹⁴ may be heard to have more of a poetic intention by abandoning the guitar and returning to the folk tradition of storytelling, ‘Pride of Pearl’ (M, A3), and the spoken-word poem, ‘The Power House’ (M, B3).

In this brief look at critical theories as ways of gaining insight into song writing it appears that the creatives offer more understanding than the theorists alone, or those who practice the craft are better equipped to explain it. Even the modern poets only recognise the uneasy but interdependent relationship between the two forms of expression. It could be observed, in a rather reductive way of structuralist binaries, that music broadens perception and possibility outwards, while lyrics bring things back down to earth, but that is only a half-truth from modern day musical experience.

4.6. The Media Context; Hope in Folk and Blues; Spontaneity vs sitting and crafting.

Most of the music that you listen to on the radio, records, CDs, Internet, or however you consume it, is a product, which also includes the selling of the singer and the shaping of the potential audience.¹⁹⁵ This is one of the objections of the folk community, and was one of the objections of Softley, although he went along with it to a certain extent in the folk-rock period of popular taste. If Softley chose anyone to blame it was the industry and consequently he tried to maintain as much control over the process as possible. He is possibly right for, unless a person is particularly fortunate, ruthless, or exploitative, they will be directed by the recording company and, if not compliant, or if the music is not receiving public attention, they will be discarded. We all end up as products of the system to some extent. Marx was right: the bottom line is economic. This summative last sentence is echoed

¹⁹⁴ Davis, S. *The Craft of Lyric Writing*, 10.

¹⁹⁵ Frith, S. *The Sociology of Rock*, 75-96.

in the retrospective, black humour of my song 'Bad Planning' by the line, 'Redress the balance: Charles Manson was right'.

Despite the spirit of the 1960s folk revival to prettify the world in accordance with the marketed pop/hippie culture, as proposed by Donovan in the dedication message on his album from 1968¹⁹⁶ and to some extent in the life-affirming songs of Softley, there still exists a darker side to traditional folk and blues which goes beyond the happy pop song to represent a fuller, deeper side to humanity. Folk is as diverse as the cultures that live it, tell it, and sing it. Folk has obvious associations with 'traditional' and 'legendary', and out of folklore came folk song in 1870.¹⁹⁷ Its diversity, humanity, and controversy are its lifeblood.¹⁹⁸

Improvisation usually happens within the context of a group of jazz or progressive rock performers who will improvise instrumental passages around or within a musical tune. Solo musicians can improvise as an expression of individual, instrumental art music as mentioned in 4.1, but one of the most rewarding methods for song creation is to also improvise with words lyrically. The musical improvisation is typically within a framework of a repeated sequence of open chords as Donovan advised, or the three-chord framework of a blues sequence, which offers musical familiarity for the listener and allows single note soloing within the blues scale for the player while simultaneously allowing time for the mind to think of further words and rhymes for the continuation of the lyric. As the lyrics are improvised it is rather difficult to account for them, however, the source of the lyrical improvisation can be from performer anxiety as an expression or observation of the immediate surroundings, a clichéd response to the musical genre, or prompted by an overheard comment. Lyrical improvisation works most effectively within a social setting. Writing is rather an artificial,

¹⁹⁶ Donovan, *A Gift from a Flower to a Garden* (Pye Records)

¹⁹⁷ Williams, R. *Keywords*, 136.

¹⁹⁸ Mitchell, J. *Postwar Politics, Society and the Folk Revival of England, 1945-1965*, 133.

often private, activity. As a skill it needs focused attention and work, but too much thought can inhibit the flow of the spontaneous moment. There is spontaneous writing of course, or even the Modernist stream of consciousness style of prose, but improvised lyrics are from more of an immediate source, are based around rhythm and rhyme and, on the surface, can reveal an energy and a simplicity which is essentially folk/blues.

4.7. The Possibility of the Product; More Softley Speculation; Song Material and the Album Cover; Control and Serendipity.

The process of creating a product, ideally in the form of an LP, would be an interesting possibility. There would, I imagine, be an ‘artistic’ compromise, involving working with producers, digital technology, photographers and distributors, who may have little interest in the processes, and so potentially frustrate the outcome. Even with a very patient and attentive producer to advise and shape the recorded product, there may well be a language gap in my ability to communicate the sound that I wish to achieve and the producer’s ability to translate this into the desired outcome.

These factors may have contributed to Softley’s personal attitude to recording and his initiation of Doll Records in the mid 1970s, the songs of which simply consisted of voice and acoustic guitar.¹⁹⁹ The ‘artistic’ compromise, the communication gap, as well as the financial constraints of recording a studio album can, however, be overcome by a folk-blues ingenuity of recording a live gig,²⁰⁰ which may ultimately be my approach.

On albums the silence between tracks is typically left blank, which is simply part of cutting tracks, and allowing listener selection and assimilation of them, but it can be utilised for

¹⁹⁹ Other musicians took a similar line, hear: Nick Drake, *Pink Moon* (island).

²⁰⁰ Hot Tuna, *First Pull Up, then Pull Down*. (RCA)

additional musical atmosphere with music,²⁰¹ words,²⁰² or birdsong,²⁰³ even backwards secret messages.²⁰⁴ Softley's approach was to sing to it ('Silence' C, A5) and, on *Capital*, note the duration of spaces on the album cover. The words on the packaging, even if capital in its monetary form was not available for the image, also conveyed a possible significance regarding, not only specific recording dates, but also times of day: 'The album is released for public sale at midnight on the 26th December 1978' (*Mensa*, 1978). This is also an interesting point with reference to Softley's use of dates on the postcard that I received from him (see Chapter 2.6). A more informal paragraph is also included, as well as exclusive Composers and Publishers rights, on what might be called 'the means of production', regarding the birth and gender of the two acoustic guitars used for the work.

All of this may be interpreted as imposing a control over the finished product, but I suggest that there should also be space for serendipity in musical expression, which is a musical inheritance from jazz improvisation, lyrically expressed from blues expression, tolerated in Folk, and even relished in live music settings of pubs and parties, in which half-songs, forgotten lyrics, and musical errors may be harmful for the performer's ego, but they are certainly a way of gaining auditory attention in live performances and can also be incorporated into a recorded product.²⁰⁵ Such fallibility is not meant to be taken in its etymological sense of a deception, as may be the case in comedy or fiction, but rather as a recognition of musical and lyrical creativity and the communal recognition of the flaws of humanity.

²⁰¹ Trader Horne, *Morning Way*. (Dawn)

²⁰² Moondog, *Moondog*. (CBS)

²⁰³ Lyn Dobson, *Jam Sandwich*. (Fresh Air)

²⁰⁴ Pink Floyd, *The Wall*. (Pink Floyd Music)

²⁰⁵ Youngbloods, *Elephant Mountain*. (RCA)

CHAPTER 5. IMPLICATIONS FOR PERFORMANCE

5.1. Narrowing performance; the relations between performer and audiences.

The title of this chapter, ‘implications for performance’, offers something in the way of what has been discovered on this research through a practice approach to my own music making, seen partly through the veil of recollections and imaginings regarding Mick Softley and some similarities and differences in our respective musical contexts. In this section, unlike chapters 3 and 4, it is not so much the language and style of the lyric as to what surrounds the lyric, that is, the language and style of delivery. We are not referring to the fixed product of the recording, we are investigating and commenting upon the variable process of the live event, which in my practice includes music for pubs and private parties, as well as busking on the streets of southeast England. Throughout this section there will be references to the most recent and collated work on performance by those who practice it and who have researched it, from the work of Richard J. Watts and Franz Andres Morrissey in *Language, the Singer and the Song* (CUP: 2019). Some of our terminology may be different, but when using their words I will cite references to their book. Their primary interest is in the language of Folk song, which may not exclusively represent the work of Softley or myself.

