



THE PORTRAITS

‘Counterbalance’

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SONG COMMENTARY

01. OPEN DOORS

"What is hell? I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love." Fyodor Dostoyevsky

A song for those left behind when a loved one departs from us with no certainty of a safe return. Whether it is nature or circumstance that has brought it about, we are permanently divided from someone we love, and for most this is a punishment from which it is never possible to recover fully. Inspired by the death of singer Lorraine's grandmother Nora Reilly in the summer of 2011 after nearly a century of life.

02. BACKYARD

"Corruption is nature's way of restoring our faith in democracy." Peter Ustinov

In Britain, Her Majesty's Government and its machinery is at the time of writing pouncing on some wishy-washy and unsubstantiated allegations on a foreign shore against the founder of the Wikileaks website Julian Assange, who lives on British soil. Those put in power to protect the nation and its inhabitants are supporting the extradition of one of them away from these shores to an uncertain future in which his life could be put at risk. A convenient moment indeed for the authorities to rid themselves of inconvenient truths.

03. LITTLE FLAME

"You are discussing how Moslem women cover themselves from top-to-toe in order to become 'sexually invisible'. In this country there's a much easier way to do that – just turn forty-five." Monica from Liverpool, a caller to BBC Radio 2's Jeremy Vine show, as quoted in Vine's book It's All News To Me

Women in all four corners of the globe are fighting for their freedom to be celebrated for the person they are rather than being judged on how they appear. While Bruce Forsythe's longevity is widely celebrated by the BBC, the same organisation quietly removes from its screens knowledgeable and talented female presenters thirty years Forsythe's junior for having too many wrinkles to look good in HD. Isn't this one of the great battles for justice in this age: accepting and celebrating what we look like and having the right to be heard regardless?

04. DAISY CHAIN

"There will be change because all the military have are guns." Aung San Suu Kyi

In 2010, whilst working towards a Burmese arts event in London, one of us had a dream where after nearly five decades of brutal military rule there was a sudden, irreversible movement in Burma for peaceful change instigated by people power. Then, it was just a dream. In 2012, we sat in London's Royal Festival Hall watching the leader of Burma's democratic movement Aung San Suu Kyi speak to a crowd of followers not only outside the walls of her famous house-come-prison in Burma's main city Rangoon, but, for the first time in over two decades, beyond the borders of her enslaved nation for whose freedom she has fought for so long. Can we dare to hope that the dream could become reality?

05. SHADES OF VICTORY

"Undoubtedly, VE Day was a time to celebrate, to think back over the past and look ahead to the future. But there was, for everyone - because everyone had either lost someone themselves or knew somebody who had - a strange air of sadness to the day. That, I think, is what people remember." Phil Carradice

Shades of Victory is the portrait of a young woman caught up in the dancing and celebrating at a VE Day street party in early May 1945. She dons a brave expression, and revels in the moment as much as the next person. She wears a painted smile but carries a heavy heart as she remembers her lost love that would never make it home. And she is not alone: on her simple terraced street adorned with colour and reproduced for all time in monotone, a dozen other young hearts have also been left broken by the injustice of a terrible and protracted conflict, mirroring the millions of lives destroyed by the futility of war before and since.

06. VALIDATION

"The saddest part about being human is not paying attention. Presence is the gift of life." Stephen Levine

In every corner of London, talented songwriters and bands are battling to get heard, hoping for that lucky break where someone with the power to deliver them to a wider audience might just be listening. So often the most deserving voices get passed over in the mêlée of popular culture, drowned in the sea of voices setting this week's romantic break up to music. A parallel exists in the world of news, where the pleas of a nation in turmoil, a people desperate to let us know how they are being denied their human rights, can be eclipsed by the juicy details of Beckham's latest Achilles disaster even on the most high brow of news broadcasts. The news and art worlds have both sadly been consumed by commercialism and popular culture in the battle for an audience.

