

JIMMY CAMPBELL

Live at Essex University.

Monday, November 21st 1977

In 1977, I organised a five-day poetry festival at Essex University, (near Colchester) where I was a student. This was the punk era – The Damned and The Stranglers having played there recently – and there was little interest in Jimmy Campbell, the best songwriter to have emerged from Merseybeat. However, Jimmy and I were friends and he agreed to do the gig. Although he had developed a reputation for being unreliable, I was confident he'd turn up. He arrived early with a friend called Bruce who drove and got the drinks in, something at which he was very proficient. There was no pressure on Jimmy - it was up to him how long and what he did. During the evening I requested a few songs and urged him to try out any new ones he might have. This turned out to have been fortuitous. Ironically, had the gig been bigger and better organised, Jimmy might have felt nervous and played a brief set with safe choices of material. In the event, he was relaxed, playing two sets which included many new songs. During the interval, I mentioned how much I'd liked "When I Cross Your Path" so he played it again.

In fact, the gig should have been rather different. The Student Union had done little to advertise the gig and then, without notice, their technicians had substituted an inferior P.A. and supplied only one mic and one stand. Jimmy had an acoustic guitar with no d.i. ; he chose not to use a strap, putting one foot on a chair and holding the guitar high so the mic would pick up both voice and guitar. There was no foldback for him to hear himself. The venue was a bar, partitioned into two sections - not normally a problem with the right P.A. However, there was background noise from the other half : people weren't being rude, they couldn't see and some may have been unaware of the gig. Jimmy's audience was small, (thirty or forty people) but more appreciative than it may sound to the listener as the (external) recording mic was unidirectional and there was no audience mic. Strangely, the informal, slightly shambolic, nature of the evening probably helped as Jimmy was happy to treat it as a private party. I can't remember the guitar he used - it may have been a Fender. His appearance resembled the cover of "Jimmy Campbell's Album", though his clothes were darker.

I grew up in Birkenhead, Merseyside, in a working class family ; my brother and I were the first in our family to receive further education. From an early age, we were both interested in music. I became interested in poetry and, while still at school, performed in pubs, clubs and other venues. Jimmy and I were never on the same bill, though there were some overlaps between the scenes, as mentioned in "Adrian Henri's Party Night". My brother had all three solo albums plus "Rockin' Horse". I loved the records and got my own copies. Unfortunately, because of school and my own gigs, I never saw Rockin' Horse play live.

One day, I contacted Jimmy and went round to see him in New Brighton. It's hard to remember your own thoughts from so long ago, but I thought his songs were unusual and brilliant and I guess I just wanted to meet the person who'd written them. I couldn't understand why he wasn't hugely successful.

Jimmy had retreated to the upper floor of an old house which was sparsely furnished and rather run down. There were toys lying in the overgrown garden and in the dark hallway. He was friendly, (he always was) but a little bemused as to why I was interested in him. Later, of course, I realised how self-effacing and self-deprecatory he could be about his work and his life. Our early conversations would have amused an onlooker : me saying how great a song was and him - the person who wrote it - shrugging dismissively. He wasn't involved in the poetry scene, though he liked poetry - he mentioned Shelley and Keats - but he knew or knew of several local writers.

I was still learning guitar, (later, I had my own band, Missing Persons) so it was really good (and quite a thrill) to sit in the kitchen while Jimmy showed me how to play a few songs : I remember learning "Another Vincent Van Gogh" (which he alludes to after playing the song) and how to play the riff from "Half Baked". He sounded exactly like he did on the records, though that was hardly surprising since, (apart from some Lennonesque echo) the records featured little vocal production work. He didn't have perfect pitch and neither do I ; on one occasion, it seemed to take us ages to tune up.

Foolishly, during visits to a nearby pub, I would attempt to match him pint for pint. Somehow, I'd get home. I'd had a few disappointments with "heroes", and it was a relief as well as a pleasure that Jimmy was so friendly and "normal". Of course, there was something enigmatic about someone so dismissive of their own talents and so lacking in any pretension.

I'd try to see him when I went back to Merseyside to visit my parents. Although I wouldn't want to push this too far, I felt we were kindred spirits : both proud of and slightly at odds with our roots, creatively driven and prone to sabotaging ourselves. Billy Kinsley was his best friend and was then having great success with Liverpool Express. Jimmy never expressed any envy and seemed genuinely glad whenever friends were doing well. Jimmy and I weren't close friends - I wonder whether he let many people get close? - and we rarely talked about his personal life.