Performance implies that some affect will be experienced by the audience through human agency, goal directionality, human beneficiary, and temporality in the social process,²⁰⁶ but for myself, and I imagine for the one-man travelling Softley, especially from the starting point of busking, the concept of ‘performance’ is a little grand for what is on offer. A performance denotes an artistic or dramatic production, it has connotations of an elevated, contrived step out of the everyday world for an audience, and, as such, has strong associations with Theatre Studies. Its musical equivalent may be the concert, which implies a

²⁰⁶ Watts and Andres Morrissey. *Language, the Singer and the Song*, 35-54.

bringing together of musicians for the presentation of a performance, but for Softley and me, live music making is essentially solo, informal, and variable, and is referred to as a gig.

The musical gig came into common usage in the twentieth century from jazz language into pop parlance. A gig was the name of an open carriage on which a gathering of jug band musicians could challenge the authorities' rulings on staying in one place too long, creating a nuisance and disturbing the peace. The gig gave them the chance to arrive in a place, offer some entertainment, gather some quick financial reward and then move on, without violating any laws and incurring any unnecessary penalties. In the twenty-first century, it is now common to refer to the gig economy, whereby gig simply means engagement for a one-time booking, which makes it like the musical gig of the folk/pop musician.

The dynamic between the performer and the audience is an active one. It is dynamic as it is part of a social process. An audience is not a passive recipient of the music; it will form conscious and unconscious judgements based on prior knowledge, the music itself, the ambience, the style and delivery of the performer and the performance, plus other factors outside of the performance itself. For the gigging musician, I propose that the dynamic between the performer and the audience is best served as an interactive one, so that we are acting with close relation to each other. I would further suggest that, in the two-way process of the live gig, the dynamic may be termed 'reactive',²⁰⁷ in that it attempts to break down any social or performance barriers between the performer and the audience, allowing the performer or the audience to 'react' in whatever manner to any part of the process.

These keywords, because there is something transactional at play, sound like they are from the lexicon of Business English, but in that context 'reactive' would be negated in favour of

²⁰⁷ 'Reactive', as terminology for the live music social dynamic, comes partly from my interest in the immediacy of mid-1960s Beat groups, like 'The Attack' and 'The Creation'.

the more recent term ‘proactive’, which the management would claim stresses more positive and professional human relations, pre-empting behaviour, rather than reacting to it. The word similarly became fashionable in teacher training in the nineties, and generally works within those contexts, since Business and Education have their own specific agendas namely Profit and Learning, but an agenda for the gig performance needs to be more fluid, in respect of where potential audiences are coming from, which is generally indulging in some leisure time. This may appear to imply that the music gig is simply a form of entertainment and, depending on the context and the contract, this is indeed primary. Even the politically involved Country Joe McDonald on his solo gigs in 1972 sang ‘Entertainment is my Business’,²⁰⁸ yet his performance also encouraged the possibility of ‘reactive interaction’. In respect of audiences, everyone is able to engage in some level of Deconstruction of the text before them, and everyone reflects certain ideologies in their state of being, so, if there is an ideology in ‘reactive interaction’, it stems from a Folk origin²⁰⁹ in that it borrows and adapts from a musical tradition, it aims, at certain times in the performance, to build a rapport with the audience, and, underneath any jesting or flights of fancy, lies the sincerity of the performer.

There are further informal associations with performance. It can be something that is laboured, and if ‘reactive spontaneity’ is one key to the solo live gig, then there are times when this association of performance comes into play, notably when the lowest common denominator of musical taste momentarily takes over, usually at an informal Open Mic which has dissolved into karaoke. A further informal association with the concept of performance very much connected with this is the notion of a behaviour which is outside of a person’s normal mode of expectation, moving into the realm of embarrassment. One may think of the

²⁰⁸ Country Joe McDonald, *Incredible! Live!* (Vanguard).

²⁰⁹ Watts and Andres Morrissey. *Language, the Singer and the Song*, p.2.

antics of Liz Truss, remembered by many as being the unapologetic, delusional, short-lived Prime Minister whose performance was potentially harmful for the country. Whereas, in the contexts of informal musical performance, such an approach is mostly harmless and functions socially as an expression of entertainment. It may be seen as a reliever of tension, encouraged by an audience, and can be explored through the concept of The Fool.²¹⁰

A gigging musician, in the context of a pub or club, a private party, or busking on the streets, always has a listenership which may be termed an audience. Obviously there are different types and there are different stages of audience involvement. The next section reflects on Softley's performances in different location contexts, as well as his styles of presentation, and includes some reflections on my own experiences.

5.2. Softley's Performances

Pete Frame's recollection of first hearing Softley around 1965 in a pub in St. Albans sounds very much like a Gathering.²¹¹ This is distinct from a Folk Session, which is typically dominated by accordions and fiddles playing instrumental jigs and reels, with the occasional hush for a Capella singers. It is distinct from a Singers' Night, or the more familiar Open Mic Night, where there is typically a short performance by a host, followed by guest slots for performers who are typically allocated three songs. The Gathering is typically communicated by word of mouth, consists of local musicians and is more informal and less structured, although they are most effective if overseen by a host, who will start proceedings, indicate the next performer around the room to play, and others may join in with the song or tune. To conclude, the host will often finish on a familiar song, thank all for coming, and indicate other music sessions that will be happening.

²¹⁰ Gardner, R. *The Purpose of Love*, 71, 95.

²¹¹ Frame, P. "Mick Softley."

Softley, having returned from his Beatnik travels and singing experiences in Europe, clearly wanted to make his presence known in the Folk Gatherings of Hertfordshire in 1965, through the power of his singing voice.²¹² I have commented previously in Chapter 2 that I perceive the clarity, volume, and range of Softley's voice to be his primary asset. I have witnessed a similar stance being taken by an individual thirty years later at a Folk Gathering in Stony Stratford. Musically it may remind us of the power of the voice of Folk. Aesthetically it could equally represent an affirmation of life. Politically it suggests that the loudest voice takes the platform. With a multitude of theoretical possibilities, it is simply best to return to the social context, for both instances were happening in public houses, where the emphasis was on informality, spontaneity, and hedonism, so within those contexts the loud, clear voice rising above the hubbub can have the effect of enabling the Gathering to pause, listen and refocus. Personally, I like the wild card: it makes one think. Momentary disruptions in the flow of existence suggest that a social text can be deconstructed and reconstructed. From the multiplicity of voices within the individual, changing and recurring currents rise and fall within the social dynamic of the live performance. This is all sounding rather esoteric; however, as stated previously, recollections of Softley and his behaviour swing from a Structuralist system of binary oppositions of the individual vs the communal, freedom vs control, and the real vs the illusionary, in the multiple, often contradictory, possibilities of live performance.

From his early encounters in the mid 1960s Pete Frame noted Softley's 'satirical heart' and that he would play 'parodies of current hits like, 'Sweets for my sweet' with the chords purposefully misfingered ...'²¹³ This was a pop song by The Searchers from 1963, simple,

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

repetitive, persistent, annoying, as is the way with all good pop music. Not quite hip enough for the folk crowd, and therefore open to harmless parody.

