**Why Leave Me Hanging on a Star, When You Deem Me So High?**

**The Joe Boyd - Nick Drake Nexus**

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This paper proposes to examine one particular case of the Transatlantic Anglo-American exchanges in the folk music world of the late 1960s and early ’70 through a study of the focal figure of Joe Boyd, an American producer and musicologist who spent time first in the blues revival in the US in the early sixties, and upon his relocation to the UK became a pivotal influence in the development of folk rock and psychedelia on the British scene. I will devote particular attention to the troubled relationship between Boyd and one of his greatest artistic finds, yet greatest commercial failures, quintessential English singer-songwriter and guitarist, Nick Drake.

Drake seems to have found a father surrogate in Boyd, only to be mortally disappointed in him when Boyd again shifted to the US side of the Atlantic to take up a more lucrative job in the record industry. The unresolved Oedipal crisis may have contributed to the depression that cost Drake his life in 1974 as a result of an overdose of anti-depressant medication. One of Drake’s last songs, “Hanging on a Star”, seems addressed directly to Boyd and to give voice to this conflict and sense of loss.

In addition to Drake’s lyrics and biography I intend to use Joe Boyd’s own autobiographical account, given in his book *White Bicycles*, elucidating the collaborative process between him and Drake. One of Drake’s biographers has in fact suggested that the Boyd/Drake relationship can be figured metaphorically as the harmonics between chords in A and E, respectively – designations that of course also mirror the national belongings of the two artists, namely the components in the special, Transatlantic relationship between America and England…

Starting in A major: Joe Boyd began his life-long career in music, while still a student at Harvard, as a promoter of blues concerts in the university-dense Boston area in the early 1960s. He travelled to the South searching for surviving bluesmen who still had the chops to perform live for an authenticity starved, white college youth audience eager to relive vicariously the sufferings of disenfranchised black Americans in earlier decades – an interest spurred on by the Civil Rights struggle of the period where white sympathizers with the Black cause enrolled as Freedom Riders, joining the protests against discrimination and segregation.

Having had modest success with these concerts, Joe Boyd first visited the Uk in 1964 and used his network among Black musicians to recruit players for the increasingly popular blues revival tours that began to come over to England and continental Europe in this period. The exposure to the blues in live form that occurred in Britain was to eventually inspire English-born artists such as Eric Clapton, Eric Burdon, Keith Richards and many others to form rhythm’n’blues bands that a few years later spearheaded the so-called English Invasion of r&b acts that became hugely popular in the USA.

Joe Boyd relocated to England in 1965, to set up a British office for Electra records. While based in London Boyd became involved in running the UFO night club which opened in December of 1966 and became the home of the first English psychedelic bands such as Pink Floyd. Boyd functioned as an A&R man for Island records, and constantly scouted for new talent. He was getting passionately interested in traditional English and Gaelic folk music and travelled the British Isles as an amateur ethno-musicologist, collecting songs and encountering musicians. Among his discoveries were The Incredible String Band, Vashti Bunyan (a distant descendant of the author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, John Bunyan) who quickly got out of the music business and returned to the life of a traveller, and crucially - through Ashley Hutchings, the bassist of Fairport Convention (another Joe Boyd mentored act) - the young singer/songwriter Nick Drake, whose quirky and eccentric Englishness fascinated Boyd.

Continuing now in e minor: English singer-songwriter and guitarist Nick Drake, who was born in Burma to wealthy upper-middleclass parents in 1948, died prematurely at age 26 on November 25, 1974 – his death a probable suicide caused by an overdose of his prescribed tricyclic antidepressant drug, Tryptizol. Biographical narratives of Nick Drake’s life have without exception rested on simplistic one-to-one interpretations of his complex lyrics and on spurious conclusions drawn from such analyses. Some of these fallacious narratives have sought to explain Drake’s depression and suicide as drug-related and/or as a result of repressed homosexuality or childhood abuse. I find nothing in the song lyrics to support such claims.

The fact remains that none of the biographical accounts hitherto published can fully explain Drake’s development from a happy, sports-loving boy who enjoyed public school life and a harmonic, protected home-environment, leading effortlessly into an exciting spell of university-life in Cambridge in the 1960s, adventures in Southern France and North Africa etc. and a life of music, including recording with his best friends as well as some of the brightest musical talents of the contemporary English scene (including guitarist Richard Thompson and keyboardist John Cale) – to a near-catatonic man in his early twenties, unable to connect with peers of either sex and with real or surrogate father figures of any sort.

Part of the reason for the failure of these biographical accounts is that none of the biographers have had access to the remaining primary sources of insight into Drake’s life. The only biographer who has interviewed Drake’s parents (who are now both dead), his sister, his professional collaborators, including Joe Boyd, and – crucially – his school and university friends is Gorm H. Rasmussen, who has generously shared his tapes and transcriptions with me. I am therefore in the privileged position to be able to produce the first academic text on Drake and his work which is fully informed of his psycho-social and cultural background.

