



AWOL

As with most of them I can't remember how "AWOL" came about. Great chord progression, a little Nashville tuning, eke a few more drops of ink on to the mental blot paper and let it mushroom, occasionally fork out, tease something from the corners of memory and repression, repressed memory and remembered repression, 'wisdom suppositories' etc.

Graduating high school in Shepparton I was presented with a poetry prize out of the blue. Out of the blue because there had never been one before and my excellent English, sometimes French and Lit teachers got together and figured it couldn't hurt to make one up. Lit was held in a spare office that year and its students had to be actively recruited the year before, such was the shadow operation it had been rendered into that nobody even knew there was an English beyond English, one that dealt with books of all things and not just examining local newspaper articles for punctuation and "meaning". By the time I'd fled to the big smoke it was cast entirely off the tablet by the same wicked authorities who instigated the "Multiply Your Options" pogrom in my penultimate year, where student advisors blatantly coaxed bright introverts away from the art room and the history shelf and into the fluro lit white rooms where ledgers were balanced and surds were conveyed. In other words maths, science, commerce and a bit of property law, way ahead of their time as it's what the Big 8 are enormously about now.

My prize was a paperback Selected Dylan Thomas with a print of the handwritten "I see the boys of summer..." and I've written more than one song 'informed' by that poem and the events, banal and small town as they are, that gave the poem to me. As well there are Dr. Who, The Goodies and an unmentioned cast, present all the same, of Danger Mouse, Monkey Magic, Kenny Everett and maybe even Count Duckula.

After The Crack Up

Hemingway would've given Fitzgerald an uppercut if he wrote this song. And when it gets to the lalala's I want to give one to myself. But apart from that it turned out a stellar piece of ensemble playing, skating as it does over its mostly basic mechanics and cultivating a rare pop ephemera of its own. Also in its favour, while not so much the subject matter of the song, it wants to argue valiantly against the thinking that has an artist of whatever stripe only ever 'entitled' to a golden decade of production. Outside that very brief span, (3 albums and a bakers dozen substantial tours if you're lucky in this game), all else is impotence and repetition at best, amazing disgrace otherwise when it isn't just a mute disappearance or a dignified admission that it was just a hobby and now I've got kids and a job designing websites for government departments. Bah.

Bastard Time

This is supposed to be a little bit funny and the first line is, to my mind, almost humorous. In the same way that sentence is. Of course no amount of play acting or sonic manipulation can erase a chronic earnestness from this voice, and after all you have to sing with some honesty, (this assertion being vigorously challenged every night on the television and every day on the radio as I write).

Not a great deal to say about the song. I'm a very join the dots piano player, in fact I'm that sort of musician all over, so venerably Master of None it's almost funny too - and a bit sad, like the song. So when I manage a basic phrase or a shiny musical shard, rather than elaborate on the ivories I'll tend to stay with it until it's no longer a piece of music at all but a rudimentary echo receiver. All it should then do is serve as the chamber from which a line of lyrics are issued and the retort is comfortably snatched back. Bastard Time is one of the earliest songs written for the album and it had its beginnings literally in a hole in a wall under the West Hobart house I first moved into three years ago, duly converted into a dusty but virtually dead little studio. Dead being a good thing in that circumstance.

A Dog Starved

Blake, Manley Hopkins and Dylan Thomas all vie for the pedant's ear in this power pop excursion, not to mention Big Star, XTC and maybe more recently, via XTC, Field Music. For all that heavyweight arty dick swinging it was from a dearth of brawn and a surplus of brain in evidence at what I'd mistakenly thought was the end of the project that "A Dog..." came, tail wagging. It became hurtfully clear that it was for me to go back into the pit and swing a little harder at the face, maybe even shirt off this time, do the shale dance into the hard rock. Four days of basic tracking later we had four new songs, this and Villa Adriana being the survivors. Back home I wielded my brother's old red hollow Silvertone and got some nice tones. Some songs are just purpose servers, which ain't bad.