There is only one recording of Softley performing live. He is playing the song 'Time Machine' on acoustic guitar and voice, at la Fete a Malataverne in France in 1971.²¹⁴

Obviously here the performance setting is different from six years previously in St. Albans, nevertheless, it was still a Folk Gathering, but the move from innocence to experience, from England to Europe, and to an outside festival setting, brought a bigger crowd. It is an unusual performance in that it is unpredictable, breaking the written sociological rules. Firstly, Softley, in seeking to engender the enthusiasm of the audience, becomes momentarily angry in his vocal delivery. This confirms what Mac MacLeod noted in the interview regarding Softley's later approach to an audience.²¹⁵ There may be several reasons for performer anger. Fear can create anger. Fear that the process of transmission of song, through performer to audience, has broken down. Fear that the song does not reach people anymore, it is out-dated, culturally irrelevant, and perhaps never was relevant in the first place, psychologically resulting in a momentary loss of faith in the material. For an idealist, singing a song like 'Time Machine', which asks the listener to 'take a trip', or at least see the potential of humankind, recalling the past good times of freedom, 'just being ourselves', and the future possibilities for the individual of being 'a star tripper, maybe', and for someone like Softley, whose hedonism just wanted people to dig the music, a mediocre response may have been disheartening. He does not appear, however, to lose faith in the song as he manages to complete it. A reason for the anger could be a disillusion with how the era was progressing, but even that is not convincing as he was discontented with the ideals of the Underground scene of the late '60s. In an acoustic duo in 2002, my fellow musician felt unappreciated if

²¹⁴ Various, *C'est la Fete a Malataverne* (Expression Spontanee).

²¹⁵ Psychedelicbbymag.com "Mick Softley: A Rebel Life."

he perceived that people were not listening to him. I had to remind him not to take things personally, that they were not his own songs, and, even if they were, his challenge should then be to make the music and the lyrics of the song so engaging that people would want to listen.²¹⁶ Therefore, in both cases, perhaps to engage an audience through less domineering methods, such as a preamble, humour or reduction in volume and intensity, may have been more effective.

Softley's live version of 'Time Machine', in true, spontaneous live performance, is made more interesting, however, as a male member of the audience interrupts the performance. My interpretation of this is that he senses Softley's passion for the song, believes in it, and wishes to further engender the enthusiasm of the crowd by reminding everyone to 'remember the war'.²¹⁷ There is a possibility that this interruption could have been staged beforehand, but Softley's slightly cautious reaction to the interruption can be overheard on the recording, however, he allows the man to speak before returning to the mic to finish the song.

I have had members of the audience crash into a song halfway through it. A drunken woman tried to wrestle the guitar from me, stating that she could play it. In the true spirit of Open Mic, I have let drunken individuals make comments, sing half remembered songs, all in the spirit of organised chaos.²¹⁸ Of course, there will be audience members who simply want to have a sequence of songs, rather than the momentary melodrama of an interruption. The Fete a la Malataverne from 1971 is a different context historically, geographically, and socially to a solo musician playing at pubs and parties in the 21st century, but the spirit of involvement of the audience continues. The next section aims to explore some practical examples from

²¹⁶ Rossacher, H. *Sunshine Superman: the Journey of Donovan*. This point is made by Donovan in a retrospective on his career.

²¹⁷ Various, *C'est la Fete a Malataverne*, side 1, track 7.

²¹⁸ Lerner, M. *Message to Love: Isle of Wight 1970*. In which the host allows audience members to express their opinions on the politics of the festival's organisation.

my own gigging performances and includes some resources that a performer may use when confronted with audiences.

5.3. My Own Musical Performances

Some of the background to my own musical evolution has been accounted for in the Critical Commentaries. Musical performance for me never took the form of miming to songs in front of a mirror, as is so often recounted in youthful dreams; it was the sound that attracted me, not the image. I learnt from three books, one Classical, one Rock, and one Folk, as well as from listening to records. When I found myself playing solo gigs in 2007 - the use of the past participle transitive verb 'found' here, expressed in a relational-circumstantial clause,²¹⁹ indicates that it was not a pre-determined decision to start playing live music solo - initially I was just following my joy, possibly in a similar, but less adventurous, way to Softley back in 1959. Softley's musical endeavours began by busking on the streets of Paris without really knowing what he was doing (see Chapter 2), whereas I tried the same thing in the 1980s unprofitably in Luton, in the 1990s enjoyably in Cambridge, amusing the tourists by playing flute while a fellow student recited Coleridge poems to his strummed guitar, and in the post-millennium in Buckingham and Thame, where the use of a small amount of amplification and the choice of locations proved to be more rewarding. Busking has negative connotations for some, and in one sense is born out of desperation, but it also stems from a kind of joy of being out in the world with a constantly changing audience. It is the purest form of live music in its transitory nature.

By 2007 I had already gained material and experience of performing in front of people from an acoustic duo, solo appearances at Singers' Nights, joining in with folk sessions, playing music out on the streets alone or with friends, and, as far back as the 1980s, playing electric

²¹⁹ Simpson, P. *Language, Ideology and Point of View*, 91-92.

guitar with a covers band, therefore the impulse to continue playing music, and to take it out to the world, was very strong. For many people the act of speaking, presenting, or performing in front of others is one of the highest ranked fears, however, it did not bother me. This lack of fear may be accounted for in several ways: I cannot see reactions, so am less intimidated than a fully sighted person, life is a social event, and music is simply another aspect of that, I felt that I had attained an acceptable level of musical ability, and it may have been a way of achieving some social recognition. Additionally, by the time of starting solo gigs in 2007, a friend from a previous acoustic duo in 2003 had eventually convinced me that it was acceptable and even expected to charge money for this musical service.

Apart from the mention of Business English in section 5.1 above, which was intended to cite a difference in language terminology between the controlled world of business and the reactive context of live musical performance, this is the first mention of money, or, in less crude terms, the transactional mode of performance. It was startling for me to perceive that all interaction has an economic foundation. I registered myself as a self-employed musician, was exploited by an accountant, paid a friend to create a website, another to design posters, made business cards, and put myself on Facebook. I had the label of a semi-professional musician and had, like Softley back in 1970 (see Chapter 2), reluctantly become subject to cultural absorption. However, unlike Softley, I operate on a much smaller scale, and have avoided other people acting on my behalf, preferring to deal on a one-to-one basis for live bookings, and charge pubs and private individuals according to my perception of their means. The accumulation of money, despite the current demands of service workers, is not my priority. Financial reward does not make any difference to the way I play; I still aim to perform to the best of my ability, and am more interested in different types of audiences, ways of engaging them, and the influential effects of music and language.

Theories of influence can become rather ethereal, psychological, and are often applied to Romantic Literature. From my experiences of playing live music, the dominant musical equivalent to Bloom's 'strong poets', if the popular tastes of audiences are to be believed, would be the musical and lyrical compositions of Dire Straits, The Eagles, and Fleetwood Mac. I comply with these to a certain extent but often play the blues of Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac from personal preference, to awaken listeners to something 'new', and to look back to older forms of origination. This attitude maybe a form of 'vulgar Bloomism', as it appears that I am simply looking back to the source, even though the source of early Fleetwood Mac, for the songs I play, is Elmore James, while for Bloom influence goes beyond 'source hunting, the history of ideas, or the patterning of images.'²²⁰ However, these are not my own works, and I am simply imitating them through voice and guitar rather than with a full band, so in my live music contexts the two-way social influence between myself and the audience, however conflicted, is stronger than the psycho-poetics of *The Anxiety of Influence*.

In the social context of music making, and personally the live solo gig, there is a two-way influence between the performer and the audience. Social psychologists may refer to social differentiation, whereby a performer, if s/he feels comfortable in performing a task, may perform it more assuredly in the presence of an audience, whereas uncertainty may make the performer feel the negative effects of being observed. I have experienced this as a very real phenomenon when having doubts about the lyrical content of a song, or my ability to convey it adequately. Doubt will produce more doubt. I have, however, learned to cope with this if it occurs, either through sincerely expressing my inability to play the song effectively, or by deflecting my inability with the material back onto the song itself. As well as the rather

²²⁰ Bloom, H. *The Anxiety of Influence*, p.7.

obvious two-way influence that channels both ways between performer and audience, there is also an influence of social conformity that exists between members of an audience. The effects of social conditioning in times of uncertainty often see the herd mentality coming to the fore. I've witnessed 'rent-a-crowd' being used at an Open Mic session but did not find it very convincing due to its lack of sincerity.

