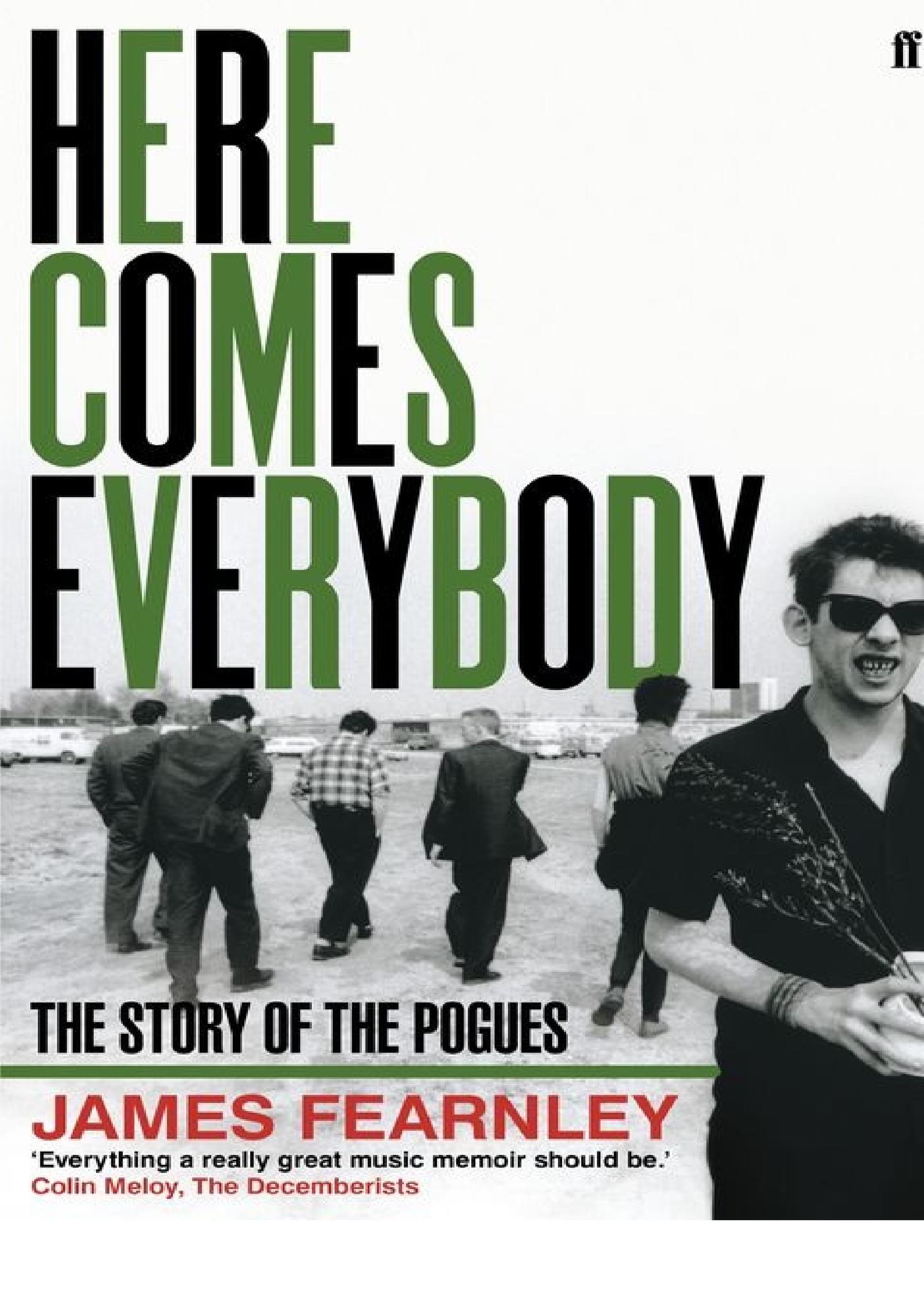


HERE COMES EVERYBODY



THE STORY OF THE POGUES

JAMES FEARNLEY

'Everything a really great music memoir should be.'

Colin Meloy, *The Decemberists*

Here Comes Everybody

James Fearnley

ff
faber and faber

For Mum and Dad

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One

[30th August 1991](#)

Shane had gone to his room, stuck phosphorescent planets on the walls and drawn the curtains. Since checking into the Pan Pacific Hotel, on the seafront at Yokohama where we had come to perform at the WOMAD festival taking place in the Seaside Park nearby, none of us had seen hide nor hair of him.

We had arrived in Yokohama from Tokyo the day before, after a brief stopover in London, on our way from a festival in Belgium, the last of a series of European music festivals. Increasingly, our performances had become a matter of determinedly turning a blind eye to Shane's fitful, fickle behaviour on stage. To keep time, we had resorted to foot-stamping. To find out where we were in a song, we had been forced to commit to prolonged, wretched and discomfiting eye contact.

I was adrift with jet lag. Incapable of staying awake any longer, I'd been waking up just an hour or two after nodding off, to turn the television on and watch CNN, the only channel in English. In the last few days a hundred thousand people had rallied outside the Soviet Union's parliament building protesting against the coup that had deposed President Mikhail Gorbachev. The Supreme Soviet had suspended all the activities of the Soviet Communist Party. That the Eastern Bloc was disintegrating seemed apposite to the situation in which we found ourselves.

