

A Soul Song

by Russell Stone

A galaxy swirls majestically, moving rapidly away from the centre of the universe. On an outflung spiral arm of that galaxy, an anonymous star system continues its own preordained, elliptical dance. Within that system, third from its sun, is a planet that houses a miracle – a species exhibiting the beginnings of awareness. It has come to dominate the planet, and has recently engaged in one of its more enduring forms of recreation.

It was evening, shortly after the end of WWII, and lying in bed, in an upstairs bedroom of a newly-built house on a council estate in a small Norfolk village an infant listens to his father sing a lullaby. And is happy. The infant that is.

At least, I think I was. In fact I must have been! Why would I not be happy listening to my fathers' warm baritone singing to me?

That is:

mmm**MMEEEE!!!**

The centre of my known universe.

IMMERSION

Intro/Prelude

I do not know the genesis of my connection with music.

I do not know what music is.

I know I have a feeling for music and that the connection, that feeling I have, is something that has been a constant throughout my life. Even when I appeared to go away from music, I found it was in order to return to it. Music has shaped my life, and my changing connection with music has reflected my tragedies, joy, and personal growth.

The culture I was embedded in dictated the music I experienced growing up. My childhood memories are defined by popular songs from the previous century onwards – songs from the first and second world wars (*For All We Know – Pack Up Your Troubles*), songs from between the Wars (*Autumn Leaves – How Long Has This Been Going On?*) and songs current in the 50s (*Shrimp Boats are a-Coming – Que Serà*).

Snapshots:

Waking up as a boy chorister in the village church having falling asleep during an evening service. Figuring I'd had enough of that and walking out of church mid-service to go home to bed. The vicar was not best pleased.

I can sense a papier-maché sheep's head (something to do with baby Jesus) from a school Xmas play in the village hall where apparently I sang a solo of I Saw Mummy Kissing Santa Claus – and remember the astonishment and pride in my mother at seeing her child, me, singing for the first time in public. Playing the record of Behind the Green Door over and over on a great uncle's

radiogram before a party with my mother's extensive London-Irish family. Vague memories of that party, where everybody had to do a turn, and reveling in it. Picking out tunes on the piano in the same room. Seeing a dance band, on the first-floor of a village pub for the first time and being absolutely fascinated by it. Staring the whole evening, right beside of the band, trying to figure out what the hell they were doing. Sitting in the back seat of the car, watching the headlights brushing the tree branches as we drive back, singing the songs of South Pacific after seeing it at the pictures in Beccles. Mum already knows the lyrics, she's good at that, and works on the melody with Dad; me joining in as best I can. Some Enchanted Evening still evokes a delicious stirring from then – impossible to describe.

The first album I bought at 11, Take Five by Dave Brubeck, the second, Scheherajazz a wonderful version of Scheherazade.

Singing the lead in Gilbert & Sullivan operettas at college, loving it.

Hearing Ray Charles for the first time and being blown away.

Mucking about on the piano as I loved to, when a teacher pushes open the door and says, "Right Stone, get off that piano, get out." Banned from all pianos in the college for daring to ask my piano teacher to be allowed to study the Moonlight Sonata. He deemed this pop music, the strongest denigration he could muster. Silly old sod.

Going to hear Booker T & the MG's in Norwich playing Green Onions and being more blown away.

Having an emotional crisis as I neared A levels, realizing that I did not want to be an engineer, but not knowing what else to do – until a teacher (the first and only) asked what I could do? "I can sing." So he suggests looking in The Stage. At my first audition I land a job in The Black and White Minstrel Show. Singing in front of the school assembly feels great, some kind of twisted revenge. I am leaving. I have a Job.

1st Verse

I am still unclear why I never elected to undergo formal training in music. I spent years blaming others for this, but gradually I guess I begin to understand that I did not wish, at an unconscious level, to engage with music in that way. My intuitive feelings have always been very powerful around music; less so in other areas, but strong in music – so much so, that once I began a professional career in music I moved forward effortlessly on an upward curve to the peak of the profession.

My voice has variously been described by others as strong, rich, marvelous, moving etc... but the only way I can describe it is as a feeling. Singing was what I did. It was as much a part of me as breathing.

However, I was now required to shape this voice, to shape myself, to shape my behaviour in certain ways. Thus, over a period of time, my upward career curve was accompanied by a downward character-developmental curve, that tracked my gradual estrangement from my self, from that inner connection, forged in many excursions into the countryside and communion with nature as a young boy.