For a gig in a public house or a musical appearance at a private party the musical act may be a background to the social instinct of interaction and conversation, however, a basic level of awareness is an almost unavoidable consequence of the performer's presence there. At certain points, either initiated from the performer and his/her song choices or delivery, or a lull in the social interaction, the attendees' awareness may move from casual listening to attentive listening. This momentary involvement can then be further enhanced by the singer, the song, or other attendees, who may express their involvement verbally. The most familiar and socially cohesive verbal response is singing along with a familiar song. Other verbal involvement from a small group within the audience may take the form of requesting songs, heckling, or singing the group's favourite song over the performer's song. The response to this challenge for dominance of the floor can either be ignored, which is not helpful in the realm of entertainment, accommodated by playing the heckler's song, encouraged by offering the guitar and allowing the heckler to perform, or diverted through humour. It is not suggested for the performer to ignore the heckle or retaliate in a confrontational manner.

There was a tradition of alternative comedy in the 1980s whereby a comic, largely because of the social and political unrest at the time and as a reaction against the previous generation of comedians, would verbally attack members of the audience as part of his/her comic act.

Further audience involvement may be seen through dancing, provoked by the rhythm, the beat, the familiar song, although, because of social inhibition, dancing usually requires some encouragement, either verbally by the performer or through someone taking the floor. The

exception is when a couple feel that their dancing is worthy of display, usually in the case of rock 'n' roll songs from the 1950s or early '60s. Inhibition and social conformity are very strong ties for the pub audience, which is generally playing an accepted role, whereas for the performer the number of roles is wider, and can encompass the fool or the joker, which may help the audience to feel more accepting of its own human frailty. These examples from my own practice suggest that, although the performance may be the stimulus for reactive interaction, the responses can take a variety of forms. The collaborative energy of the participants therefore, through the emotive medium of music, may result in the coproduction of live performance between performer and audience, momentarily transforming the live event through spontaneous reaction and democratising it.

The ability to draw on musical genres, as well as communicating a certain amount of skill in one's craft, comes, in part, from an awareness of musical traditions. My ability, through simply liking the song, or being requested to learn it for a private party, is generally limited to rock, pop, blues, and folk musical genres. Other familiar genres, such as reggae, ska, and opera, either require a full band, or are simply beyond my vocal ability. Knowing a song, so that no visual prompts are necessary, is a serendipitous consequence of visual impairment and a benefit for live performance, in the same way that an actor learns a script, for it forces the performer to internalise the material and may be a visual indicator to the audience of a certain amount of care, effort and ability. The choice of song should ideally be convincing for the performer, either musically, lyrically, or both. If it sounds convincing to the player, then it should sound convincing to the listener. This approach typically involves keeping the song in its original key. Transposing and reworking a song into an acceptable form through song segues, and jazz/blues improvisations within or across songs, is somewhat dependent upon

one's familiarity with the material, while creative re-workings of songs into a new style²²¹ is effective if the new version surpasses the original.²²²

In my Introduction to this Chapter I expressed reservations regarding the ideology of the Folk performance which denigrates entertainment at the expense of political manifesto.

Entertainment is a precarious business. Mass entertainment is an uncomfortable term which often forgoes respect for individuals in the name of providing the lowest common denominator through organisers' perception of popular taste. I am perhaps beginning to sound like Theodor Adorno in his post war reaction to American culture,²²³ but my involvement, on a local, rather than an international, level means that I can avoid being part of mass entertainment, as much as possible, in favour of an eclectic musical mix, sometimes framed by idiosyncratic dialogue and reactive interaction with audiences. One customer commented recently that it was just nice to have the option of listening to some music in a pub, which I perceive as a fair, if rather diluted, comment about what was on offer, and I imagine that Softley would have seen it as a statement of 'the real'.

Entertainment is loaded with a certain amount of expectation; expectation from the organiser that the performer will arrive on time and fulfil his/her part of the deal, as well as a cultural expectation from the public, which, presented with a singer with a guitar, may have associations with folky Dylan to contemporary Ed Sheeran. (I was once asked if I knew any songs by Ed Sheeran and jokingly responded that he was my son, was apparently doing very well, and that his tickets were on sale for high prices.) In the tradition from Music Hall in the Edwardian era, through variety performance, a popular form of entertainment in the middle

²²¹ Some examples of effective song re-workings include:

Joe Cocker, 'With a Little Help from my Friends'

Siouxsie and The Banshees, 'Dear Prudence'

²²² I have attempted my own re-working of The Beatles song, 'Norwegian Wood', after hearing a re-working of it by the band Circus on Transatlantic Records.

²²³ For a possible way to re-think Adorno and The Culture Industry, see:

Krims, A. "Marxist Music Analysis without Adorno: popular music and urban geography."

of the twentieth century, I consider that entertainment should offer a diversity of musical genres, should, at times, disrupt standard audience expectations, and should offer an opportunity for audience involvement. As discovered previously, and this would be from teaching in a secondary school classroom context as well as observations from live gigs, audience reactions are subject to social cohesion, herd mentality and social conformity. I am not trying to change this in my own private revolution, but merely figuratively opening the door through allowing and, at times, encouraging, spontaneous reactions to the interactive live gig. Despite social conformity, there is no such thing as a standard audience response because there may be unforeseen events, as in the wild card interrupting Softley's recorded performance in 1971 and reactions at the Isle of Wight festival in 1970.

There may be spontaneous reactive responses from part of an audience at any solo gig, but it is not so usual for the performer to be spontaneous. Most musicians, solos or bands, have a setlist. Most do not deviate from this, even when met with audience requests. This is understandable for band members who may have to adjust amplifier settings to create the approximate sound of a song or style of music and must work together as a unit, but a solo performing individual has the possibility to be more accommodating. Of course, there is the potential of a momentary partial audience take-over, but this will usually be short-lived and should be accommodated into the live event. It is possibly more satisfying for the audience majority for the performer to be flexible within a framework, which can be achieved through familiarity with a song. Jazz musicians may take an improvised musical solo within the framework of a variety of songs. An individual performer may improvise a section within the framework of a song, or improvise between songs to join them together, and a further step would be to incorporate any audience vocal reactions into a spontaneously improvised song.

The disruption of audience expectations²²⁴ has the effect of provoking a potential further response from the crowd, forcing individuals to re-consider their relationship to music, the artist, themselves and even society. Music's force is primarily emotional; the sound has the potential to encourage an individual to listen, and a lyric can reawaken the familiar or even prompt a new way of perceiving. It is part of the art to combine the two into a persuasive encounter. Some of this has been previously explored in Chapter 4 on the processes of writing, but the processes of making music are also subject to unconscious forces of composition.²²⁵ The disruption of audience expectations does not necessarily have to be through Pete Townsend's guitar smashing, Jimi Hendrix's guitar burning, or any other means of outlandish showmanship; these are all passe and would only be responded to with bemused irony or indifference. The disruption does not necessarily have to come from the focal point of the performer, whereby he/she is placed in the role of the director with the audience as passive receivers, particularly in the twenty-first century, where the Internet can brand people as producers, rather than as consumers. There is a sense that the live performance, if outside of a set list, can take on a life of its own through the communication of an atmosphere, and become the main director of an event. Through internalising the music, improvisation, and a willingness to respond to the moment, the barriers, or expectations, between a performer and an audience can be, at times, momentarily dissolved to form a social unit governed ultimately by all its members. This may sound idealistic, but it exists as a possibility that I have tried to encourage at various gigs, and as it was for Softley, who claimed that he simply wanted to play music and wanted to see people enjoying it. Again, there are internationally acclaimed

²²⁴ Neil Young confounded audience expectations in 1973 by stating that after he had played his new material from his latest LP, *Tonight's the Night*, he would play something that everyone had heard before, only to run through the new material again.