Yokohama was blazing with sunshine. Against the blue of the sky, the exterior of the hotel was white as sailcloth. It had been a glorious day. I had spent it plying between the hotel and the rumpus of the festival, the hubbub of musicians, techs, drivers, roadies, in the souk of the backstage area, among the caravans and canvas. I adored, in the afternoon sunlight, Suzanne Vega, her hair magenta, accent Californian, pallor Manhattan. I tucked into the crowd with Jem to watch the Rinken Band, a headbanded, muscular bunch from Okinawa. We laughed out loud at their choreography of flexed biceps. They played, to our delight, instruments called shamisens. The thwacks of the plectrum were like firecrackers. It was a joy to spend the day at such a festival, relishing the summer sunlight and the warmth of the evening. I ended the day in jet-lagged, sake-infused awe of Youssou N'Dour, having forgotten for the time being about Shane. Now, as the afternoon turned to evening, I was waiting in my room for the phone call to summon me to a meeting in Jem's room, to talk about what to do. Though there had been no single catalytic event to join our minds and harden our will regarding Shane – it was just time.

I pictured Shane up in his darkened room somewhere in the hotel as a freakish combination of Mr Rochester and Miss Havisham, with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* thrown in. Whenever I thought

him alone in his room, a feeling of impending catastrophe sank my otherwise buoyant spirits. His solitude had started to symbolise the human condition of disassociation, irreducible loneliness, the separation of person from person. What I imagined him doing up in his room, condemned to wakefulness and watchfulness and a horror of sleep – the wall-scrawling, the painting of his face in silver, the incessant video-watching – made me fear for us all, for humanity somehow, that all we were heir to was eternally unfulfillable desires and the inevitability of death. I was jet-lagged, was no excuse. Jet lag, along with hangovers, beset me with anxieties that loomed larger than maybe they should. I was filled with worry too at the improbability of putting on a reasonable show tonight, let alone the gigs we had coming up in Osaka and Nagoya before going home.

I had had no desire to go up and see him, no compulsion to drop by. I used to before the Pogues started. His flat was situated at a sort of nexus of my itineraries to and from guitar auditions. I had been drawn to the unmistakable, mardy power he had. Once the Pogues started, I entered into near-constant orbit round him, a decade in which the exigencies of life on the road, the cramped minibuses, the confined dressing rooms, studios, rehearsal rooms, enforced our physical proximity.

Over the past couple of years I had found I didn't want to be near him. Mostly I didn't have to be. The Pogues' continuing success had done away with the tiny vans in which we used to ply the motorways and autobahns and autoroutes at the beginning of our career. By this stage in our lives together, our success had furnished us with relatively commodious tour buses, with a kitchen, bunks, lounge in the rear. We occupied single rooms in more or less luxury hotels. We played venues, more often than not with ample facilities backstage, with sufficient space for Shane to find a room for himself. By now, I found myself not so aware of Shane's gravitational pull. I had come to consider myself free of an incumbent responsibility for him, only to be beset by the opposite: a revulsion, a self-protective termination of whatever duty I thought I should have felt towards him, particularly on stage, when the evidence of the torture of his worsening condition over recent years, as he seemed to hurtle to his own self-destruction, had become manifest. I had ended up hating him.

The phone rang. We were to meet in Jem's room in half an hour. The occasion for a meeting had become rare enough to be a novelty. It had been several years since we had abandoned our skills at decision-making, suffering as they had from a modicum of success: the hiring of a manager, the signing of a record contract, the engagement of lawyers, an accountant, an agent, the venue for meetings having become the polished desks in lawyers' premises or the corporate sterility of record company offices or a melamine table with a tray of water, still and sparkling, in one of the conference rooms of the hotel we were staying in. The cumulative effects of our success seemed to have detached us from the ability to husband our creative source.

I was tempted to get excited about the prospect of doing business, taking our careers in hand and sorting things out. Reminded of the circumstances that had prompted the meeting though, I chastised myself. Summoned to the meeting this afternoon in Jem's room, at a time of day when, given the line-up at the festival, and given the almost pristine beauty of the weather, I would probably have been on

at the festival site, whatever excitement I might otherwise have enjoyed sitting around in Jem's room with my compadres, my brothers-in-arms, my adoptive family, was eclipsed by a feeling of sickness and doom.

They were my compadres. They were my brothers-in-arms. They were my family. Since the chaotic first show at the Pindar of Wakefield in King's Cross in 1982, we had been together for nine years. It seemed longer than that. We'd gone through a gamut of human experience. We had survived poverty, impecuniousness, evictions, sickness and destitution. We had fused our fortunes together in a series of confined spaces: passenger buses, ferryboats, bars, dressing rooms, cabins, restaurants, pubs, hotel rooms. I had lived with these people longer than I had with my own parents, Jem pointed out to me once. I closed the door to my hotel room behind me and climbed the echoing stairwell up to Jem's floor.

He opened the door. Light from the net curtain at the window lit the corridor. I couldn't help but try to detect a certain hesitancy or a hint of pessimism in the smile which puckered the corners of Jem's eyes and revealed the minute serration of his front teeth. In the ten years I had known him, the genuineness of his smile had always been reliable. He stood against the wall to let me in. Even under circumstances such as these, there was a formality about Jem, an understated attention to the matter of putting one at ease. It gave me the feeling that things were going to have a good outcome. I took a seat at the foot of the bed. We awaited the rest of the band. There was a smell of toothpaste in the room.

