

It started with a Disc

So how did *your* great love affair with music begin? Each issue we give *RNR*'s writers a chance to share *their* version of an age-old story...

Be-coming a teenager in the mid-60s, my early musical influences came from popular music – The Beatles, The Who, The Kinks, and others. I'd been to a few shows at the Boston Gliderdrome (it was built for roller skating) but only to see groups: first, Traffic, and then a number of shows by The Strawbs who had a young man on keyboards named Rick Wakeman. At one show, a drunk tried to climb onto the stage in front of Rick's Hammond organ. Rick punched him back into the crowd and didn't miss a note. He did play more notes than most! My early musical influences back then were pop and rock.

I moved away to Plymouth for college at the then Polytechnic. The Guildhall hosted live music and in April 1972 I went to a show which if I remember correctly featured a number of solo singers. I think I recall Noel Murphy as being one of these though the singer who really influenced me was Harvey Andrews. His voice rose and fell as he conveyed the story. That was when it dawned on my nineteen-year-old mind that there were songwriters who took contemporary stories and issues and sang about them with detail.

I bought Harvey's album *Writer Of Songs* when it was released that summer. What struck me were not only the songs and the singer but also the backing musicians. Those were the years when the likes of Ralph McTell, Danny Thompson, Dave Pegg, Dave Mattacks and Rick Wakeman played as session musicians. I bought Ralph McTell's *You Well-Meaning Brought Me Here* at around the same time although it came out the year before. Again the backing musicians added something special to the sound of the singer and his songs.

It was *Writer Of Songs* that started it for me. I still have my vinyl copy. It's in front of me now as I type. The album opens with 'Hey! Sandy'. I knew about the shootings at Kent State University (4 May 1970) from the song 'Ohio' by Neil Young and made famous through the efforts of Graham Nash. Harvey's song takes a more

personal angle. The mood is lifted by 'In The Darkness', with Buddy Holly influences reaching back before my time. Next is the haunting melody of 'Boothferry Bridge'. Who could write a song about a rusty old bridge leading into Hull? Everyone should listen to Rick Wakeman's piano on this track.

Next, the cappella 'Unaccompanied' – the lyrics written in 1971 are still very applicable today. The details and the nationalities have changed but the political issues around poverty and employment it raises remain relevant now. Next track 'Gift Of A Brand New Day', a sweet glimpse of 60s hope, love and freedom, gained more meaning for me years later when I started travelling myself.

Side one (remember when albums had two sides?) concludes with 'Soldier', probably the most widely known and most misunderstood of Harvey's songs. In 1972, with my awareness of both the Vietnam War and what was described as 'the Troubles' in Northern Ireland, the song spoke to me about the loss of an individual being forgotten in the politics and fighting of war. It's a song the BBC would not play and soldiers apparently got into trouble for buying it. It was a big seller in Northern Ireland as the B-side of a single, and very popular at Harvey's solo concerts.

A little while back I spoke to Harvey on the phone, a couple of weeks or so after his seventy-seventh birthday. He explained how he came to write 'Soldier'. The lyrics portray a British soldier on guard duty in a crowded police station. A bomb is thrown through the window and the soldier covers it with his own body to protect the civilians in the station. The song was inspired by an actual event that took place at a Royal Ulster Constabulary station on the Springfield Road in 1972 and the soldier died protecting two adults and two children. An accurate song would have had little impact. Harvey only knew of the general circumstances



of the incident and crafted as powerful an anti-war song as you can hear. Sadly, Harvey regrets that the song is often perceived as pro-loyalist, which was never his intention.

The songs on the second side of the album lack the power and effect of 'Hey! Sandy' and 'Soldier', but 'Anna (My Love)' invokes thoughts of the oppressed minority; 'Borne On The Breeze' evokes visions of Paris, and Rick Wakeman adds his piano accompaniment to the story of 'Martha'. The album finishes with the title track, 'Writer Of Songs', with Harvey accompanying himself on guitar. He wrote it when he was only twenty-six.

'I always wanted to be a someone/to climb those mountains that no one has stood on/So let others paint now, their touch is lighter/Some other author can become the great writer/I'll be content just to be a writer of songs.'

And this he has been. In his career, he played over 3500 gigs (keeping a note of each one), and recorded many albums until his last, in 2014, which was entitled *Life!* He considers *Snaps – The Family Album* from 1995 and *The Journey* from 1997 his personal favourites.

While the songs from *Writer Of Songs* are the ones that continue to reverberate in my head, I now need to listen to his later albums so that I can be true to the final verse on the album: *'And some will love them and others will hate them/And I'll just hope that someone will rate them, and maybe someday, investigate them – seriously.'*

Tom Povey