Snapshots:

My first professional step –going onstage at the Blackpool Opera House in my first production number in front of over 3000 people I am immediately

blinded by the lights (I have never rehearsed with full lighting). Guided around the stage by the hands of a succession of Minstrels and Television Toppers. I survive – a miracle. On tour with the Minstrels at the age of 17. Quite a move from a boarding school in the depths of Norfolk to a summer season surrounded by lots of leggy, gorgeous women ... and sharing a room with a gay guy. Life has got very interesting indeed.

Walking into Boots to get a hangover cure – after a night on virtually neat gin with some Toppers and Donald Peers, the star. I feel absolutely bloody awful. Never doing this again! (ah well!)

A year later I am summoned to the Minstrels' London production at the Victoria Palace: my voice is working well.

It's Sunday morning, the run-through for the Minstrel's weekly TV show at BBC Centre in Wood Lane, having done vocal pre-recordings the previous week – my first sessions. A typical week: rehearsing the TV show from Monday to Saturday during the day and recording on the Sunday – on top of 'twice nightly' theatre shows and two matinées. A week's pay is about £45.

Being told off for singing the wrong harmonies during the production numbers on stage. Despite the work-rate I was getting mightily bored.

Leaving the Minstrels and getting a job in the chorus of what turned out to be the final Billy Cotton TV series.

1st Chorus

Although I got married far too young, the mid 60s was a period of stability for me. I was still deep in the trance of unawareness and responding to life as a series of emotional and behavioural knee-jerks. I had no awareness of the depth of my connection to music, and leaving the security of a long-running show introduced me to the insecurities of the freelance. No doubt this served to promote my deep in-built insecurity around life itself. I knew I could sing, but somehow belief in myself, in my talents and abilities, was deeply tainted with Family-of-Origin dynamics ... learned behaviour modeled by my father around his own insecurities ... and who I was ... what I brought into the world.

However, there was something within me that would not lie down, would not let me settle into security, I was always pushing, always looking to move. Others saw this as ambition, and so did I at the time, but now I wonder ... was it maybe, that deep down I knew I was in the wrong place, doing the wrong things, trying to find what I was searching for? With no way of acknowledging this to myself, my inner connection grew fainter.

So, I now moved into more TV work, tours and more studio sessions. I began to work with more contemporary material, listening to fusion bands, Blood, Sweat & Tears, as well as Sinatra and others.

Snapshots:

Asking Val Doonican what it took to be a star and being told, 'Be prepared to die, die, and die again, and never know whether you'll make it.' Being scared by this but excited.

Driving along the A4 to do my first cabaret in South Wales Working Men's clubs – the proud owner of a yellow second-hand Triumph Vitesse. (The M4 stopped at Maidenhead)

The next morning I'm on the phone getting the lyrics to Tom Jones' hit The

Green, Green Grass of Home – having been booed off the stage the previous night, all my arrangements of wonderful, classy, cabaret tunes having been murdered by a female organist with bottle-bottom glasses who'd previously announced 'No problems', after riffing through the parts extremely briefly while standing at the entrance to the men's toilets, my changing room (after years of theatre and TV dressing-rooms it isn't easy to adjust to avoiding splashes). I triumph with three reprises of Grass and head for England in huge relief

In the changing room of a London nightclub, I'm copping crafty glances at the breasts of the showgirls as they preen in their costumes in front of the mirror, preparing for the show. They know I'm looking, but I don't know that. Or do I? It's starting to get a bit confusing. And exciting. I'm gradually aware that women are interested in me. Shame, about being married, but what the fuck!

Twice while working these clubs I have out-of-body experiences. Immersed in the songs I am slowly aware that I am letting go of everything and floating upward, looking down on myself – that singing is now effortless. I am just in it, in the song and observing myself with no judgment – not scared, not concerned, just present.

Singing Goldfinger, encircled by girl dancers, and having a complete blank on the lyrics. The look on their faces is priceless as they circle, with me singing garbage.

2nd Verse

By now I was making connections in the Music Industry, and begin singing with The Mike Sammes Singers on TV, radio and studio work, which necessitated concentrated sight-reading. I cut my first record and began getting a different kind of studio work, more contemporary with different singers who were mainly non-readers, and who had a very different attitude to those they perceived of as 'straights'. I was increasingly insecure, frequently astonished that I got calls to work, yet more arrogant about my talent. I had begun to write and was exploring this very different expression of my abilities.