Whenever there was a knock on the door, Jem got up to greet whoever it was, in the same way he had greeted me. Terry came into the room, carrying, as he did, a pair of glasses in a sturdy case and the book he was reading. He wore jeans and a dramatic black and red short-sleeved shirt, tucked out to hide his stomach. Though he wasn't a tall man, Terry exuded eminence. He was older than us by a few years. He had curls which were once boyish – a 'burst mattress', I used to tease him – but were now greying. He sat on one of the two chairs in the room, his hands folded over his book on his lap, his lips pursed, the expression on his face one of sad seniority, full of the expectation that his years in the music business would be put to use.

Darryl came in and sat in the other chair across from the table, tapping his thighs. His cheeks were lined with capillaries. His bay hair, which he had now begun to dye, fell in brittle unruliness over his forehead. Fatigue had gouged a brown half-moon in the corner of each eye.

Andrew lumbered in. He had grown his hair long. It was beginning to show filaments of grey. He sat heavily on the bed next to me and stared at the carpet. He began to turn his wrist in a hand ivied with veins. His mouth was a lipless line.

Philip came in and wiggled his hand to have space made for him. He perched awkwardly on the corner of the desk-cum-dressing table with his legs crossed, a shoe tucked behind his calf, his frazzled arms similarly twisted. His hands trembled as he shook a cigarette out of a packet. His mouth was thin, recessive, dwarfed by his fleshy, slightly curving nose. His face was suffused with pink from tiredness.

Spider was the last to knock on the door, apologising for being late. His lips were dry and, with his dark tousled hair, he looked as though he'd just got up. He had a boyish face, even more so than in the afternoon as he paced back and forth, a hand on his hip, his arm bent awkwardly behind him, the skin on the underside of his forearm wan and subtly grained with the blue of his veins. He clapped his long-fingered hand to the back of his neck, looked down at his shoes and paced between the bed and the wall.

There wasn't a lot of room. We sat shoulder to shoulder on the ends of the beds or on the dressing table. Terry had the chair and Darryl the armchair by the curtains. By the time we were all gathered, the atmosphere was almost funereal.

We talked about our circumstances, what had led us to this meeting, the state of Shane.

In the course of the past two years, our gigs had been decimated by his fits of screaming, his seemingly wilful abandonment of his recollection of the lyrics, his haggard, terror-stricken appearance which we had mistaken for panicked requests for a cue, his maddening and petulant refusals to come out on stage with us.

Jem lamented the fact that Shane no longer accompanied us anywhere, preferring to shut himself in his room, appearing only at show time, more often than not with seconds to spare and hardly in a condition to do much. He lamented the fact that, at one time, Shane would have loved to come to such a festival, the hotel so close, the people interesting, the organisers ready to bend over backwards for his help.

'I miss him!' Spider complained. 'I do!' He laughed at the thought and ruffled his hair with his hand. 'I miss the cunt!'

'I'm simply not enjoying myself,' Andrew announced. We all turned towards him. We knew Andrew well enough. The silence that followed was a precursor to something else. He lifted his eyebrows in weary anticipation of what he knew he was going to say next, resolved to the implications it would carry.

'He's spoiling everything.' He drew in a long breath and cleared his throat. 'I have a family,' he continued, 'what's left of it.' Four months before, days after giving birth to their son, Andrew's wife Deborah had died from an aortic aneurysm.

Terry nodded, and mouthed 'Andrew' in sympathy.

'We all have families,' Andrew said. 'Well, most of us.'

He propped himself up, hands on his knees. We waited.

'I have childcare to pay,' he went on. 'I have a mortgage. I earn my living playing music. I can't do it any more with – him.' He nodded at the door of Jem's room to signify Shane, somewhere in the hotel, in his darkened room. Andrew fell silent long enough for us to know he had finished.

'What do we want to do?' Jem said then.

'Let him go,' Andrew said with a brutality that shocked me.

'Let him go,' Spider said.

We went round the room. Philip, Darryl, Terry and Jem were all of the same mind. I didn't want to let him go. It frightened me to lose what I had become used to, to relinquish pretty much everything I'd wanted since first setting a guitar on my knee and painfully framing chords on it when I was thirteen. I also wanted to punish him. I wanted to drag him round the world with us some more. I wanted to rub his face in his own shit to teach him a lesson.

'James?'

'Okay,' I said.

I hadn't expected our meeting to arrive so swiftly at such a conclusion, or at any conclusion.

'Who'll tell him?' Jem said. Jem was the perfect candidate. Jem had been the one whose opinion Shane had once sought, and with a meekness which bordered on the reverential. Jem was the one who had badgered him to write, who had set everything up, organised everything. Jem had been the one whose resolve we had all depended on.

In the end though, the task of letting Shane go fell to Darryl. It felt like an act of cowardice, to give the most recent member of the band the job of releasing our singer. But, overriding that, Darryl had the least history with Shane, had less of an axe to grind, was the least judgemental. Of all of us, Darryl was the nicest.

When the time came, I was shocked that Shane should arrive at the door with such alacrity. Jem got up to let him in. Shane nodded at us all and stood dithering in the short vestibule between the toilet door and the wall.