Hobart Obit

One of the Fairfield songs built around a very old grand piano with its own ideas about what key we ought to play in, even if it was one that hadn't existed until now. It sounded so good to me that we decided to tune to it and all the subsequent parts back home would then need to be tuned accordingly. Inevitably, (at least in our case), this would lead to incremental disagreements between a whole family of instruments and result in the quiet argument you have now. Which is no problem to my ears, for a start I always heard the song, sonically, strongly referencing the original "Sea of Love" which is nothing if not sublimely wonky. Even Robert Plant's superb cover, the first version I ever heard, is a woozy affair which can be put down as much to Plant's wizard vocal as instrumentation. Sailing on the sea of love clearly wants some chuck bags along. "Hobart..." belongs to a group of my songs I will always keep adding to, thank yous to the best friends you can have.

Father Jack and Mr. T

Basic demo, nothing changed here from its original which makes sense because it is the original. It's a pretty song and deceptively difficult with a melody that had to be strangled into submission and still resists an easy rendition. We tried to make this a band song three times but we couldn't get it. Sometimes that just happens, especially with ones you've already written in your imagination. I still hear what it should be but I can't for the life of me convey that to anyone.

In not quite a first Father Jack came out of a short story I'd sketched out but hadn't written, so more of a daydream with plot points. Without going into it too much there's a brother and a sister, twins, rumoured to be gifted with extra sensory powers, uncannily able to extract themselves from the kinds of snares that might've consigned Houdini to some inky oblivion. The catch being they can only achieve these miraculous escapes working in concert with each other. It's the last dark days of the Weimar era, they are in the employ of a weak man whose clientele consists more and more of...you get the picture, Mengele might make an appearance at some point, unthinkable research, miraculous escapes...hackneyed to the point of tasteless and well worth not writing. The twins touched me though and I wonder if they are really my kittens, left on the side of the freeway, wet through and ready to be picked off by hawks and those wonderful folks who swerve to hit not to miss. Of course the song is really called "Brother Lock and Sister Key" but maybe that's a song that hasn't been finished yet.

St. Helena

(Another demo we added drums and bass to later in Melbourne.) The first house I moved into in Hobart was, no surprise, on a hill. So the back yard sloped down to its rear which I arrayed with a hotch potch of small wired and unwired speakers operating on a very nervous wifi confusion which nonetheless usually let me sit up the top, drink wine and change my music with my phone. Pleasant. I had determined to treat my separation from the mainland like a bitter thing, all the while knowing that it wasn't which made it not just ludicrous but probably dangerous to my health. I was to be Ovid whose parlour trick of turning turgid rock into animated fancy flights had grown stale at court, out of favour with the imperious tastemakers and more than likely suffering the ravages of time, cheap wine, sneering women and under-developed song. David Malouf would re-issue with some serious amendments. But that was not the book I was reading, and Naso was not the flawed character from history I would more convincingly inhabit and be charlatan.

No, it was Bonaparte and "The Black Room at Longwood". The trick to nervous collapses for a songwriter, (of which you are required to have three minimum according to one industry type I've met), is to remain wilfully oblivious on a level, and match the perpetual spasm of slow disintegration with a slow spooky carnival ride of your own invention. And this method saw me on many occasions out there on the hill having genuine half awake, narcotic conversations with friends who I believed had made their way somehow that very night across the wild strait, maybe even in a primitive submarine, to keep me company and have a drink. The landlord kicked me out of that house within the year for having adopted those kittens some other total shit dumped on the freeway. Those two kittens, brother and sister, played a big part in helping me throw off the Bony suit and get back to being a plain old randy ancient dead poet tending his Tomis flower in the rubble. Je ne regrette rien!