Snapshots:

Rushing into a pub at lunchtime to throw down a quick double brandy. I'm doing three radio sessions in one day, 10-1, 2-5, 7-10, live in the studio with the Ray Davies Button-Down Brass. There are two other singers, Mike Sammes - bass, Nick Curtis – tenor and myself - baritone: both serious readers and I'm busking. Terrifying. Hence the double brandy. By the end of the day I am growing in confidence, and my reading has improved vastly. Auditioning for Opportunity Knocks and being told by the producer that I came over as arrogant – astonishing her by replying that my knees were knocking together like drumsticks. Inner and outer moving further apart. I tell Mike Sammes that I wouldn't be doing studio work much longer as I am cutting my first record soon. Ah, the arrogance.

*Singing Sly Stone's Dance to the Music on a TV show, next to the wonderful voice of Johnny Goodison. My first trip abroad with Brotherhood of Man. **This is it!***

My first tour with James Last. Rejected by the German PA I was having an affair with for hanging around in bars after the shows drinking with English musicians, I tell each German band member, one by one, to fuck off. Next

day I have no memory of this and wonder why the Germans are all ignoring me as we board the bus.

Coming back to England at the end of the tour, staying with a fellow singer and being found outside the next morning naked, curled round a rose bush. I sit frozen all night on a couch, listening to my wife's screams of emotional pain from upstairs, having told her I'm leaving. Drinking heavier and heavier.

2nd Chorus

My behaviour was by now chaotic, reflecting the deepening fear and insecurity I was experiencing within, but still singing, still getting work. People loving my voice but having problems with me.

On another James Last tour I met my second wife, over from New Jersey. She joins me in England with her gorgeous son Rhashan. Now really being exposed to Soul for the first time in a conscious way, being blown away by it. Singing and writing coming together as my writing adapts to accept new stimulus. However, vocal insecurities began to mount as I sing next to people blessed with superb talent.

My wife and I cut some of my tunes; these are picked up and one song eventually becomes a hit single.

Made it!

Or have I?

I had now moved into mainstream popular music in Britain and was briefly at the cutting edge. The marriage brought stability into my life and for a while this papered over things. Joanne and I have a beautiful son, James, who is much loved.

Snapshots:

Shame at being admonished publicly by James Last for ad libs he didn't like, my response, have a drink! Lots!

Singing on my own with a Big Band in very successful Swedish TV special.

Alcohol gets more important as my nerves get worse.

Getting married for a second time – drunk in the evening.

Sitting in my car in Bond Street, listening to the radio, The single We Do It Joanne and I had cut is at number 5 in the charts. That's it then – R&J Stone. Definitely made it!!!

*When **R&J Stone** do a TV special for LWT, I am greeted warmly by MD Harry Rabinovitch in the production office – so very different from the cutting tongue Harry used with me as a session singer. I am somewhat bemused, what's changed? Of course – I'm now a pop star. But **I** haven't changed and I'm finding it difficult to square all this.*

Cabaret with pickup bands off the back of the single – which I hate. The musicians are tired and bored and this is hurtful. I'm no longer enjoying music.

Looking at my hands on the piano as they struggle to find a chord sequence that will give me inspiration for a new song. I've always written because I like writing songs. Now the commercial pressure is crucifying – there's so much at stake and I'm becoming more and more scared ... though I have no way of acknowledging this, least of all to myself. So much pressure to come up with

another We Do It, and I can't.

In Australia I read a bad crit about my voice. Never had one before, this goes deep and causes me great pain. I'm gradually losing connection with my voice, and that spells bad trouble for my soul.

In a white stretch limo on our way to a charity performance at the Sydney Opera House Joanne has a really bad stomach and is throwing up out of the open window, trails of puke streaming down the sparkling white door. When we get there, a doctor gives her liquid valium so that she can perform.

Instead of waiting for my cue to go on stage she wanders out, high as a kite and just stands around grinning. The conductor has laid the parts out wrong and when we begin the first song, half the band plays one song and the other half plays another. I've had it by now too and collapse with laughter. Happy days.

Middle Eight /Bridge

I decided I didn't want to be a singer any more, I would just write songs and produce Joanne. But we couldn't come up with another hit single. A second album didn't do much. A third was recorded but never released.