'Awright?' he said. It was a greeting that was as familiar as it was ridiculous in such a context.

There was an endearing vulnerability to him as he turned this way and that, sniffing, taking us all in but unable to meet eyes with any of us with the exception of Jem. Shane followed Jem with a devoted gaze, as he returned to his seat on the end of the bed.

Shane's hair was filthy. His beard was blasted. His face was the colour of grout. A bib of necklace beads and talismans hung from his neck. He was wearing the black short-sleeved shirt which had not been off his back for the past couple of weeks. It was dank with the wearing and had calcimine staining down the front.

'Can a lady have a seat?' he said. He dropped into the chair that was found for him and rested his palsied, trembling hand in his lap.

'Shane,' Darryl started in. 'Well, we've been having a talk.'

At the end of Darryl's speech, Shane clapped his tongue to the roof of his mouth and nodded and sat up in the chair and looked at no one.

'You've all been very patient with me,' he said. He wheezed his laugh of letting air escape where his teeth used to be. 'What took you so long?'

Two

[30th June 1980](#)

The studio at Halligan's rehearsal rooms was narrow. The brown carpeting was sulphurous under the track spotlights in the ceiling and wormed with cigarette burns. A bottle-green set of drums crowded the way in. A guy called Terry sat behind it. He stood up to shake my hand. Beyond, on the brown carpeted dais at the far end of the room, another guy squatted against the knotted pine dado wiping his nose with the back of his hand. Across from him, a girl leant back against the weight of her white Thunderbird bass. As I worked my way down the room with my guitar, past the edges of the cymbals, the girl appraised me unashamedly – and my new black strides. It seemed she knew how recently I had thrown my flares in the bin. The guy sitting on his heels, in T-shirt, jeans and sandals, forearms on his knees, looked as though he'd had a long afternoon. He pulled on a cigarette and wiped his face. He had watery blue eyes and looked as though he had come off the worse in a fight or two. I could see where cartilage twisted under the skin of his nose and where a kink of scar traipsed from an upturned lip into a nostril. He breathed through his mouth.

'Hullo,' I said.

'Nng,' he said and nodded.

I laid my case on the floor and took out my guitar. Terry pointed me to the amp I was to use.

'What's the name of your band?' I asked.

'It didn't say in the *Melody Maker*?' Terry answered.

'It just said "name band",' I said.

'The Nips,' the singer said lazily.

'The Nipple Erectors,' Terry said.

'The Nips,' the singer repeated.

As soon as he stood up I realised who the singer was. There couldn't have been many people who hadn't seen the photograph on the front of the *NME* of a guy called Shane O'Hooligan having his earlobe bitten off by one of the Mo-dettes at a Clash gig at the ICA in 1976.

We went around our names. The girl bass player I was told was called Shanne. I wondered if the similarity of her name and O'Hooligan's was by design rather than chance.

I took my guitar out and slung the strap over my shoulder.

'Telecaster,' O'Hooligan said. I couldn't tell if the guitar was a disappointment to him.

I was proud of my Telecaster. It was the blonde pre-CBS Telecaster with a rosewood fingerboard and a £220 price tag which I'd pulled again and again out of the rack at Barratts on Oxford Road.

Manchester, to put back again and again, paralysed by the thought of forking out that kind of money for a guitar, or for anything for that matter. I had saved the money working for three months on one of Fearnley & Sons Ltd's building sites. Being the boss's son, it wasn't particularly hard-earned, but there was a lot of money nonetheless. Part of me wanted to find fault with the guitar, an excuse to put it back and walk out, not so much on account of the expense, but to spare myself the presumption of thinking that buying such a thing was ever likely to change my life. At the same time, I dreaded walking out and away from a vocation I had always had.

I left Barratts, walked through the pelting rain and phoned my brother.

'Get it,' he had said. 'It's your ticket out.'

I plugged into the amp Terry had pointed out.

'Telecasters are good,' Terry said. 'We haven't seen one of those all afternoon.'

'Yeah,' O'Hooligan said. 'Telecasters are all right.'

They had me play a song that was all downstrokes: A to D to E. It was easy enough. The chorus consisted of slashing out A and D chords. Now and again I looked across at Shanne the bass player, his hands in an attempt to predict when a chorus was likely to come up. Her face was inscrutable. O'Hooligan was in a world of his own, singing to the wall, tall, cocking his head from time to time. I had to rely on Terry, his mouth in an O, to nod me into changes in the songs, not that there were as many as that many of them.

O'Hooligan sang with his eyes half-closed. His nostrils flared as he lifted his head up to the microphone, positioned higher than his gaping mouth, which was full of crowns white as mortar with blackened joins where they met the gums. Where one of his crowns was missing stood a tiny brown prong.

He sang with abandon. He would clutch the microphone with both hands and then buckle away from it at the end of a verse, as if it repulsed him. His voice was guttural and artless and he sang in a London accent.

When the song came to an end, O'Hooligan stepped clear of the microphone, sniffed, wiped his nose on his wrist, cleared his throat with a cough, looked over at Shanne, remembered a packet of cigarettes on the ledge, shook one out, patted his pockets elaborately for a lighter, wheeled around to see if there was one nearby. At the end of the sequence, he caught my eye and nodded and quickly looked away. He lit the cigarette and looked round for guidance from Shanne as to what to do next. I took something in their exchange of looks to be an indication that the audition was going well.



