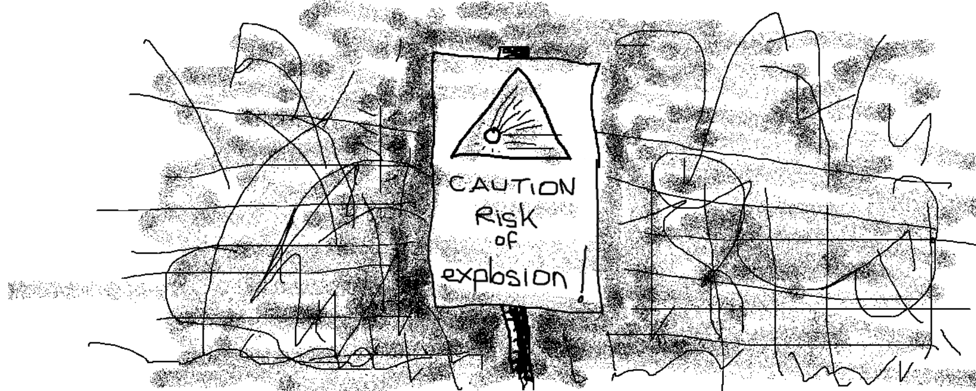
PROLOGUE

'Writing about music is like dancing about architecture. It's a really stupid thing to want to do.' (1)

The man is right of course; good music should stand alone and need no comment or explanation, no rhyme or reason. OK, maybe a little rhyme. But later, if only out of curiosity, questions arise:

- Who or what inspired the piece?
- Does it mean anything beyond the obvious?
- What else has the composer written?
- What other things are being worked on or planned?
- What's his/her back story? Their life and times?
- Where might one see the music performed and by whom?
- What are the composer's favourite writers or musicians?
- How's it played? (As a fellow artist there may be numerous technical questions – not just for geeks.)

Leaving Newcastle on the Whitley Bay road, just past Asda and next to the Wheatsheaf pub, there's a fenced-off field surrounded by scrubby hawthorn trees and, up on a post serving no apparent purpose, is this sign:



Passing many times over the years, I've often wondered what this stark warning was for. So far as one could tell, there being nothing left now but weeds and rubble, the place used to be an industrial complex, the kind for which North East England was once renowned - along with coal mines, steel mills and shipyards, etc. Not being a local born and bred, I didn't know if that included munitions (it does, I later discovered, though not here) (2), but without any other form of indication I was left to wonder.

- What had been so explosive?
- If really dangerous, why was it close to a busy road?
- Had nearby residents complained about the danger and noise?
- Had there been some terrible disaster causing the closure?
- Or, like the pits, slagheaps and other eyesores, did local people accept the site as just another occupational hazard?
- Since the warning sign remains (at the time of writing) was there still some danger to the public, as with many other old industrial sites?

I was reminded of these concerns every time I drove past. Then one day another thought struck me – not just explosives are risky. Maybe there was a song there?

there's a risk of explosion wherever you go
but the risk of going nowhere is the worst risk I know
there's a risk of falling over with every step you take
but the risk of never falling could make your poor heart break
life's a risky business of that there is no doubt
but don't let fear and trepidation make you take an easy way out

Living in London during the Seventies and Eighties when the IRA was conducting its mainland bombing campaign, frequently targeting public places, I never saw any evidence myself except on TV and in newspapers. Theoretically, the chances of being affected were many thousands (if not millions) to one against, yet many visitors were deterred from coming to the UK. In reality, the probability of a fatal traffic accident was many more times likely.

The same applies to other perceived threats, from terrorists or otherwise. Fear of flying, for example, is irrational given its safety record compared with other forms of transport (a possible cause being a combination of acrophobia and the high profile given to air crashes by the media) yet no amount of evidence will allay fears. Of course, flying is still potentially dangerous – then so are many other things. The chances of accidental death or injury are far more likely in the home, yet we feel safer there than anywhere else. Also, people regularly ignore the many known dangers of smoking, drinking, drug taking, fast driving, contact sports, etc, etc. People have even been known to die laughing, literally [(3)].

Likewise, we are much more likely to be attacked, abused or ripped off by friends and relatives than by strangers, but who are we more afraid of? In any case, by not carrying on with our normal everyday lives, aren't we allowing terrorists or other potential aggressors to win? Isn't this kind of disruption exactly what they want? Each time I go through security checks at an airport I think the buggers must be laughing at us with every new restriction or imposition a sign of failure on our part. By disrupting our lives with threats of violence they remind us of their twisted ideology and force us to give them credence, however reluctantly. Not that I have any answers myself, of course, except more efficient and less overt security measures – and to carry on regardless.