The Faking Boy

See "Sailing To The Moon" for the category this one lands in. Only in this case it's an abbreviated version of what was a much longer tune. I took some of the words from a poem that lives in that great collection from Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney called "The Rattle Bag". I can't verify this being away from the book now but I think they gave it an Anon for author and it leads you a dance if you try to verify anything about its origin. It's very likely a piss take of an old Irish song "The Minstrel Boy", but then the Rattle Bag version seems quite genuinely a song of protest or at least an antsy elegy for a hung youth, that is, a youth who's been hung by the neck. And then you have the following information which suggests a piss take of a piss take, "The Faking Boy to the Crap has Gone..." :

"'Bon Gaultier' was the joint nom-de-plume of W. E. Aytoun and Sir Theodore Martin. Between 1840 and 1844 they worked together in the production of The Bon Gaultier Ballads, which acquired such great popularity that thirteen large editions of them were called for between 1855 and 1877. They were also associated at this time in writing many prose magazine articles of a humorous character, as well as a series of translations of Goethe's ballads and minor poems, which, after appearing in Blackwood's Magazine, were some years afterwards (1858) collected and published in a volume."

All I remember is I ended up on the wrong side of everything one bleak, black morning and eventually started to feel hard done by so I peeled the fun back and let it bleed again. A toy bodhran keeps questionable time and I think I got inside the idiom quite well with the words and the singing.

Definitive History

It shouldn't have surprised me, my favourite writers become my favourite because in a seemingly tossed off sentence they will communicate in simple, elegant terms one or another of the big "feelings" I've had hovering over me in my waking hours and mocking my honey-slow reasoning. Incapable as I so often am or afraid even to try to reach up and grasp in the aether for a solid - it's not just that it requires an intellectual flex I can't make but there's that songwriterly fear that if you tangle too directly with the nebulous and look to strip it back to what is almost always just a common idea you also strip it of its mystical song birthing power. Probably it's as simple as this, someone sits all day long with one of those rubber band entities, spheres of a thousand stationary souls intertwined and Borg like enslaved to the service of a confounding One, and that person is trying to find the critical strand which, once tugged at sufficiently, will unravel the malty universe. Robert Dessaix saunters up, takes the object in hand and throws it against the wall. "See, it's a rubber ball?" And I'm paraphrasing this next bit rather than just clumsily making stuff up, but he does the same thing for me when he writes about the famous Australian egalitarian, anti-authoritarian schtick which always struck him as "another kind conservatism dressed up as rebellion for a laugh".

To the song, well it's a demo from home which we added drums and bass to later on in Melbourne. It's a lot of bowed piano strings and theremin, settlement myths, murder, feelings of being taken for granted, and advantaged of, simultaneously by some cultural accord that was and is not to be questioned because...yuk. How odd. How uncomfortable. Multi-antennae slouching indignant beast of a song, eastward, southward, up side, down cast...all the requisite mishandled tropes of the scrambling antipodean, colonial crackpot flower going to seed, blowing hard.

Villa Adriana

This song, lyrically at least, aspires to not much more than being a very abbreviated tour guide to Hadrian's Villa if you happen to be leaving from around the Trastevere in Rome. A very energetic tour guide who is wont to pass over certain crucial details in the excitement of the journey because it is itself taking the journey with you whether you like it or not. I had something more than just a reading of Marguerite Yourcenar's "Memoirs of Hadrian", contemplating my first holiday in Europe it became the centrepiece of what little planning I would do - it was certainly the one journey I would have to make whatever obstacles presented. As it was apart from the difficulty of finding the right tabac in Tivoli (built into the farthest corner of a flash Gelateria) to buy a bus ticket, it was easy enough and full of sights that are now "emblazon'd on my mind as 'twere".

The song, musically, belongs in that narrow band of Augie tunes like "The Hole In Your Roof", "Vernoona", "The Drowning Dream" etc, very odd tunings, breeze with incipient thunderstorm, manufactures a nostalgia for my own pricking and inflicts it on others. Anyway, read the book, listen to the song, or don't, but go to the Villa.