We finished a couple of other songs which were indistinguishable from one another. Puffing on

cigarette, O'Hooligan stepped down from the dais. He came to stand close to me. He was tall and his proximity was threatening.

'Can you do disconnected shards of industrial noise?' he asked me, in such a way as to imply that he doubted I could. I relit my roll-up.

Once I had bought my guitar, I had gone back down to London. The 'guitarist wanted' ads in the *Melody Maker* sent me all over the city. In Harrow I had played soul music – in Carshalton, rhythm and blues – in Covent Garden, metal – in Teddington, new wave. I thrashed punk in Camberwell. Islington, I chugged blues. I crossed and re-crossed Central London.

I had shown up at my appointed times – at a classroom, a Sunday school, the back room of a pub, the offices of a record company for an interview for Billy Idol's newly renamed Gen X, where I was only asked if I would be prepared to wear leathers, to which I said, 'Yeah, why not?' and then was sent away. I'd spent an evening cross-legged on a beaten leatherette sofa opposite an owlish Glaswegian meshing guitar riffs until the last train while he recorded on an old TEAC. I had gone to Wood Green and handed my guitar down through a hole in the floor of a dilapidated front room, shimmied down a pole into a tenebrous basement to find myself standing among mute creatures wearing black jeans and sagging cardigans, with shocks of black hair hanging over their faces.

I had been waiting my turn at an audition in Covent Garden when I had heard the thud of a jack going into an amp, followed by a cascade of harmonic distortion interspersed with wails and shrieks. The noise ended just as abruptly as it had begun.

I didn't play that stuff. I stuck to percussive, metronomic rhythm-playing, the plectrum close to the bridge, going against the grain every now and again in a way I hoped sounded like Steve Cropper, Mick Green or Wilko Johnson. Chords I knew. I had done my time sending burning spasms into my extensor muscles over Mickey Baker's *Complete Course in Jazz Guitar*. My fingers bore dark, ingrained calluses because of it.

But if O'Hooligan wanted something that called for the stretching of my fingers into jagged and discordant chord shapes and torrents of splintered notes, I could do that.

'Can I do disconnected shards of industrial noise?' I answered O'Hooligan. 'I can do disconnected shards of industrial noise. Where do you want them?'

The song went from A to D to A to D for the most part. It was moronically simple. I whacked the chords out, watching Shanne's fingers on the bass, alert to when the solo was going to come, but not wanting to appear too eager to launch into it, in case it might be mistaken for showing off. O'Hooligan suddenly pointed to the ground.

I thrashed into the solo, chafing the strings with my guitar pick, dragging it back up towards the bridge where the sound was harsher, bundling and splaying my fingers in discordant configurations on the fret board, spidering up the frets, clustering in one place or another, my head down. I had no idea what I was doing. Remembering O'Hooligan's comment about my guitar, it occurred to me that perhaps a Telecaster mightn't be the best guitar for this kind of thing.

Then O'Hooligan hurled himself into the chorus, about how he didn't care, how he was getting nowhere and how, when everything was going wrong, he'd sing a happy song.

At the end, he nodded.

'Awright,' he said and rubbed the side of his nose with an onion-coloured finger.

A small, balding guy came in, churning his eyes I guessed on account of his contact lenses and the smoke in the room. He was introduced to me as one of the Nips' duo of managers and was called Howard. The other manager I'd met on my way into the audition that afternoon was a guy called Job Hasler, a tall hollow-cheeked man with blond hair and a comic-book countenance about him. Howard needed to bring the audition to a close. There was another guitarist waiting.

I packed up my guitar in the bare-boarded lobby with the strip lighting and the lock-up cages and was about to leave to go back to Kingston-upon-Thames where I'd been living for the past ten months working at a bakery, the band I'd been in having gone to shit, to wait for a phone call – or not – when Howard came out of the rehearsal studio.

'They want you to hang about.'

In a pub down Holloway Road, Howard asked me where I was from, what bands I'd been in, what bands I liked. He didn't really listen. He folded an arm across his chest, propping up the other, his fingers either prodding his eyes or squeezing his earlobe. He had a round, fleshy face, which he kept at a continually oblique angle to me, and wet lips.

'You all right here for a bit?' he said.

I was excited by what looked like the prospect of being in another band – a band back in the city, North London too. After an hour, the door to the pub opened. I looked up to see Howard leaning in.

'You're still here,' he said. 'Good. They let the last guy go,' he added. 'They want to play some more with you.'

On the way back to the rehearsal room, Howard asked: 'How old are you?'

'Twenty-two,' I lied.

'We won't hold that against you,' he said.

Back in the rehearsal room, Terry the drummer's geniality, in the interim, had changed into unalloyed effervescence. O'Hooligan and Shanne on the other hand were reluctant to give so much away. They seemed sheepish about having brought me back to the rehearsal room: Shanne's face, despite its lack of expression, now allowed the briefest eye contact; O'Hooligan was gawking executive and impatient to play. I plugged back in.

We went through a couple more songs. They were called 'King of the Bop' and 'Hot Dogs with Everything'. They were fast but easy to learn.