These were some of the trains of thought that provoked me to write the song 'Risk of Explosion'. But there were others. I'd always loved these simple lines of a Woody Guthrie number:

you gotta walk that lonesome valley
you gotta walk it by yourself
nobody here can walk it for you
you gotta walk it by yourself [(4)]

Woody, who frequently borrowed from existing songs, adapted the words of an old gospel number, which in turn had been taken from Psalm 23, often called 'The Lord Is My Shepherd' or 'A Psalm of David'.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me;
Thy rod and staff they comfort me. [(5)]

All musicians, artists and creative people in general, rip off other's work. Call it imitation which, as they say, is flattery. But, though you start out emulating heroes, after a while, if lucky, you develop your own style. Keith Richards, in his excellent autobiography 'Life' [6], says about the Stones early career, 'We were just playing American music to English people.' Then their manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, realising they must come up with original material to survive, locked Mick and Keith in a kitchen saying, 'Come out with a song.' After some time playing around with chord sequences and odd phrases, Richards says, '…something else took over somewhere in this process. I don't want to say mystical, but you can't put your finger on it.' Luckily for the Stones, the pair had an early success with 'As Tears Go By' (though the more obvious word 'time' was changed to 'tears' by Oldham) which was a big hit for Marianne Faithful. Following this, however, it took some months of trial and error before they arrived at anything they were happy with. As Keith admits, 'After that we wrote loads of airy-fairy silly love songs for chicks and stuff that didn't take off.'

Most singers try out other people's material, in private at least, for the sheer hell of it if for no other reason, even though they might never do so in public. But often these influences show up unexpectedly in various ways such as new riffs, structures, tunings, literary references or other bits and pieces – and there's nothing wrong with that. We all gotta owe somebody something, sometime, somewhere.

According to Wikipedia (the greatest rip-off site on the net, but does it matter?) this is an ancient tradition: 'The concept of a singer-songwriter can actually be traced to ancient bardic culture, which has existed in various forms throughout the world. Poems would be performed as chant or song, sometimes accompanied by a harp or other similar instrument. After the invention of printing, songs would be written and performed by ballad sellers. Usually these would be versions of existing tunes and lyrics, which were constantly evolving. This developed into the singer-songwriting traditions of folk culture.'

The modern concept of the singer-songwriter, they say, in English-speaking North America and Great Britain… 'occurred in the 1960s and early 1970s when a series of folk and country-influenced musicians rose to prominence and popularity. These singer-songwriters, Johnny Cash, Kris Kristofferson, Bob Dylan, Tom Waits, Tom Rush, Phil Ochs, Tom Paxton, Arlo Guthrie, Paul Simon, Neil Young, John Denver, Jackson Browne, John Prine, Dave Mason, Jim Croce, Joni Mitchell, Judy Collins, David Crosby, Leonard Cohen, Donovan, Randy Newman, Gordon Lightfoot, Nick Drake, Carly Simon, Cat Stevens, Bruce Cockburn, Harry Chapin, James Taylor, Dan Fogelberg and Dolly Parton. People who had been primarily songwriters, notably Carole King and Neil Diamond, also began releasing work as performers. In contrast to the storytelling approach of most prior country and folk music, these performers typically wrote songs from a highly personal (often first-person), introspective point of view. The adjectives "confessional" and "sensitive" were often used (sometimes derisively) to describe this early singer-songwriter style.'

I wouldn't argue with any of this, except to say there are still many songs written in folk circles which aren't so introspective but often explore themes of wider social or historical significance. Other than that one could, of course, add lots more names to the list, past and present, covering all genres. So many artists, including most of the above, have influenced me one way or another as, I believe, one should always be ready to listen and learn - even from the most humble of unknown performers.

Singer-songwriters may, of course, find inspiration anywhere and anytime. In my case - having dropped out of playing in public many years ago, for reasons you may learn later - I was recently thrown back on stage by the unexpected appearance of a stumbling figure from my distant past. A crazy genius I had assumed long dead. Once he'd been a big influence on my playing - in fact, without him I'd probably never have got started. As such, since memories of the years I travelled the land looking for somewhere to perform (and lay my

head) weren't all sweetness and light, I had mixed feelings upon meeting up with the old rascal. Nevertheless I did succumb and over the past few months, with his encouragement, have not only revived many songs I used to sing but also been inspired to come up with new ones.

This book is the story of my encounters with the legendary Arthur Grimsby and various other characters in the music business, particularly the acoustic scene, both in recent times and delving back over the years. It does not attempt to be a manual on how to write or sing songs but might, inadvertently, shed some light on these matters.

