

Liberate Ulysses Conversation

Question No. 3:

Steven Cole:

Let's talk about one of your songs that you feel has a particularly strong link to Ulysses. What specific ideas or themes from the book shaped the song? And how did the thoughts from the page or your impression of them grow to a particular style of music/sound in that tune?

Ken Cotter:

The concept of the album from the start was to create a contemporary set of songs based on, or inspired by Ulysses. I wanted to intertwine the subjects I like to explore in my songwriting with themes and motifs from the novel like love, loss, loyalty, betrayal, compassion, desire, a yearning for times past and so on. I knew I didn't want to write a kind of 'rock opera' or create a direct musical representation of the narrative. I also didn't want knowledge of Ulysses to be an absolute necessity for the listener, but rather would provide a valuable added layer. It was important that the songs could stand alone while at the same time being laced with references to Ulysses. In my head, I think of the text in my songs as being like a hyper-linked webpage where the lyrics and phrases can lead you to a deeper narrative if you want to click on them.

Musically, I drew very little from the music in Ulysses. I wanted to create something modern and true to my own songwriting identity rather than leaning on the early 20th century Music Hall songs that pepper the novel. I did however create three 'segue pieces' or 'vignettes' between the songs. These are entirely based on Ulysses and are parts of the project where I unapologetically indulge my passion for the novel.

As an example, one of these vignettes is called 'Radio Ulysses.' It sounds like someone is trying to tune in a radio. As they scan there's a sports commentator announcing the SP of the Gold Cup race in Ascot (of course won by outsider Throwaway at 20:1- a dark horse!). There's an old time tenor singing a ballad in a pub (actually my dad!). And finally there's an American preacher stating that the 'Deity ain't no nickel dime bumshow' backed by a southern-chapel style

Hammond organ. All these 'scenes' are readily recognizable to the Ulysses reader.

Some of the songs are explicitly based on episodes of Ulysses like 'Nighttown' and 'Rain Clouds Gather' (which is based on Cyclops). The song 'Dublin' is about Joyce's self-imposed exile from his beloved city. Others like 'NWxW', 'Light Up The Room' and 'Small Craft Warning' explore the voyage of life and love, whether newly departing or faltering, by referencing Leopold and Molly's life. All the songs are coloured by my own experiences and observances.

For me the song that sums up the entire concept very well is 'Dawn'. This is a song inspired by my own warm relationship with my late father, and how some of the best times we spent together involved music and singing, often into the early hours of the morning. I think of the father-son motif in Ulysses - mine being opposite to most of the disastrous versions in the book - but more specifically I draw on Leopold Bloom's nostalgic reminiscences of nights spent listening to Molly sing (at Mat Dillon's house in Roundtown for example). Much of the good times Leopold and Molly spent together involved music. The text quoted at the start of 'Dawn' is Simon Dedalus' reminiscing about his childhood in Cork listening to Italian sailors singing their barcaroles. The end of 'Dawn' features Joyce's incredible description of a song crescendo. I draw on these reminiscences and emotions to emphasise the sense of nostalgia and longing in my own song. I draw on Joyce's thesis that music has the strength to evoke powerful emotional memories that can attack or sooth an aching heart at will.

Anatomy Of A Goddess was always primarily to be a music album, and my personal narrative would always take precedence over the general concept. So as Joyce ended up with something completely different to Homer's epic, I always intended to stray at will from Ulysses when I needed to. I wanted to create something unique and true to me while at the same time, warmly embracing this beautiful novel, which has become such an obsession.

Dawn

"It was the only language Mr Dedalus said to Ben. He heard them as a boy in Ringabella, Crosshaven, Ringabella, singing their barcaroles. Queenstown harbour full of Italian ships. Walking you

know, Ben, in the moonlight with those earthquake hats. Blending their voices. God, such music Ben. Heard as a boy. Cross Ringabella haven mooncarole."

First notes rang out
Hung lightly in the air
They hung like starlight
In the dawn

Remember when we sang the songs?
You and I were there.
We were carried like heroes,
On the shoulders of a song.

And I know that if I need you,
I close my eyes and you are there,
On a summers evening, when I was young. A starlit dawn.
Somewhere I still want to be.

And if I need you now,
I can see your smile and sing your song,
And in those lines where we both belong
I draw a breath and let them come

Come to me.

"It soared, a bird, it held its flight, a swift pure cry, soar silver orb, it leaped serene, speeding sustained, to come, don't spin it out too long long breath he breath long life, soaring high, high resplendent, aflame, crowned, high in the effulgence symbolic, high, of the ethereal bosom, high, of the high vast irradiation everywhere all soaring all around about the all, the endlessnessness..."