At the end of the afternoon, with nothing left but the prospect of packing up and seeing what was supposed to happen next, I started chiming an A chord on the guitar. The rhythm I struck out had little context or purpose other than the fact that I liked the sound of it. Immediately, O'Hooligan stepped back over to the microphone and started to sing, flipping the rhythm unexpectedly into a backbeat.

hadn't been thinking of.

Sun arise she come every mornin'

It was just him and me for the first verse. Shanne joined in. I opened the song up into a three-time rhythm. Terry took up with two on his bass drum and a backbeat. Halfway through, we broke it down to the A-chord figure that started the song and then built it up again. I had loved Rolf Harris's 'Sun Arise' since I was a child. Though it should have been laughably out of context in the circumstance, we played the song with an ingenuousness that seemed to go hand in hand with the lyrics.

'Fuckin' hell!' O'Hooligan said, when we'd finished.

Howard sent me to wait in the pub again. When he pushed open the door, O'Hooligan was with him. We sat at one of the tables in the corner.

'You want to be in the band?' Howard said to me.

'I have a condition,' I added.

'What kind of condition? A medical one?'

'I'll join the band if they give me somewhere to live,' I said.

The band I'd been in, in Teddington, had been gravely new wave and fronted by a singer called Geoff, small in stature, intense, quick and as insecure as a rodent. *A Clockwork Orange* had provided the band's name – The Mixers – and had vaguely inspired Geoff's dress sense, at least when it came to the few gigs we did. His wife, Jan, was his polar opposite – compliant, long-suffering, but with a mettle that wasn't all that far beneath the surface.

One night at Geoff and Jan's flat, Geoff trudged upstairs to bed, tired and drunk. While Jan and I were clearing up, we fell on one another with an abandon that shocked us both. The affair advanced from glances and brief touches of the hands behind her husband's back, to meticulously scheduled phone calls in a phone box at the end of my street, to meeting in a park on her lunch hour, to borrowing the key to the house of one of her co-workers. My affair with Jan was months old when the band broke up. The wave of destruction which had been bearing down on their marriage crested. They arrived at their flat one afternoon. Geoff turned me round at the top of the stairs and ushered me back down to the street.

'Are you having an affair with my wife?' he demanded.

By the end of a month, Geoff had gone to live in Thames Ditton. Jan kept the flat above the car repair shop. One night when she and I were in the Royal Oak opposite the flat, a mate of Geoff's followed me into the toilets. He stood waiting until I'd finished, and then said that if he'd come across me in the pub on my own he'd have given me a kicking. He told me not to bother ever coming back to Teddington.

I viewed my ten months in suburban London as an aberration. I burned with regret at having wasted so much time. I didn't want to go back to Teddington.

‘You want somewhere to live. Shouldn’t be a problem,’ Howard said. ‘He wants somewhere to live.’

‘Shouldn’t be a problem,’ O’Hooligan said.

*

O’Hooligan took me out drinking. After a pint or two on Holloway Road he took me down to a couple of pubs near where he lived in King’s Cross. We had hardly settled in the Skinners Arms on Jud Street, before we had to go to the Norfolk Arms on Leigh Street. In the Norfolk Arms our pints were half-empty before we were up again. As we went from local to local, I thought his restlessness was a sign of boredom with me. To compensate, when we had pints in front of us, I found myself talking. I was inflated by my success at the audition and the more pubs we went to the drunker I got. I ran at the mouth. I painted for him a life of privilege: my middle-class parents, my private schooling, my father’s chairmanship of the family building company, the shares I owned in it.

The evening went on and we downed more pints. By the time we got to the Harrison on Harrison Street, despite my initial ambivalence about O’Hooligan, I wanted to impress him, at least with self-revelation, and found myself divulging secrets, among them details of my affair with Jan, which had resulted in my turning up for the Nips’ audition that afternoon, together with the rumour that my grandfather had flushed a baby down the toilet in the Sixties. He cackled with delight.

He rose to the exchange. The next thing I knew, I was struggling not just against the amount I had drunk, but to pick my way through a tangle of allusions to his childhood. He’d been born in England where his parents lived, but appeared to have been brought up by family in Tipperary. From the little I could comprehend, his first six years in Ireland had not always been happy. He laughed. It was a strange sound: a protracted Donald Duck quack.

When the pub closed, I staggered down the road after him with my guitar. He weaved a little across the pavement, his hands dug in his pockets. We turned into a dead-end street, cobbled and lined with iron railings. With the exception of No. 32, where there were a couple of lighted windows on the upper floors, the street was dimly lit, the houses dark and clad in scaffolding. Shane let us in. He showed me a room with a mattress in it and left.

I wondered if I would have cause to reprimand myself for having talked too much about myself. So ironic had been his laughter about his own disclosures that I told myself I had no worry on that account.

Three

‘Well, you were told wrong!’ a girl’s voice bellowed down the stairway. ‘There’s no room here! Go round to Burton Street, that’s where Shane lives!’

I stopped on the landing, halfway up the narrow stairs, leaning on my speaker cabinet, panting. Through Howard Cohen, Shane had let me know that there was a room above a bookshop on Marchmont Street in Bloomsbury. A friend had driven me and my belongings – my Telecaster, my acoustic, my amp and speaker cabinet, record player, typewriter, a suitcase full of clothes – up from the bedsit I had been living in in Kingston-upon-Thames that morning in a Transit van. I lugged the speaker cabinet back down the stairs, to the street and back into the van. I didn’t want to go back to the suburbs. I was finished there.