An analysis of selected lyrics and songs by Drake demonstrates how they in a wistful, melancholic metaphor-driven poetic language (which owes much to the Romantic poets and other English canonical literature that Drake read during his studies of English at Cambridge) prefigure first a nostalgia for lost childhood and innocence (not unconnected to his early childhood experience as a Sundowner child, whose parents in their own small way helped dismantle the British Empire), then in later years express a darkening sense of existential depression and futility. The lyrics contain themes of lost belonging, lost ideal love, lost direction and purpose – found at first as subtle hints in lyrically rich, sometimes enigmatic songs such as *Time Has Told Me*, *River Man*, *Northern Sky*, *One of These Things First*,the two *Hazey Jane* songs, etc. – then expressed more starkly in naked, pared-down form in late works such as *Pink Moon*, *Hanging on a Star* and *Black-Eyed Dog*.

One can contextualize these thematic analyses with an interpretation of the psychological energies Drake was exposed to from a set of exceptionally supportive parents, an extraordinarily successful school life and musically rewarding childhood and incipient professional career – to the unfortunate circumstance of perceived betrayals by all authority figures in Drake’s adult life, lack of recognition of his genius by the public, leading to a secondary, or belated narcissistic injury, exacerbated by a culturally conditioned, reversed feeling of responsibility towards his parents, ultimately leading to feelings of shame at his perceived failure both as an artist and as a son. The end result of this unresolved crisis of shame and anger for Drake was the inability to fend off the latent existential depression one can sense in all his lyrics, and finally a sad inexorable slide into a suicidal state. Here, however I shall limit my scope to tracing some thematic connections between early Drake material and the later songs.

The first song on the first Nick Drake album (recorded in 1968, but not released until the summer of 1969), *Five Leaves Left* – a title which in itself reminds us of things running out – is *Time Has Told Me*. In this song a naïve 1st person lyric speaker reflects on what he, in a memorable phrase, terms a “troubled cure for a troubled mind”. While this ‘you’ is doubtlessly a female presence, sent to help the male speaker overcome some earthly troubles – making the song partake of some of the characteristics of a traditional love song – the most interesting entity in the lyrics is the third party in the conversation between lovers, Time itself – personified as a fully developed lyrical speaker: “Time has told me/you’re a rare, rare find”, and “Time has told me/not to ask for more”. Father Time is thus the first of several authority figures we encounter in Nick Drake’s lyrical output; and in this song, which is typical of his early work, there is trust and belief in the veracity of the cosmic statements of these entities.

*Five Leaves Left* continues with Drake’s most enigmatic song, again a triadic situation between a passive, expectant male lyrical speaker; an inquisitive yet insecure female; and an authority figure, clearly male, and clearly supernatural – The River Man. The female persona Betty has “come by” with “a word to say/About things today/And fallen leaves”. Betty is plagued by existential doubts and indecisions, to an extent that is quite alarming: “she prayed today/For the sky to blow away/Or maybe stay/she wasn’t sure”. That the two diametrically opposed outcomes and desires in Betty’s mind are quite equivalent is a tell-tale indication of her existential crisis of action and decision-making. She is plagued, indeed paralyzed, by a type of pain that can only be described as both nostalgic and profoundly disoriented. Only during her visits to the River Man can she reach an untroubled state, albeit at a cost: “For when she thought of summer rain/Calling for her mind again/She lost the pain/And stayed for more”. Thus the cure is again “troubled” – in order to lose the pain, she must also lose her mind. We now begin to realize that the River is Lethe, the river of forgetfulness, or ‘unmindfulness’, one of the five rivers of Hades, the realm of the dead, and in fact the one which must be crossed to reach Elysium. Only a small number of the dwellers on the other side of Lethe manage to re-cross into the land of the living, re-incarnated – and in some version of Greek mythology such a re-crossing requires a drink from another river, that of remembrance, Mnemosyne. Perhaps the speaker is gathering the force to attempt this re-crossing himself after a consultation with the River Man: “If he tells me all he knows/About the way his river flows”, but he is not yet ready for such a daring move and resigns: “I don’t suppose/It’s meant for me”.

These two songs from the largely optimistic and patient debut album *Five Leaves Left*, show Drake as a seeker and a believer, but also as a person whose lofty ideals almost inevitably set him up for disappointment if his interlocutors fail the ideals or deliberately betray them. Certainly, the first album firmly establishes the archetypal Nick Drake alter ego poetic speaker as a passive observer/listener – trusting male authority figures metaphorically disguised as Father Time and The River Man.

Turning now to Drake’s urban album, *Bryter Layter* – a title which still expresses intense hope – which was written while Drake lived a solitary life in London in the fall of 1969 on money secured by Joe Boyd from Drake’s record company Island Records, waiting for *Five Leaves Left* to make a splash, a hope which shrank with every passing month, we encounter another incarnation of the bewildered waif in the two Hazey Jane songs, but now it is not a bucolic setting that is the immediate cause of her confusion, but rather the hustle and bustle of city life: “what will happen in the morning when the world it gets so crowded that you can’t look out the window in the morning?” This question is posed in one impossibly long line that suspends the song’s otherwise driving, fast time signature, thus indicating the breathlessness the city life induces in Jane and poetic speaker alike. Still the song ends on an affirmative note, the cure being to “take a little while to find your way in here/Take a little time to make your story clear”. The lyrics end with what has been taken to be Drake’s acutely precise self-diagnosis: “If songs were lines in a conversation the situation would be fine.” In song the speaker can carry out a conversation with others; in mere words devoid of melody, perhaps not…