Millenarians' Mirror

Where I live now I'm woken almost every morning by the sounds of innumerable birdlife, chattering and issuing all manner of warnings and threats to mark the resumption of avian hostilities and herald light's approach. The opening verse comes from this and the pace of the song fairly mimics my own morning animus, from coffee cup to dreaded studio. I made this one with as many chords as possible - for kicks maybe? or was I trying to emulate the cacophony of my Nature's Own Alarm Clock? - either way it's going to be a bastard of a thing to play live. If I was trying to crowd out the cage as it were, such is the perverse nature of AM of course the song became the most spacious thing on the record while some three chord wisp of a tune probably ended up cast to an opposite pocket of the spectrum, so clogged with voices it couldn't hear itself let alone sing.

As it stood after the drums and bass were done in Melbourne it was too brief and uneventful so I extracted some organ and limb samples, took some skin off its bum, and concocted sinew and capillary from its stems to create a middle section which also supplied an intro and an outro. One of the few vocal albums I could listen to more than once or twice over the last few years was John Cale's "Paris 1919" and while this song hasn't much to do with that I did have a picture of a small sad gathering of people, 7th Day Atheists let's say, inured to any number of Great Disappointments, hopelessly celebrating hopelessness with a foolish wish which has become nearly conviction, that soon the face of things will be razed, two moons will guess at each others place in the black ocean, and we will be blessedly forgotten. Hmmm.

Sailing To The Moon

There are always scraps like this, put together when I can't write anything of substance, then I get carried away and start adding parts all in the service of distraction from the real task. Usually I think of them as intros for grand pieces yet to be conceived and that's really still what this is. I think it got its own number so we wouldn't have to call it a 13 track album. Which never would've come about if I'd listened to a couple of the others who were, as ever, impotently calling for a 10 track album. I might've agreed too but then it wouldn't have been as long and difficult to get through. Which sounds arrogant and foolish and it is, but I'd rather irritate a few reviewers, who'd be spot on in their observations mind you, and please the peculiar lot of AM diehards who not only get the truly long player but feel insulted by the concise and frankly short offerings of other more traditional outfits. For me the great long player (Sister Lovers, White Album, Jive Bunny) is like getting through the first half of Gravity's Rainbow in 2009, then starting on the second half in 2013 and getting the feeling you might've read the wrong half first and so on. I like the gift that gives and takes.

Never Been Sad

Another party only I was invited to, thankfully the Optigan was still wheezing in the corner festooned with paper scraps and be-horned by empty wine bottles from the last 'party', more than ready to oblige with the illusion of a merry, or, if the shoe fit, sombre company. Poignant guitar solo transmogrifying into mouth yowl which, if the guitar mags were any sort of chop, they'd be all over for solo of the year, but that'll probably go to Keith Urban.

Grumpy old man song probably had its first flash in the sun drenched courtyard of Preachers bar in Battery Point, surrounded by perky Young Liberals who were just beginning to scent the winds of change to come, fresh loads of premium Sandy Bay manure in preparation for dumping over the existing desiccated turd puzzle. The insidious are always so very nice at the first meeting. In that ozonic (not yet animalic) field, dazed by early afternoon red beer and the sensory marina of interchangeable Calvin Klein aquatics, this pretty misery guts of a tune had its divine spark flinted.

The Crime

Might've been the last day, certainly the last one in Fairfield, which I know because I was drunk when we recorded it. It's all live except for the backing vocals and some guitars I added back in Hobart, for which I dutifully got into character in any case. It's another in the low blow to my teetering ego category of song, there's some humour and a little maudlin (or is it maundering?) regret in The Crime. I hope the humour is in the martyr proposition, and the sadness is in the genuine sense of expulsion and exile, however self authored the circumstance may be. Because I can say my adoptive home of twenty odd years, Melbourne, is determinedly not what it was and will never be again, snakes and roundabouts, twenty odd years earning me the temporary licence to say such a silly thing and have possession and some gravitas in the saying. And then embark on his 100 Beers of Solitude, driving on the Abstinence Hall. Lock him up.