Burton Street was a dead-end Victorian terrace. Just two houses were occupied: No. 32 and the one facing it, which had a BMW parked outside. No. 32 was administered by a local housing association. The guy living in the house opposite had made the mistake of buying his. The remainder of the street was a building site, the darkened brick façades hidden by scaffolding and dust sheeting. It was Saturday and the street was quiet and, with the exception of the BMW and a couple of skips full of splintered wood and dust, empty. It was a grim sort of place, a backwater of Woburn Place and Euston Road.

My arrival at No. 32 Burton Street threw the girls on the top floor – Jackie and Cath Cinnamon – into consternation. Of course, Shane wasn’t in and I obviously hadn’t been expected, but seeing as I turned up with a Transit van full of my belongings they couldn’t really send me away, though they suspected they wanted to. They laughed when I said I had an agreement with Shane.

Jackie and Cath took pity on me. They showed me a room usually occupied by a guy called Jerry who happened to be on a camping holiday in France. They were sure something could be figured out when he returned. I hauled my amp and speakers up the narrow stairs and leant my guitars against the wall. The room overlooked the street. It was scant of furniture. There was a mattress on the floor and a wardrobe. The Transit van pulled away from the kerb and drove off.

The kitchen was a tip. The window-frame had been jimmied out and thrown onto the roof of the brick depot behind the house. A half-burnt chair lay at an angle in the hearth. Filthy mugs, milk cartons, plates, spoons crowded the table. The cooker was black with grease. I was standing in the room, taking in the squalor, when a girl called Jasmine came in.

‘Hello,’ she said. She was wearing an eggshell-blue dress and white ankle socks. Her dark hair glistened with washing. I was amazed that anyone could be so clean, living in a place like this.

I was relieved to be back in London, amid the clamour of King's Cross. To the north was the rack of Euston Road and the railway stations, Euston, St Pancras, King's Cross. To the south, beyond Bloomsbury and the British Museum, it was a twenty-minute walk to Covent Garden and the West End. The entire area reeked of literature. Charles Dickens had lived nearby on Doughty Street. The Woolfs had lived on Gordon Square, E. M. Forster on Tavistock Square and W. B. Yeats on Woburn Walk, at the top of Burton Street.

In a couple of days the guy came back from France. Jem had wiry hair and prominent brows. There was an urbanity and an apparent suspension of judgement about him that was appealing. I liked his air of quiet capability. He didn't seem to mind all that much that I had been using his room and actually sympathised with my turning up on the doorstep at Shane's invitation.

I moved into a room off the top landing that Jackie and Cath had cleared out. It was nothing more than a cubicle with a mattress in it, a window at one end and what remained of a door at the other. I dragged my gear up the stairs and parked it in the corner of the room. I stationed my typewriter and my radio on the windowsill. I set my suitcase of clothes against the wall and draped a woollen blanket over the door for privacy.

No. 32 Burton Street was a noisy place. On weekday mornings, labourers' vehicles came to park up and down the street and in minutes the houses on both sides were ringing with hammering, shuddering with impact drills and braying with Capital Radio.

Nearly every night, in his room on the floor below mine, next to Jem's room, rant music from Shane's record player – relentless intoning against a thumping reggae beat – pounded the walls and timbers throughout the house. I tried to keep it out of my ears by pulling the bedding over my head. I went downstairs to implore him to turn the music down.

'Sure,' he said. He lifted a finger in a gesture of docility. I got back into bed, relieved that it had been that easy to get what I wanted from him. I lay in my bed, naïvely imagining that the delay in getting up to go to the volume knob of his record player might be due to the rolling of a joint, the putting out of a cigarette or something. The ululation went on unabated, pounding through the floor into my ear.

It wasn't just Shane's record player that kept me up. There were arguments, door-slamming, the sound of breaking glass and occasional shrieking as someone or other fell foul of the bicycles which were stacked in the front hall outside the room occupied by people called the 'Beards'. One night, a beam-shuddering crash started me awake, followed by shouting, the precipitation of footsteps down the staircase and the slam of the front door. Soon, I became aware of the clatter and tinkling of objects striking the corrugated roof of the bus repair depot behind the house. I crept downstairs to see Cinnamon sitting on the overturned kitchen table, throwing items of cutlery, one after the other through the window.

I got a sweeping-up job at a repair shop in Soho where they became used to my taking time off. In the afternoons, for a few days a week the Nips rehearsed at Halligan's on Holloway Road. We spent a lot of time waiting for Shane to turn up. When he did, he was drunk – a couple of times so drunk that he had fallen asleep on the tube, overridden his stop and ended up at Wood Green or Cockfosters. It was funny to begin with. After a while it began to annoy me that he should turn up so late and incapable of doing much. I brought it up with him.

'You don't understand!' he said, clawing at his face in disbelief. Shane worked as a barman at the staff bar of the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases. He implied that his lateness and drunkenness were collateral damage that came with the job. He trumped my complaints with the fact that his inebriation happened, actually, to be in the service of nurses and doctors, for whom, if they wanted to drink after hours on a weekday afternoon, he was there to oblige. When Shanne beseeched him to try to turn up to rehearsal on time, and sober, there was a surprising kindness in the way she dealt with him. I gave up. I was a new boy. I yielded, and spent the afternoons at Halligan's going over what we and Terry the drummer and Shanne were capable of doing by ourselves, waiting for Shane to make a appearance.