I was a teenager and I saw Jimmy as a romantic, melancholic artist ; in reality, he may have been depressed. On one occasion, he had to get his guitar from the pawnbroker. At that time, he didn't have copies of his own records or a record player, though I remember there was a radio.

Once when I went round, Alvin Stardust had just left ; he'd been considering covering some of Jimmy's songs. Generally, Jimmy didn't seem interested in those cover versions which had been done - he mentioned Rolf Harris and said that Cliff had done a couple as album tracks - but that may have been because these artistes were considered uncool, though Rolf is now a regular at Glastonbury. Jimmy was a huge fan of The Beatles and Lennon in particular. He and Billy had done the voices of John and Paul on cover versions for some cheap labels. He mentioned backing Chuck Berry. Apparently, (surprise, surprise) Chuck was very difficult. Rockin' Horse knew the songs from the records, but Chuck would play in whatever key he fancied each night, so whoever figured out the key first, (from the run at the start) would shout it to the others. Jimmy said (a painful memory for him) that one night, he'd made several mistakes and, mid-song, Chuck Berry had walked over (perhaps duckwalked over) and told him to "fuck off the stage!"

After punk had changed the music business, I became involved with the DIY scene, (the sort of weird, arty stuff released via Rough Trade) but I don't think Jimmy had much interest in that. He wasn't rude or dismissive, just not interested.

Jimmy seemed rather defeated - perhaps not surprising given his circumstances - but I think he did intend to record again and was hoping for a deal. He mentioned a few possibilities, but I can't remember the details and they may have been pipedreams. However, he told me that he had recorded another album - using a borrowed reel-to-reel tape recorder - but had then been burgled ; the thieves had taken the deck with the master tape on it and he'd not run off any copies! I don't know if there was an element of exaggeration in the story, (he said it happened as soon as he'd finished the album and had gone down the pub) but it wasn't a joke - clearly, something like that did happen. The unreleased songs from this gig are, in effect, the "lost album". He complained, (and this seemed to trouble him) about contracts and publishing deals he'd signed ; at one stage, he seemed to believe that there was no point in writing songs because he wouldn't be allowed to record them himself, they'd be handed to other people ; this rather belies the idea that he was happily settling into song writing as opposed to recording. However, (and this may reflect Jimmy's own contradictions) he also told me he didn't like recording studios and didn't like going to London. The experience of trying to get into art college there which is mentioned in "Another Springtime's Passed Me By" was true. Incidentally, the "mistake" in that lyric is interesting : it should be "L.S. Lowry" but Jimmy sings "T.S. Lowry". Was this a simple uncorrected slip of the tongue, (thinking of T.S. Eliot?) or was it a joke about educational failure? There are many such puzzles in his work. My theory is that Jimmy was a lot smarter than he liked to make out. Three of the unreleased songs mention the idea of moving to America which may have been on his mind, if only as a fantasy.

As Jimmy's asides at the gig testify, his response to bad luck was wry humour. He may even have enjoyed the chaotic circumstances. To my delight, he chose to do two forty minute sets and, in the end, he was asked to stop by the bar management!

After the gig, Jimmy and Bruce stayed with me at my shared house outside Colchester and, (strange what we remember!) he said they would take it easy going back North and stop off somewhere for a game of golf. From what he said, I would guess that he was keen on golf. He said he wasn't much good - but, naturally, he would have said that.

When still a student, I staged what was, and may still be, the only theatre show of Jimmy's songs : "Just A Tape At Twilight". The show lasted a little under an hour and featured me live, (poems and short prose pieces) and Jimmy on tape, (songs taken from albums, nothing unreleased) along with accompanying visuals - slides, mime and arty bits. Jimmy was amused that anyone should want to do this. My intention was to try it out and then see if I could interest him in doing a live version. Ambitious. Jimmy might have been open to the idea of trying something different, but I never pressed the point.

Sadly and ironically, the last time I saw Jimmy, he had a job which involved driving around Merseyside, changing the recorded music in pubs. I said he should put his own music on! I think that he wasn't generally good at keeping in touch – on one occasion, I saw him pick up the mail and put it in the bin without opening any of it - and eventually, we lost contact.