²²⁵ Day, A. *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*, 16-17.

musicians who encourage the division between performers and audience,²²⁶ as well as audience members who are content to maintain a critical distance. Nevertheless, for my small-scale contexts of performance, I maintain that many in the audience, whether casual or purposeful attendees, enjoy some level of involvement with the performance.

Often at my own gigs a further level of involvement may be reached at certain points in the evening through a box of percussive instruments. With varying levels of announcement of these percussive devices by myself, such as, “I’ve always wanted to have a band, so maybe you can help out with these instruments”, and “Here are a selection of percussive devices that I have borrowed long-term from the Early Learning Centre, please join in”, the results range from hesitant, polite involvement, with an audience member asking on one occasion if a certain rhythm was required, to a cacophony of random noise and possible tambourine destruction, to which the response may be, “Oh, you are obviously free-form jazz fans” or, “I see we have the Dadaists in tonight, celebrating their centenary.” Whatever the degree of the response may be, the percussion box remains a popular form of involvement for pub audiences with adults as much as children. There are contextual exceptions to ‘the music box’, notably at private parties where a host or attendees may prefer to hear some guitar playing ability, either expressed through learnt guitar pieces, or even through the form of spontaneous, instrumental guitar noodling.

Throughout this description of my own musical practice, and in the belief that disruption of audience expectations and audience involvement are useful keys to creating enjoyment, one of the most effective resources in its shared humanity is the use of humour. Within the vast genre of comedy, there are distinctions to be made between humour, wit, irony, and satire.²²⁷

²²⁶ Bob Dylan, in his UK concerts in 1987, only communicated with the audience through his songs. Roger Waters took this further in the concerts for the ultimate concept album of *The Wall* (1979) by building a wall between the band and the audience.

²²⁷ Nicolson, H. *The English Sense of Humour*, 19.

From my own practice, I have developed a collection of humorous songs. Firstly, there are satirical songs from The Bonzo Dog Band of a revivalist nature; some of them, taken from the original 1920s recordings, such as ‘Hunting Tigers out in INDIAH’, may not be politically correct in the twenty-first century, nevertheless, I still play them in the name of entertainment and controversy. Satirical material was popular in the mid-sixties era, and, in the post ironic age, should remain as an alternative means of combating folly and injustice, rather than the more direct response of anger at the widening divide between social classes. I have also played songs by other mid-sixties comic entertainers: ‘The Rhubarb Tart Song’ by John Cleese has been found to be effective in restaurants, ‘Hole in the Ground’ by Bernard Cribbins has been applauded by the older generation who recall the song’s triumph of the working man over the interfering bowler-hatted middle class, and songs from Monty Python, which are still familiar from films and offer a join-in chorus.

Like Softley at his mid-sixties Folk Gatherings, I have also indulged in humorous parodies of pop and country songs, such as ‘Can’t get you out of my Head’ by Kylie Minogue, and the much-requested Dolly Parton song ‘Jolene’, in which the lonesome woman, fearful of losing her man to the more attractive Jolene, is encouraging and imploring Jolene, in my version, to take her man away. A further example is the 1970s radio hit, ‘A Horse with no Name’, which, in my version, is from the point of view of the horse, and was originally expressed as part of a spontaneous dialogue after being requested to play a song where I was unsure of the lyrical verses, so that humour is working as a slow play of fancy.²²⁸ These humorous songs of light entertainment may see a move in audience attention from the casual listening stage to the attentive listening stage, so that humour, rather than being a simple reversal of expectation or a defamiliarizing of the original song in a slightly surreal way, can work

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

lyrically and musically across a short sequence of songs. I have used this across three songs, originally by Andy Breckman,²²⁹ which I have held together by my own generally stock humorous self-deprecating segues. What may begin as spontaneous random humour can be refined over the course of music gigs and can be applied as introductory preambles to songs which are not humorous at all. Such ramblings may surface from a whole variety of sources - momentary observations of the social context, personal stories, media articles, existential angst, as well as random thoughts and fantasies, usually involving the introduction of invisible celebrity band members from the world of media and politics. Therefore humour can have a variety of functions within the context of the live, solo gig.

Further to imitating humorous songs, parodying familiar ones, and prefixing un-funny songs with apparently random slightly surreal nonsense, I have also simply substituted words and phrases to familiar pop and rock songs to varying degrees. This can function as a way of keeping the material interesting for myself, and as means of checking audience engagement, whereby single words or phrases may be altered, as in the musicians' in-joke from the Credence Clearwater Revival song 'Bad Moon Rising', which substitutes a line in the chorus, 'there's a bad moon on the rise' for, 'there's a bathroom on the right', which is a situation context dependent joke for a pub crowd. Further to this is Pink Floyd's 'Another Brick in the Wall', which employs a simple reversal in the second verse from 'teachers' to 'students', as in, 'Hey! Students! Leave the staff alone', or even, 'Hey! OFSTED! Leave the schools alone', whereby the first may be seen as a means of highlighting one of the reasons for declining numbers of teacher recruitment, and the second as a rejection of government intervention in school management.

²²⁹ Andy Breckman, *Proud Dad* (Gadfly Records).

Finally, there are pop songs in which I interject imagined comments from characters within the song narrative into the original versions. This could be if I feel that the content is rather dubious considering contemporary social issues, as in ‘You’re Sixteen’ covered by Ringo Starr, whereby the audience may learn a little more about the singer’s passion for the young girl through my interjection, “I keep you in my cellar, don’t tell anyone”, or if I feel that a song is taking itself too seriously, as with ‘Don’t You Want Me?’ by The Human League, the original of which sees the male voice in the first verse surprised and pained to be rejected by the female voice in the second verse who has simply outgrown the relationship. My version has interjections by the female voice, expressed as imagined responses to the male’s questions, only to eventually be won over by the persistent male. The familiarity of the song for an audience, combined with its altered delivery by the performer, and the happy conclusion in the playful continuation of the relationship, add up to its continued popularity as it remains one of the most frequently requested songs from a wide variety of audiences. These interjections may be perceived as being slightly controversial, or in bad taste,²³⁰ but the first example suggests the influence of popular media on the performer as well as the audience, while the second indicates an absorption of modern culture from spoken discourse into my song extensions.

The tendency with humour is that if one begins to analyse it, one may see that very little is ultimately funny. From primitive notions of categorising human temperament depending upon one of four excessive bodily fluids, humour in twentieth century literary studies became associated with comic speech, appearance, or behaviour. Funny behaviour is limited for the solo performer with guitar, except for facial expressions to amplify the emotions of certain songs. Comic appearance may be perceived by a slightly flamboyant attire. Comic speech,

²³⁰ Many old blues songs were not too sensitive lyrically, including the Elmore James song, ‘Shake Your Money Maker’, re-discovered by Peter Green’s Fleetwood Mac, and included on my Song Menu. Also, the lyric to ‘I’m Going Home’ by the 1970s pub-rock band Dr. Feelgood which, in one verse, equate a woman with a dog.

intentional in the preamble as wit, which is social and needs an audience, through to humour, which may be unintentional in the spontaneous song and over-emphasised as a Freudian defence mechanism for the performer faced with an unknown crowd, become secondary issues to the social dynamic of reactive interaction between performer and audience, which is largely dependent upon complicity, context and community. If the audience reaction is negative or nil, then humour needs to be downplayed in favour of simply focusing on the music, as it may cause misunderstanding. Fortunately, I have not encountered noticeable audience hostility; this may be because most of my gigs are restricted to communities in towns and villages in the Southeast of Northants, Bucks, and Beds. There was one gig in Northampton in which I encountered hostility from the landlord, in a moment very reminiscent from the ‘perfumed ponce’ scene in the film *Withnail & I*, and so in retrospect rather humorous, where we were paid two thirds of our asking fee and thrown out of the pub after two-and-a-half songs, only for us to inherit an Open Mic in the pub opposite, which the former hosts had hurriedly abandoned due to the pervasive negative atmosphere of the area.