As rehearsals went on, it became clear that Shane was in love with Shanne. In the course of going through the songs, he sought her approval on everything. Shane and Shanne were so obviously the couple of the Nips, their union exemplified by their near-as-damn-it homonymy, that after a couple of weeks I was shocked to understand that Shanne and John Hasler – one of the duo of managers – had married the previous May and that Shane had been debarred from the wedding. By September, Shanne Hasler was four months pregnant.

When I also learnt that Terry Smith was the tenth drummer the Nips had had, and that I was the fifth guitarist, I wondered how long this group was going to last.

The first gig I did with the Nips was at the Rock Garden in Covent Garden. I didn't know what to expect. I kept my head down. My experience of gigs, so far, had been ordeals of unrequitedness, a series of sporadic confrontations with an audience's neutrality. Playing to one which actually knew better than I did what was supposed to happen was shocking. When I stepped up to the microphone to sing backing vocals – on 'Hot Dogs with Everything' – I was taken aback by the fact that the crowd had already begun shouting out:

'Lah, la-la-la-la-la lah la-lah, lah la-lah, la-la-la-lah!'



We did a gig somewhere in South London, the floor incompliantly empty throughout our set, the audience having retreated to the walls, behind iron pillars. Halfway through, Shane, wearing a plum coloured, quilted smoking jacket, hurled himself from the stage to writhe on the flagged floor, his legs working his body round, singing the whole time. To watch him as if at the nether end of an exorcism surrounded by what there was of an audience, some of them giggling nervously, scared me.

The gigs in what seemed to be the Nips' stamping ground of North London were raucous, teeming claustrophobic events. I recognised faces I'd seen around the neighbourhood. Jem Finer was a familiar presence at Nips gigs – at the Hope and Anchor, Dingwalls – and held Shane in some esteem.

When we weren't playing our own, there were gigs to go to – at the Greyhound, the Lyceum, the Moonlight, the Marquee, Camden Palace, the Rainbow, the George Robey. There were clubs like Billy's, the Wag, Beatroute and Blitz. I went out a lot with Shane, Howard Cohen and a girl called Mandy who worked for an agent and had the words 'super ligger' embroidered on her zip-up jacket. Often enough, though, Shane and I ended up going out by ourselves.

I had to exert myself to follow him through the cold London streets, in the yellow fog. He w

always ten or fifteen feet ahead of me. I had never known anyone to walk so fast. It was as if the matter of getting from pub to pub, from double port and lemon to double port and lemon, snakebite to snakebite, was a bothersome chasm in the evening that needed bridging as swiftly as possible. He had long legs strode down the street. He pushed his hands in his pockets against the cold. He was oblivious to the fact that I continually lagged behind. I had to skip to catch up, my hands in my pockets like his, hoping he wouldn't see me cheat, hoping he would think I could walk as fast as he could.

If we had to take the tube anywhere, we sat opposite one another in the brash light of the train. We were careful not to meet each other's eyes. If we did, he'd let out a cackle the significance of which I didn't understand, but I would reciprocate, as if I did. He'd wipe his nose against the back of his hand and abruptly stare down the carriage, a meekness in his eyes, embarrassed at what he thought was an exchange of intimacy between us.

One night he took me up to Dingwalls at Camden Market. I felt privileged to go with him. Neither of us was on any guest list but we got in anyway without paying. The kid behind the glass at the bar office summoned an older guy, who waved away the kid's reluctance when he saw who it was. He nodded Shane and me in.

The band Shane had brought me to see was already playing down the far end. The bar was fairly empty. There were a few people sitting on stools along the walls or leaning on the shelves round the pillars. I was too proud to be in Shane's company to pay much attention to the band. Shane didn't seem to show much interest either. I followed him across to the bar. The lack of words between us hoped passed for an understanding it looked like we had.

'What you having?' I said.

'A Black Zombie,' he replied, but over my head, directly to the barman, a large man with a pin-stripe suit and implacable face. I wondered if I detected a weary familiarity in him with Shane.

'You?' the barman said to me.

'He wants one too,' Shane said on my behalf. The barman raised his eyebrows and went about putting the drink together. He crooked his finger under each of the optic dispensers to release, one after the other, a double measure of each of the white spirits – gin, vodka, tequila, Bacardi – together with a double shot of pastis into the plastic pint glass. Finally and unceremoniously, he upended a bottle of Coke into it. He pushed the drinks across the bar. I paid.

I held the Black Zombie up to the light. The plastic glass was scuffed to the point of opacity. The drink was black right enough, but with a noxious-looking, muddy iridescence in it. It looked even worse. Shane drew the Zombie to his mouth and, in a succession of elaborate gulps, swallowed all of it. I wished I could do the same, but my adenoids recoiled from the first vaporous mouthful. I set the drink on a ledge for the time being.

I looked at him, standing in the half-empty bar, dark against the lighting behind the bar, his hair dark, his donkey jacket black, black jeans, the black drink gone. The clop of the empty plastic glass on the counter signalled the end of my naïve and besotted expectation of any real brotherhood with

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