For me, a central element of Jimmy's appeal is that he managed to make such an artistic success out of failings and failure. The songs are wonderful, but would you really want to be the one who wrote them? I think he was blessed and cursed with unusual sensitivity and was born into a social situation in which the odds were always stacked against him.

Here is the complete, chronological track list of both sets which Jimmy played that night.

First set :

1. When I Cross Your Path 2. Baby Doll 3. Golden Opportunity 4. I Stayed Out Late Last Night
5. New Girl Writing Me Letters 6. Another Vincent Van Gogh 7. Missing Kissing You 8. Not Tonight
9. On The Corner Of Your Street 10. It Never Rains But It Pours 11. Green-Eyed American Actress
12. Half Baked 13. One More Baby

Second set :

1. Did Not Think I'd Be So Lonely 2. Close My Case And Move On 3. All The Way To The USA
4. Baby, Walk Out With Your Darling Man 5. The Biggest Gossip In Town 6. Don't Call Me Your Baby
7. You're Spending All My Money 8. Don't Leave Me Now 9. When I Cross Your Path
10. I Wouldn't Let That Happen To You 11. Lyanna 12. By The Light Of A Lamp
13. A Bride For The Second Time 14. That's Right, That's Me

N.B. If Jimmy didn't introduce a new song, I've guessed at the most likely title.
Generally, he didn't spring surprises in his choice of titles.

This release is faithful to the running order. The few songs which are missing have been excluded due to poor technical quality or because Jimmy didn't finish the song. I am concerned not to do Jimmy's memory a disservice and ask the listener to bear in mind that this was an informal gig, in difficult circumstances, and the recording was for my private use. Also excluded are pauses between songs in which Jimmy had a drink, a cigarette or a brief chat with me or Bruce. The master is on a standard cassette, recorded through an external mic. Great improvements have been made to the sound quality, but not at any musical expense. As someone who was there, I can say that this is how Jimmy sounded that night.

Of course, at that time, I couldn't realise how rare and precious this recording would become ; I'd hoped there would be many more but, sadly, that wasn't to be.

Finally, a few thoughts about the songs. I'll keep this brief since listeners will have their own views. I think Jimmy was one of the great songwriters of his time. I have no idea to what extent he was conscious of his own ability or how hard he worked at his songs. It's possible that there was an "accidental" (not consciously wrought) aspect to his lyrics which made them so unusual and intriguing.

A couple of examples :

"Darling, sweetheart, I've been jealous and made myself quite sick over girls
who'd read certain books and spoke a language apart from English,
being usually French.... "

("Darling Sweetheart")

"Always get this way, you know I don't know why, I should, I don't know.
Possibly, I may be bothered, I suppose I am.... "

("Closing Down The Shop")

These are not standard lyrics. Jimmy used sub-clauses and qualifying phrases to reflect a complex mental landscape. Sometimes his lyrics may appear ordinary, even banal, yet they transcend this to become poetic, personal and deeply affecting. It's an extraordinary trick, if it was a trick, but Jimmy achieved this effect so

often that it can't have been luck. Inevitably, as with anyone's work, some songs aren't great, but many are and, (I can imagine his embarrassment at this!) I would place Jimmy up there with his own heroes, Lennon and McCartney. Although he wasn't a great musician, (in the technical playing sense) he was very musical, with a gift for composing melodies which could seem instantly familiar yet also original.

Even favourable reviewers and writers sometimes considered Jimmy's vocals to be rather "thin" or "weak". He worried about this, wishing he sounded more like John Lennon. I don't agree. Most songwriters write for their own voices and I think Jimmy's own versions are, without exception, the best performances. Of course, Billy Fury, for example, may have been a better singer - but not of Jimmy's songs.

Jimmy was a sort of folk blues musician, not in the obvious sense so much as having inherited the purpose and feeling behind the blues : songs about working class life, hard times and personal struggles, about seeking consolation in music. However, Jimmy's writing was not solely rooted in acoustic singer /songwriter modes, (though he often used minor chords and "folky" chord progressions) but also in rock & roll ballad styles.

Finally, (and this isn't a criticism of those who did work with him) I can't help wondering what brilliant work might have been created if George Martin had decided to work with Jimmy or if a record company had taken a chance and nurtured him as a long-term prospect?

It may have taken more than thirty years for this recording to be released, but the songs still shine and deserve a much larger audience than they had that night in 1977.

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