5.4. Introducing Own Material into Live Solo Gigs

At an Open Mic in Devon approximately ten years ago I played, amongst other things, an imitation of a Donovan song, and a stranger from the audience later remarked that the music and lyric and imitation of style were good, but the fact remained that Donovan had written it, not me. The relation between imitation and creation, and what constitutes as own material, has been incorporated into Chapter 4 on my own writerly development; here we are considering processes of the emergence of my own creative style in performance. I am willing to play gigs in any location, but most of them are in pubs and at private parties where audiences often favour familiar, up-beat songs, or nostalgic sing-alongs. This conflicts somewhat with my desire to innovate and experiment both musically and lyrically; however, these audiences will accept deviations from this perceived norm, as explored above in 5.3,

where other people's songs have been distorted lyrically and performed to comic effect in the name of entertainment, while others have emerged spontaneously, usually accompanied musically by a simple verse-chorus chord sequence, either to be lost in the live moment, or later capitalised on in the conscious structuring of a written song. Therefore, the introduction of something new or different outside of an audience's comfort zone, which also includes my own songs, can be filtered slowly and selectively into the live solo gig (see Critical Commentaries).

One of the concepts that I have been advocating and that I have found to be effective at live solo gigs is musical variety. An idiosyncratic style will automatically emerge with sincerity and therefore, with appropriate sequencing, quieter, reflective songs could be incorporated into a live performance. Sequencing implies the use of a set list, a previously mentioned, unless there is sufficient familiarity with the material, and that certain lines of engagement remain open, using preamble, for a performer to respond to the moment. In the live gig journey, it is sometimes more rewarding to take the road less travelled by using variety, the element of surprise and diversity of pace. Overfamiliarity with the material and overfamiliarity with an audience may however, according to the proverb, breed contempt,²³¹ and this is explored in the next section.

5.5. Case Study: Towcester Mill Brewery

Does a fixed residency make a difference to performance, if so in what ways, why, and what may be done about it?

Over the years since 2006 I had hosted Open Mic, played for private parties, and been part of unpaid musical Gatherings at pubs and hotels in Towcester, so had gained some recognition as a local musician. Towcester Mill Brewery opened in 2014, but only began to flourish post

²³¹ Evans, I. H. *Brewer's dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, 407.

COVID lockdown with the arrival of an entertainments manager. The Brewery, because of its location, heritage, craft beers, street food, and entertainment, attracts a wider demographic than that for local pubs and draws in all ages from nearby towns and villages. It now has monthly offerings of Open Mic, Quiz Nights, a Folk Gathering, Musical Bingo, Vinyl Nights, Business Buzz Networking, Live Comedy, as well as occasional jazz nights and sports events. Over the last three years I have played there monthly as ‘Craig, Live’, where I play amplified acoustic guitar and sing for three hours, with a couple of ten-minute breaks. The information on the website is enthusiastic, reassuring, and gives an indication as to the varied content of the songs.²³² However, despite local reassurance, from the brewery website and from the community, I feel more anxiety about this gig than from other pubs and clubs where I play once or twice a year.

Typically, one will arrive at a venue, set up, and crack on. There is usually an audience, or a listenership, in the pub or at the party beforehand, so that one arrives and responds to one’s perception of the social energy, or atmosphere, of the venue on that occasion. The interaction between the performer and the audience then becomes a social dynamic as the gig progresses.

The Mill involves a prior set up and sound check and then to return later for the gig. Thus, the pre-gig energy loses its momentum and a different preparatory state is required. If Einstein and modern physics are to be believed, energy is everything, and the preparatory state for a solo gig is part of it, but, once again, as soon as the gig commences the social interactive dynamic between the player and the audience becomes mutable. In both cases, from the performer’s perspective, a certain amount of nervous energy is expected. An extreme of this would be what performers term as stage fright. To a much lesser degree, a certain amount of preparedness, or anticipation, is commonly felt. The oxymoron of relaxed

²³² www.towcestermillbrewery.co.uk

tension is an adaptive key for the mind and body, aiding the flow of ideas and the relaxation of the vocal apparatus. In psychological or spiritual terms, the sense of self is relinquished to the interactive process of the gig and the essence of music.

The function room at The Mill is a separate area, or container²³³ from the public bar. The music has started on occasions with no one present in the room. Playing to an audience is different from playing alone, as playing through amplification is different from playing acoustically. Awareness, practice, experience, and adaptability will all aid the outcome. For myself there is usually some acknowledgement of groups, individuals, or even animals, if they are present, or when I become aware of the people as they drift in and out of the function room for food and drinks. This suggests that the performance in that context has both representational and relational characteristics.²³⁴

The greater anxiety comes from a social cause. Performance, I would suggest in my case, being self-labelled as ‘Craig, Live’, is a dynamic process. I am not a professional musician, presenting the same show month after month to paying clientele, so the question for me is: in what ways can I continue to offer a live, dynamic, variable experience?

Over the duration of my residency, I have tried different approaches:

1. I played my usual range of songs – this is a very broad approach reintroducing the music which an audience may be familiar with from previous venues in the town.
2. I have played mostly up-beat, familiar pop songs – familiar for audience sing-along, which can create a higher level of excitement.

²³³ Watts and Andres Morrissey, 34-35.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57-61.

3. I have promoted mostly unfamiliar folk/blues songs – this introduces a broader dynamic from the familiar pop and rock material and reaches an older tradition from which many pop songs later emerged.
4. I gave out a ‘Song Menu’ and offered the audience a choice – this allows more control for the audience, in an approachable format of a menu; the multitude of choices saw many people resorting to familiar rock and pop.
5. I have offered audience members a chance to play my guitar in the break – few accepted the offer; one memorable person who did accept, with encouragement from his friends, was someone who used to play at my original Open Mic in Towcester.
6. I have encouraged others to sing, if I did not know the words, while I played the music – this is a step back into Open Mic which can lapse into live karaoke; it can be enjoyable for a small part of the audience but should be used sparingly.
7. I have given out writing materials to group tables and encouraged them to write a chorus to their own song and then sing it while I put the music to it – this was an adventurous move! Three out of four table groups complied, two produced some written ideas, and one group even borrowed the guitar and sang their chorus. Perhaps this is mixing teaching with entertainment, but there was minimal guidance from myself, except for my own spontaneous chorus example.
8. I have reflected on the wording of the brewery website and incorporated it into the gig – this may have served to bring our attention momentarily back to the venue, but it was also used as a comic defence in case anyone felt cheated by the evening’s entertainment.
9. I have incorporated recollections from other gigs as a means of keying into²³⁵ a sequence of songs by genre – this was to show some continuity in performance, while observing the variability of possible audience responses.

²³⁵ Watts and Andres Morrissey, 47.

10. I have used the subject matter, or content, of a song as a means of keying in – this is one example of preamble.

11. I have improvised an advert for the Mill - this happened spontaneously at a sound check. Interestingly, when thought was applied to the idea later at the gig and in the presence of an audience, the outcome was not so lyrically fluid or engaging. Nevertheless, it could be developed into a full monologue song and explored further.²³⁶

12. I have extended the resources and approaches discussed in 5.3

13. I have played some of my own musical material discussed in 5.4.

My preoccupation with sound quality produced from different guitars, amplifier settings, and the acoustics of the room, is a personal foible which for many in the audience is hardly relevant.

It may be true that my experiments with the above styles and formats are simultaneously amusing and bemusing for some audience members; too much experimentation in a rather conservative area may result in confusion. Nevertheless, I feel that a certain amount of ambiguity and unpredictability are necessary as a reflection of and a reaction to contemporary society. There are limits to solo performances. Nevertheless, the live dynamic between performer and audience remains a two-way process of equal possibility.