07. REAL WORLD

"It's funny how humans can wrap their mind around things and fit them into their version of reality." Rick Riordan

Power, and sometimes even success, can lead to bad things because of human traits that we all share. Friendships falter when one side of the relationship becomes more interested in their own concerns than the relationship itself. In the insecure world of high-end politics, the leader who has ruled for too long may find him- or herself flying solo, adrift, losing touch with the people and things that matter, laying the blame for their own wrongdoing at any door other than their own. Being alone can harden us. We learn to care less. We convince ourselves that we are right, even untouchable. We harden. And there begins a very slippery slide from indifference to arrogance and in extreme cases onwards to tyranny. In friendship, it creates distance or separation. In politics, it destroys lives.

08. SHIELD

"Man will occasionally stumble over the truth, but usually manages to pick himself up, walk over or around it, and carry on." Benjamin Franklin

Some of the terrible things happening in Burma have never made our news. The military regime was fully aware of the wall of silence in the western media about their brutality at home, and played on this in order to maintain a hold on power. Popular opinion sways governments. The media sways popular opinion. Newsmakers make decisions, rarely along altruistic lines, about what we should know about. The Burmese people, so mild and uncomplaining at the best of times, so often wondered where the world was and why they were doing nothing to assist. In 2003, during the invasion of Iraq by American forces, the US embassy in Rangoon received a letter three words long, which read: "Please invade us!"

09. GLASTONBURY SONG

"In life, finding a voice is speaking and living the truth. Each of you is an original. Each of you has a distinctive voice. When you find it, your story will be told. You will be heard." John Grisham

When The Portraits were invited to play Glastonbury Festival in 2011, it was a moment of revelation for us all. Our work highlighting the plight of the forgotten peoples of the world had led to an invite to play the Greenfields stages by an inspiring Burmese dissident, Ko Aung, who had spent years in the brutal Insein prison for his beliefs and was now a refugee based in London and continuing to work for freedom in his country. It was amazing for our stories to finally be heard, and we started thinking what it must be like to suddenly hear the heart of a nation drumming behind you when your thoughts have been drowned out by violence, and your voice has been stifled for so long.

10. TOO CLOSE

"There are wounds that never show on the body that are deeper and more hurtful than anything that bleeds." Laurell K. Hamilton

Which is worse: physical trauma or psychological? Ask the soldiers returning from fruitless wars. The luckier amongst them can be cured of the wounds to their bodies within months. But the mental scars rarely fade in a lifetime. Depression and mental illnesses affect one in ten people and if left untreated, have the power to destroy what might otherwise be a bright future overflowing with strong relationships and positive experiences. This song paints a picture of one person's experience of depression at a young age and of the intensity of emotions that can leave the first-time sufferer frightened and alone, terrified of what might happen to them.

11. RAINBOW WAVE

"Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes." "It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence." Mahatma Gandhi

"An individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law." Martin Luther King

"For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." Nelson Mandela

A tribute in song to the quotations of some of the greatest freedom fighters history has known – Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela, the latter whose dedication to bringing about the birth of the rainbow nation of South Africa gives the song its name.

12. SHOOT UP DREAMS

"One of the truly bad effects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding." Richard Dawkins

Organised religion has the power to offer solace to the bereft, hope to the hopeless, a family to the abandoned and a shelter for those who need it most. How contradictory that the same age-old structures have the power to engender fear, set up a tribal mentality where the non-subscribing outsider is akin to a lesser being, create overpowering feelings of guilt, segregate children from the moment they are born through educational apartheid and, not least, stand as the justification for a huge number of the most significant wars throughout history. The message is this: never be afraid to question and never take an initial answer as the absolute truth if your heart tells you otherwise.

13. TRILBY MAN

"We all die. The goal isn't to live forever, the goal is to create something that will." Chuck Palahniuk

Most of us fortunate enough to live in a safe part of the world are nonetheless subject to the most intense kind of injustice at least once in our lives: the injustice of losing someone. In December 2011, one of the greatest supporters of acoustic music in London, Andy Ropek, died very suddenly, depriving London's folk and singer songwriter scene of its John Peel. Andy's habit of wearing a black Trilby hat whenever he introduced acts on stage at his Icarus Club in South East London gave the title to this affectionate tribute to a special man and the sparkling impact he had on The Portraits, along with many others striving to be heard in a music industry where so often, you are "too young, too old, too hard, too soft, too breakaway, too done before". We will most definitely keep the hat on stage with us, Andy: it is already working its magic.

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