My drinking was going strong now. But I was writing with musicians and had at last found a writing partner I really liked. An Icelandic, Thorir Baldursson who was living and working in Munich in the high days of Disco, Donna Summer et al. I went there to work with him. Really good songs coming out, 10 in 10 days.

I called Joanne to come over to hear the material, she loved it. She still looks so beautiful in the picture I took of her in a field outside Munich.

Back in England, my mother called from Winchester to say that Joanne had had some kind of fit.

In the hospital the consultant had asked Joanne to wait outside. An eternity passed before he spoke, and in that eternity an iron grip took hold of my entire being. "Mr Stone, I'm afraid that..." and "... I think it best if you don't tell her just now; let her have some months of normal life."

It was five months later. Joanne had asked to go for a drive. In the car she turned to me and asked "What's wrong with me?" I went cold inside, it was the moment I was dreading. Although she had been ill for months I had had no preparation. How do you tell someone you love they are dying? I still don't know.

It was an extremely malignant brain tumor. Joanne was dead by Xmas.

For months I maintained while she was alive, but when she finally 'died' I went off-planet for about a year, living in a bottle. I didn't know it then but I had lost something around music. I didn't want to sing, but it was all I knew.

For the next 13 years I continued, 13 years lost in my own private hell. During that time I had another beautiful son, Sebastian from a relationship that eventually broke up because of my drinking. All I did was drink and tour with James Last. My dark night of the soul was long, ugly and extremely painful. I was now completely stuck in my tune. I had no idea what to do but to keep singing the only song I know. But it hurt so much.

Snapshots:

Walking away from the funeral, having put Joanne into the ground, looking up at the branches of a tree I think, 'It's been six days since she died, how the hell am I going to get through this?'

I hold my son Sebastian in my arms, just after he's been born and look at him through tears of joy.

The pain at yet another rejection of a tune – why is this happening?

Getting out of a car in Hollywood, drunk, after dinner with Tommy LiPuma, one of the top American producers, who's looking for material for Randy Crawford. He is interested in my writing; but this evening I just walk away, not knowing where the hell I am. I do not work a great deal with Tommy, needless to say.

Now I'm really scared – I have stacks of supermarket bags all full of letters, bills, cheques etc ... I daren't open them.

Standing up to the microphone to do a sound check at the beginning of another tour, I have no idea what is going to come out of my mouth. I haven't sung for 10 months and I'm terrified. I am as far away from my self, my voice and my music as I will ever be. This is a truly terrible place to be.

EMERGENCE

New Movement

I couldn't do the old way any more and did something absolutely radical. I asked for help. And help was given. During six weeks in a treatment centre I owned my addiction and gave myself a chance for change. I quit drinking and rebuilt my life, a day at a time.

After a while something astonishing happened, I discovered a desire to sing again. I couldn't believe it, after so many years. I spent nine months writing songs, arranging them for a nine-piece band and getting horn parts done. My musician buddies were very generous in letting me use their names to put a band together and for five years I had a monthly residency in a Jazz pub.

I knew that staying sober was not enough for me, I also knew that spirituality was the way forward. I went to meetings of AA and worked the 12 Steps. I talked to people, asked questions: I became a sponge. I would go anywhere, do anything in order to learn. I began a counselling course.

I quit the James Last band, which felt absolutely wonderful.

In time I became a professional counsellor – helping others, the best way to help myself – doing service. I became a teacher. Counsellor and teacher, two vital roles for learning. I embarked on an MA, researching chanting.

Finally I came back to music, but in a very different way, engaging my intellect in all that I did, as well as my heart. I had begun to move towards balance. Finding myself and learning.

I remarried but this was no 3rd Chorus. I'd come to the relationship in a very different way after seven years on my own. I have come home to Polly my new wife, with whom I regularly share long, wonderful walks in the country, getting deeper and deeper into that inner connection, and all is well. I am blessed.

Snapshots:

Bawling my eyes out in group therapy as I begin to mourn my dead wife in sobriety, instead of with the tears of a drunk. The iron grip begins to loosen after so many years.

A stunning miracle – I hear a voice within saying 'I want to sing.' I have never been so dumfounded! What I thought had died and gone forever is stirring.