All other events at The Mill have clearly defined categories. Entertainment can best be achieved through mixing genres, so there is the need to play some popular songs, folk, jazz, comedy, seasonally appropriate material and, at times, introduce other audience engaging strategies into the delivery, such as quizzing an audience as to the origin, or year of a song. Thus, I am preconsciously utilising many of the other Mill entertainment offerings, as listed on the events section of the website, in a diluted form, as well as incorporating, at different

²³⁶ Arlo Guthrie, *Alice's Restaurant* (Reprise)

times, aspects of performance mentioned earlier. Fortunately, the Mill management allow me to have as much creative freedom as the bounds of imagination and the limitations of solo performance can offer.

The Mill is a profit-making business, but whether the ‘Craig, Live’ nights are financially profitable for them is unknown to me; I would like to believe that there is more to music-making than just money, so that The Mill may also be seen as a community hub, offering a variety of entertainment for South Northamptonshire, and supporting local people in the process.²³⁷ The Open Mic and the Vinyl Night, both of which I attend, are hosted by locals, so that some of my financial reward for ‘Craig, Live’ will return to the venue.²³⁸ There are other acclaimed singers and musicians in the town who either offer a sound that is too much of a mainstream karaoke performance or, in the case of the Folk-rock band Solstice who, with forty years of recorded music to their credit, typically perform their own songs at national festivals or ticketed staged concerts.

The learning of new material from any era or genre, both musical and literary, is a clear foundation for continuity of live performances at The Mill or any venue. More urgently for my personal journey now is the development and integration of my own song writing ability, both through improvised performance and the conscious crafting of written songs. These will hopefully see further audience enjoyment, present opportunities for individuals to discover different styles of music beyond what the popular media dictates, and may even encourage individuals or groups to start writing or performing for themselves.

²³⁷ Watts and Andres Morrissey, 67.

²³⁸ The Lovin’ Spoonful, *Money* (Karma Sutra)

5.6. Notes on Live Solo Music in the Twenty-first Century

All through this section I have been suggesting that, for a solo gig in a pub setting, rather than a fee-paying concert, an audience, at certain points in the proceedings, enjoys some participation. I termed it 'reactive interaction', which can be expressed from the familiar singing along, and the requesting of songs from a song menu, the joining in with tambourines and percussion, to the encouragement of dancing, or even the partial gig takeover. The move is from the passive, receptive audience to the inclusiveness of involved participants.

The move from the individual to the communal in practice may however be something of an idealised Folk community delusion; in my experience of Open Mic nights there may be a great variety of performers, solos, duos, groups, young and older, male and female, offering a wide range of styles from a Cappella Folk songs to group jam sessions, and the venue may be very well attended, but the majority are performers rather than an audience, and once the performers have played they often leave, rather than listening to other acts.

I personally value street musicians as entertainment, especially when confronted with individuals or businesses who insist on forcing their messages of God or profit onto the public, such as street evangelists in Milton Keynes and audible retail advertising in Northampton. Busking in the UK traditionally had a poor reputation, not far removed from begging, but modern busking is often seen to be accommodated by performance, and sees individuals or groups in smart attire, with music stands and amplification; some may have a guitar case full of merchandise and even accept monetary donations with card readers.

Technological advancement and education have affected performance. Young people can learn and share ideas and put them into practice at local Rock Schools, they can take it further to degree courses in popular music, sound engineering, acoustics, stagecraft, all facilitating confidence and ability. Technology has advanced to offer better sound for live performances

and there is a huge market in guitar effects which, if used sparingly, can enhance an atmosphere, and affect audience experiences. Computer software can be integrated into live performances and quickly accessed via a laptop. The music of Gaming culture may be brought into performance and, with further technological advancement, some musicians even fear that their craft will become obsolete due to Artificial Intelligence.

As well as looking forwards, there is potential for groups to exploit the past through the presentation and marketing of tribute acts; similarly, solo performers may also combine biographical information regarding a musician and present the performance through a combination of music and story. These are all opportunities for performance, but they will usually entail working co-operatively with managers and promoters, which is something that Softley found difficult to do.²³⁹

There are examples of pub musicians in the twenty-first century who retreat from live performance to either offer home recording opportunities for performers, set up businesses to market out other musical acts, or sell their musical services through video courses. All very enterprising, even if the motive is money rather than music.

Despite some performers allowing a certain amount of control for audiences in the late 1970s,²⁴⁰ the world of music and performance is controlled by wider forces than ideals. Sometime in the mid 1990s there was the corporate takeover and standardisation of music and venues. Nevertheless, at a one-day town festival that I played at in 2018, there was the successful 1970s solo musician Tom Robinson there, insisting that the resources and

²³⁹ Griffiths, T. *Comedians*, 14.

²⁴⁰ Here & Now, *All Over the Show*, (Charly Records).

The Here & Now band who, as late as 1979, still maintained, 'We never charge admission to our gigs, but prefer it if you give what you can, instead of giving what you're told to.'

opportunities for making music at present were better than they had ever been;²⁴¹ it was just the fact that there were more people doing it now.

In the world of entertainment, the best resources are possibly performer authenticity, imagination, and audience engagement. I would like to think that a certain amount of humanity will remain in the live performance, to include room for error, spontaneity, positive and negative reactions, beauty and harmony, as well as disturbance and possibility, without music becoming too controlled by those who know or care little about it, to the extent where it becomes too formulaic.

²⁴¹ Gigging Solo: a Guide. “Stand and Deliver Workshop” with Tom Robinson.

A CONCLUSION

Inspiration, from Romanticism, or Epiphany through religion into Modernism, can come from anyone, anywhere, at any time. Such moments, if acted upon, can produce an awakening, a change of direction. Influence, although etymologically emanating from a similar celestial light, is not so intense and has a slower, more continuous, effect on the receiver. The effect of influence may wax and wane like the cycles of the moon, which is also, according to astrology and paganism, claimed to affect human life.

Influence has clear associations with power, power over an individual, a group, a nation. Music may be valued for its emotive power. Language, or rhetoric, can be used for its persuasive power. A combination of music and language in the form of song, which was part of the enquiry in Chapter 4, often results in a dilution of effect, but I am becoming lost in effects now, as noted in the Introduction, rather than concluding on the concept of influence.

Influence can work at a more subtle level. Complex music can affect cerebrally rather than emotionally, and language clearly has other functions beyond persuasion. If we could step outside of the concept of power, back into idealism, back into the emanation of starlight, we may see a more peaceful side to influence. Here, what is read or listened to, either literally through literature and music, or more generally in what is perceived through daily human interaction or nature, may then have a subtle influence resulting in the receiver expressing him or herself casually in a creative form. This perspective, which is present in some of Softley's songs, and was also offered in Chapter 4, embodies rather a low-key or simple attitude to influence. There is no need for any anxiety for, being accountable to no-one, except perhaps oneself and one's co-creators, there could be a newly found enjoyment in the process and the outcome from the original influence and, once again, new influences may emanate from one's co-workers or the process of creation.

This was a Practice as Research project. The three main theorists of Bloom, Kristeva and Williams, whose work extended beyond traditional influence, all had something to contribute to the outcome. To state this directly: Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* was most relevant for the writing of songs, Kristeva's inter-textuality found its way into performance, while Williams' cultural studies provided the overall framework for both. More specifically, there may be a tension experienced from prior writers, or lyricists and musicians in this case, but this is not the sole issue in finding poetic space for one's own compositions. Softley may have found an individual creative musical style on the *Sunrise* album, and also referenced topical concerns of 1970, but only one year later these were absorbed into personal experiences from lived culture. What appeals to me mostly about *The Anxiety of Influence* is not the theory per se, but the manner in which it is articulated through its rhetorical style.