The album culminates with the song *Northern Sky* which again addresses a feminine disembodied entity come to “brighten” the speaker’s sky: “I never felt magic crazy as this/ I never saw moons knew the meaning of the sea” (remember that “someday our Ocean will find its shore” – *Time Has Told Me*). Furthermore the speaker’s patience is wearing thin “It’s been a long time that I’m waiting/Been a long time that I’m blown”), and he badly needs guidance: “Oh, if you would and you could/Straighten my new mind’s eye”. The cryptic reference to the speaker’s “new mind” makes us wonder what has happened: Some form of enlightenment, which needs exactly that: form, straightening out? The line “Never held emotion in the palm of my hand”, i.e. firmly in his grasp, seems to indicate the turmoil, which perhaps was brought on by her, or perhaps was there in his (“blown”) mind already before she came…

Still, the song is so earnest in its beauty (not least created by John Cale’s selection of keyboards, including celeste) and near desperation “Will you love me until I’m dead?” that the listener believes that the magic the speaker invokes will rescue him “now you’re here,” and that *Bryter Layter* will indeed end with the brightening of his Northern Sky.

But what if there is no Morning Star, no Lucifer – only a Pink Moon, out to “get ya all”? “None of you will stand so tall”, the speaker of the title track of Drake’s third album (recorded in 1971, released in October) summarily informs us. Only the defiantly perky melody of the overdubbed piano track is there to contradict him, and the opening song quickly gives way to the first truly dark song of Drake’s oeuvre, *Place To Be*, which begins: “When I was young, younger than before/I never saw the truth hanging from the door/And now I’m older see it face to face […] Now I’m darker than the deepest sea.” These songs are expressions of disappointment and bitterness at the lack of appreciation of his two first albums, and a young man’s lashing out at his father figures for real or imagined slights at his lack of independent, adult success. Shortly after the release of *Pink Moon* which Island Records again failed to turn into a commercial success, despite an innovative anti-campaign, and a pledge from the label to keep Drake’s albums in print in perpetuity, Boyd went back to the US, to take up an executive position in the label’s LA office. Nick Drake was in practice left musically orphaned by this move.

As a sort of epilogue to his recording career Nick Drake entered the studio once more in 1974 with only five songs to record. Despite problems with his guitar playing and his voice he managed to leave finished versions of these even sparser summations of his situation, which by now was beyond even being fine when communicated with songs as lines in the conversation. In *Black Eyed Dog*, the role of the still faintly luminous celestial orb, the Pink Moon, has been usurped by a fully dark creature of the earth: “A black eyed dog he called at my door/A black eyed dog he called for more.” The dog is a harbinger of death, no matter his name, which will be revealed shortly. Of course the creature is a metaphor for Nick’s depressed state – his hitherto last ability to disappear was that of being the observer, but here at the end he is the one under the black eye of the dog staring at him, waiting for him to take that final journey to Hades. Thus, the dog is also that of Charon the ferry-man, but this time the river is not Lethe and the destination is not Elysium. It is Styx, the river of hate, which must be crossed under the watchful three-fold gaze of Cerberus.

Nick Drake’s final cry takes us back to the sky he has been gazing upon in most of the songs analyzed today. In *Hanging on a Star* the speaker has finally been abandoned by all and like Prometheus he is left dangling in utter solitude: “Why leave me hanging on a star/When you deem me so high?” Lucifer, now embodied as his surrogate father figure Boyd, has left him for good, yet his star is now his solitary home from which his cry of incomprehension at his betrayal rings out to the absent you. We note that as Nick Drake sinks into deeper and deeper depression the songs begin to shed their personae. The figure of authority is the first to go as the Triad shrinks to a Dyad of you and me – and the end is reached when the black-eyed dog sits alone and stares at the Monadic self, hanging on a star…

After the last session in July 1974 Nick Drake went back to living with his parents in the village of Tanworth-in-Arden. In November of that year he died from an overdose of his anti-depressants which he habitually used as sleeping pills. After the use of Drake’s songs in commercials (where bizarrely *Pink Moon* is used to sell VW Cabriolets) and on film soundtracks, his work has begun to sell in much larger quantities than during his life time. There is a strong irony in this fact, as now his music reaches the type of audience he originally wrote for: young disaffected people who need guidance to cope with existential issues, a generation that is perhaps better equipped to deal with depression and disillusion since they never really bought into the idea that the future was promised to them at birth and that father figures were permanently fixtures of a young man’s life. Nick’s songs therefore help the young listeners of today cope with numbness and existential fatigue, and may well have prevented the potential suicide of some of these people. As Nick’s increasing desperation grew audible in his lyrics, so the potential healing power of his voice for future generations grew correspondingly. Joe Boyd on his part has come full circle in his musicological quests, now focusing almost exclusively on world music which he tirelessly scours the third world for, continuing his talent scouting activities into the sixth decade of his career…