Walking in the rain and cold on a February evening in North London, going to a singing lesson and feeling sorry for myself. Suddenly, I awaken, and it comes to me that despite the conditions, I am doing what needs to be done in order to grow and learn. Just as suddenly, I feel absolutely marvelous, putting my face up to feel the rain and laughing.

Saying goodbye to the James Last band, one by one, on my last tour having realised I don't have to do this anymore – so very different from what I'd told them 22 years before. It's time to stop. A wonderful feeling.

Asking the reception desk at Alton College for the room number of the counselling course I have signed up for. Re-engaging with education, dealing with unfinished business.

Singing with my band, feeling the groove, working the music, working my songs, working myself. Ahhhh!!

Sitting in an empty room as a trainee counselor, waiting for my first client, feeling so nervous – but knowing that I am feeling nervous, being present with myself. This is one of the huger changes in my life.

On the phone to the landlord of the Jazz pub, who is canceling me after 5 years – because I had the temerity to have a cold and am unable to sing. I feel the anger and unfairness, let it through and it is gone. Time to move on. I thank him and replace the phone. Very different behaviour.

Chanting for the first time with people who have no connection with music in a professional sense, so liberating. Knowing there is something very important here and not having a clue what it is. Wonderful!

Reading Don Campbell's book on the broader aspects of music. Ah-ha, here we go – another universe becoming available. I suddenly get the sense that this is the way forward. I expand within, fear is shrinking and I become more deeply aware of others and myself.

Coda

So here I sit at the word processor, organising these words; six months through my journey into researching chanting/sounding for my MA in Transpersonal Counselling and Psychotherapy. I take a big sigh. Where am I?

Part of where I am is now moving towards the essence of music and away from form, just as Miles Davies and other jazzers were around 1960. For the past two years I have hardly performed at all, but have been busy with exploring modal music and my own spiritual practice which includes chanting/sounding using the tunings of the 13 Indian thats or scales for meditation, accompanied by a Shruti box (a kind of harmonium with no keyboard).

I sing in a kind of free-form improvisational /explorational manner, based on whichever that I am drawn to that day. This has opened something within, as well as freeing me up vocally and mentally – altering my experience around

music to expansion rather than contraction. At the same time, my personal growth work /therapy /yoga, and commitment to my wife /life has served to decrease the fear that had been present for so much of my life.

I have looked briefly at Quwwali with my voice and mind, chanted with different groups and individuals such as Gilles Petit, and feel a growing synthesis as this Eastern aspect of music begins to merge with my Western music experience. Something is growing and I am in the process of exploring this as a singer and writer with colleagues from the Music & Psyche group and others. My teaching and counselling commitments mean this is a slow process but that is good. Slow is excellent for me.

But I am also coming to music in a much broader sense: to its deeper purposes/aspects, for example, the embedded healing properties it offers. This has powerful musical and psychological implications that I am now in the process of exploring under the auspices of the MA. Chanting normally uses pre-composed melodic structures with text/lyrics: I am more interested in Sounding because I find myself moving away from pre-composed melodic forms aligned with text. Feeling an intuitive need to work completely spontaneously, allowing whatever emerges through the voice to emerge, that any sound is acceptable, melodic or otherwise. I actively encourage this process, for I feel that in doing so we are working pre-verbally; facilitating direct expression of the unconscious.

Also, my role as a facilitator of voice/music workshops has led to a deeper and growing awareness of these aspects of music – very little of which I experienced as a professional singer and writer. It took a helluva transition to get here. It took something as powerful as the fire of alcoholism to shift me out of the trance, the immersion [,and make me aware of the emergence]. But shift I did, and those 13 years were not lost years, they were absolutely necessary in order for me to shift (I still have difficulty in accepting that, but that is the truth, as I see it).

In that shift I have learned: I am a son, and more than that I am a husband, and more than that I am a father, and more than that I am a grandfather and more than that I am a singer, and more than that I am writer, and more than that I am a counsellor, and more than that I am a teacher, and more than that I am white, and more than that I am a man, and more than that I am human, and more than that ...

What this 'more' is, I do not know, but I have a feeling that moving towards the essence of music, exploring my relationship with it through the vehicle of vocal expression, will shift me towards that 'more'.

And so the wheel turns. I move deeper into this slow dance, away from my egoic self, expanding to become aware of others, of the world, of the universe out there. I had to go far away from myself in order to begin the journey of finding myself. Joy to the world, love and light to all – to

uuuUuuUSSS!!!