By the way, I am reliably informed that the empty field on the Whitley road is the site of a specialist glass factory. (7)

Regarding the layout:

- All lyrics have been reproduced with a minimum of punctuation for the sake of clarity - retaining capitals for proper nouns. For myself, when I use punctuation in song writing, it is often to indicate pauses or emphasis when performing rather than to follow grammatical rules, but other writers may have different methods. So I've tried to be consistent.
- I apologise to those who think footnotes are annoying but there was no other way to include additional material which I, and hopefully many readers, may find interesting or illuminating. Eventually, if this book can be reproduced digitally, many of the footnotes will be accessed electronically, as sound or video clips, etc.
- Likewise, bullet points might seem to have no place in a work of fiction – but I just think they're useful.
- Song lyrics printed at the end of the book relate to the chapters that were inspired by them. Some of the songs have been recorded and are available on CD (from my address or website) along with additional information.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Elvis Costello on music critics, as quoted in "A Man out of Time Beats the Clock" by Timothy White in 'Musician' magazine No. 60, October 1983, p52.

(2) BAE Systems on the Scotswood Road manufacture tanks for the army but the site has been the home of a series of companies making armaments and other military products for well over 100 years. In 1847, engineer William George Armstrong founded the Elswick Works at Newcastle. It originally built hydraulic machinery but soon branched out into manufacturing bridges (including the opening machinery for Tower Bridge in London) and then into armaments, notably the Armstrong breech-loading gun, which re-equipped the British Army after the Crimean War. In 1882 it merged with the shipbuilding firm of Charles Mitchell to form Sir WG Armstrong Mitchell & Company. In 1884 a shipyard was opened at the Elswick site which had the facilities to build and equip a warship from start to finish. HMS Victoria was the first battleship to be built at Armstrong's Elswick shipyard and was launched in April 1887. Armstrong's became the most successful exporter of warships in the world and by 1895 was the largest employer in Newcastle with an 11,000 strong workforce. Over the years there have been various mergers and other company changes and Vickers-Armstrong became one of the most important warship manufacturers in the world and were instrumental in the rearming of Britain leading up to the Second World War.

www. preservedtanks.com

(3) Death by laughter:

- On 24 March 1975, Alex Mitchell, a 50-year-old bricklayer from King's Lynn, England, died laughing while watching the "Kung Fu Kapers" episode of The Goodies, featuring a kilt-clad Scotsman battling a vicious black pudding with his bagpipes. After twenty-five minutes of continuous laughter, Mitchell finally slumped on the sofa and died from heart failure. His widow later sent The Goodies a letter thanking them for making Mitchell's final moments of life so pleasant.
- In 1989, a Danish audiologist, Ole Bentzen, died laughing while watching A Fish Called Wanda. His heart was estimated to have beaten at between 250 and 500 beats per minute, before he succumbed to cardiac arrest. "The Last Laugh's on Him".
- In 2003, Damnoen Saen-um, a Thai ice cream salesman, is reported to have died while laughing in his sleep at the age of 52. His wife was unable to wake him, and he stopped breathing after two minutes of continuous laughter. He is believed to have died of either heart failure or asphyxiation.
- Historical deaths by laughing include the Greek stoic philosopher Chrysippus in the Third Century BC, King Martin of Aragon in 1410, Pietro Aretino in 1556 and Thomas Urquhart in 1660, the Scottish polymath and first translator of Rabelais upon hearing that Charles II had taken the throne.

References:

1. Man Dies Laughing at The Goodies, "Daily Mail", London (29 March 1975)
2. A Goodies Way to Go — Laughing, "Eastern Daily Press", Norwich (29 March 1975)
3. Slapstick! The Illustrated Story of Knockabout Comedy — Tony Staveacre, Angus & Robinson 19879 ‘People Who Died Laughing - Death - Book of Lists’ - Canongate Home (version archived by the Internet Archive)
4. Episode 12: I See Dead People (And They're Cracking Me Up)

(4) ‘Lonesome Valley’ by Woody Guthrie, © 1963 – renewed 1977 by TRO-Folkways Music Inc. USA.
There are many other interpretations of this song but one I particularly like is by Mississippi John Hurt: catch it on YouTube.

(5) Psalm 23 - ‘The Lord Is My Shepherd’ or ‘A Psalm of David’. This version is from my old school Bible, Authorized Version, published by The British & Foreign Bible Society, 1954.

(6) Keith Richards autobiography ‘Life’, published by Orion Books, 2010

(7) The glass company was originally called ‘The Thermal Syndicate’, set up in 1903 to exploit a process invented by Dr. J. F. Bottomley for producing translucent fused silica from high purity sand. A works was established in Wallsend and the syndicate manufactured the world's first, commercially produced, electrically fused silica products. In1909 the trademark "Vitreosil" (taken from vitreous silica) was registered and is still in use today for products manufactured from naturally occurring silica sand or quartz crystal. In the 1960s they developed a new process for production of fused quartz. In the 1970s the company began development of new production technology to manufacture fused quartz ingots using a continuous fusion process. In 1988 the company became part of the Saint-Gobain group. Information from: Graces Guide www.gracesguide.co.uk/wiki/Thermal_Syndicate

Despite my enquiries amongst local residents, it is still unclear why manufacturing produced explosions, how dangerous it really was and why the factory was sited so close to a main road. Perhaps readers may enlighten me?