Inter-textuality, or transposition, is a concept within a wider theory of the semiotic. It does, however, have greater cultural currency, Softley's sometimes playful use of language, goes some way to disrupting conventional language use. Intertextuality is best experienced, in my case through spontaneous speech and playful spontaneity in live performance, rather than being used as a descriptive critical concept. Any challenge to the prevailing dominant culture, which includes, from my experience, what audiences are directed to listen to, is capable of creating a change in thought, critical theory, or artistic practice.

Like some of Softley's lyrics and the fleeting music and poetry culture explored in Chapter 1, I cannot reject the love and peace ideology entirely, the influence of these things has been experienced individually or communally in life and enhanced through music and language and offers hope to the living. It is easy to lose sight of these ideals because of what I perceive as individuals having too much power, media manipulation and the profit motive. These concerns have been highlighted in some of my songs through my main weapon of humour,

although I feel that Softley's wordplay may be more effective in communicating a sense of fun in music, yet a lot depends on the listening audience. Language manipulation through word and phrase substitution is something that I have always included in live performances as noted in Chapters 1 and 5, and I imagine that I will incorporate more of this as my songwriting progresses.

In Chapter 3 I also observed a move from playfulness of language into creative expression of passion and imagination through Softley's expression of sexual fantasies, partly inherited from the Gothic literary tradition, the supernatural in folk ballads, and as a latent expression of cultural absorption as 1960s sexual liberation came to the fore in some mainstream lyrics of the 1970s. The song 'Fire Revisited' may be interpreted as a tentative exploration of psychological desire, even if it was not the intention. I recall being rather surprised when I was asked by an individual if I could incorporate some more adult oriented material into a live gig, and, on another occasion, I recall spontaneously singing about sex with strangers and later wondering how far my repressed desire was coming to the surface, compared with Softley's more liberated self-expression. Back in the Introduction I had a notion regarding influence as a way of finding a voice, which was dismissed for opening myself up to Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, but if we consider this from the point of view of volume and pitch and the confidence of vocal ability, then one may hear Softley's unrestricted vocal expression in comparison to my own somewhat muted or repressed style of singing on some of my own songs. I suggest that confidence, practice, familiarity with the material, and faith in the liberated spirit will help these things develop over time for anyone on the songwriting journey.

I wanted to put Softley and his works onto the critical map, feeling that his oeuvre deserved attention. I have offered some critical overview of his life and works, mainly as a stimulus

for my own creative song writing, and his life, attitude and works have given me some guidelines in the refinement of my own musical and lyrical style. However, these are not an exclusive influence on my output, for a song like 'Bad King Nigel', although it may have a tenuous link to Softley's religious education and concerns, is more influenced by my immediate lived local culture and my perception of an unsympathetic wider culture of individualism. Lyrically I may have been influenced by 'The Age of Self' by Robert Wyatt,²⁴² while musically I may have been thinking about a Christmas album by what has been termed the 'primitivism' of John Fahey's guitar playing.²⁴³ The musical and lyrical structures were very tight in 'Bad King Nigel' in accordance with a direct imitation of the melody of the Christmas Carol and the rhythm and rhyme of its lyric, but a song like 'Fire Revisited', which had little resemblance to Softley's oeuvre, apart from the sequence of colours mentioned in 'Am I the Red One', errs on the side of the poetic, or at least the symbolic. These preconscious influences return attention to the psychoanalytic criticism of Kristeva and Bloom, particularly Kristeva who sees the revolutionary potential of the irrational in language as continually threatening the rational. This is amplified further in the song 'Invisible Gold Bear', which was a reflection on the psychedelic experience, prompted again by Softley's 'Am I the Red One'. In such an altered state of perception the revolutionary potential of Kristeva's 'semiotic', which normally is present in dreams, is brought to the surface. The terminology of Kristeva's theoretical impulse is very musical because of its fluctuations of rhythms and sounds in the semiotic stage, and it is the combination of music and psychedelics of late 1960s counterculture that retains a strong influence over my mind. The psycho-social benefits of psychedelics are still being explored

²⁴² Robert Wyatt *Old Rottenhat* (Rough Trade Records)

²⁴³ John Fahey *The New Possibility: John Fahey's Guitar Solo Christmas Album* (Takoma)

in research universities to this day²⁴⁴ and could be further enhanced by allowing for more lyrical and musical expression.

Excited by Kristeva's proposed revolution of poetic language but sensing that my language of song was not especially poetic and wondering whether her theorising on the disrupting power of language from the early 1970s was just another product of the 'spirit of the age', I rushed out of the psychological and into the world of the social; if a revolution of the mind was not forthcoming, then a social revolution might make people feel happier. The song, 'Bad Planning' was also partly in accordance with Softley's belief in 'real' people and places, rather than being too 'arty crafty'; unfortunately I fear I was being too arty or crafty in the telling of the song because, after playing it at 'Live in the Park' festival in Aylesbury in 2025, I was berated by a woman from the crowd who thought I was complaining about the town and its people, rather than the intention, which was to instigate a mock uprising against all systems and agents that had initiated and were perpetuating the belief that Aylesbury was an undesirable place.

'Eliot's Field' learnt the lesson from 'Bad Planning' by refocusing attention onto an unambiguous narrative in rather a folky way of plain speaking, like Softley's lyrical style of keeping the 'message' simple - uneventful, unadorned, but apparently leaving just enough space for possible audience involvement with the song. 'Diffusionism' took its focus from Softley's guitar style heard on 'Birdie, Birdie' from the *Sunrise* album. Learning, without overt imitation, lyrically and musically from Softley's style, I feel that the final track of the twelve songs, 'Surprised by Song' is the most effective meeting of styles between myself and Softley as influenced from the first side of the *Any Mother Doesn't Grumble* album, while simultaneously furthering the development of one of my lyrical voices and communicating a

²⁴⁴ Luke, D. *Otherworlds: Psychedelics and Exceptional Human Experience*.

clear experience that could potentially engage a listening audience, as well as opening a critical perspective that incorporates the psychological as well as the social.

The combination of music, lyrics and personal mythology have prompted other musicians, journalists, biographers and academics to investigate other solo musicians, such as Nick Drake, Jackson Frank, Nic Jones, and the Nobel Prize-winning Bob Dylan.²⁴⁵ What has emerged for me is that I am more powerfully influenced by an era than an individual.

Nevertheless, by the process of investigating an individual, his music and lyrics, as well as focusing my attention on the era, things have been drawn out of me which have engaged my personal resources in a more structured way than being left to my own devices. The process may be likened to a good educator or counsellor.

From the composition of music and lyrics I have similarly re-enforced the idea that a varied approach is preferable. A variety of musical styles and of lyrical themes, at least at the level of folk song before a distinctive style has been established, recognised and paid for by an audience, will sustain the interest of the author and be more entertaining for potential listeners. A certain style is inevitable due to tone of voice and manner of playing, particularly for the solo player, yet a variety of musical and lyrical approaches was achieved by Softley through his recordings and may be heard in my own songs. This variety of styles in the interactive engagement between singer and audiences can be further enhanced by song preambles, sincerity, use of humour, and by responding spontaneously to the dynamics of the performance context in a tradition of folk entertainment. These aspects, which are typically neglected by a band with a set list, were explored in the dynamics of interactive performance in Chapter 5, which was closest to my research as practice, and even saw such contexts as possible starting points for later song creations.

²⁴⁵ Day, A. (1987). *Jokerman: Reading the Lyrics of Bob Dylan*.

I have heard and seen other small-scale performers playing songs from pop, folk and blues culture, sometimes in a similar style to myself, which suggests a small-scale influence, or lack of imagination on their part. As a Bloomian postscript I could say, if someone plays one of my own songs then I will feel that the work on influence has been effective. Even if we are all just singing variations on the same song, I feel that we are still on the road.

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