

A Sunflower On Camphill

In the late summer of 2004 I was living in a flat in Camphill Avenue, Glasgow. The place was a bit, you know, strange. It consisted of one large room with bay windows into which had been built a small kitchen and bathroom. Off to the side was a small bedroom which had clearly also been a part of that large room. The building itself had originally been a Victorian Townhouse according to the landlord, who owned around 40 such flats on that part of the street and who himself lived in one, chain smoking on an ash flecked sofa while collecting the dough. When I moved in he told me that the space I was renting had been “the musician’s room” in prosperous days, a place where hired musicians could prepare before entertaining the master and mistress of the house. Given my own background in music I took great comfort from this nugget of (probably false) information, imagining my new path was somewhat blessed by the association.

Flat 5 at 12 Camphill Avenue had one wonderful defining feature for me – the view outside its big bay windows. When I think of my time there the thing I remember most is staring out of the window. I don’t know why, but even at night-time, eating dinner and watching whatever happened to be on television I would usually have the curtains drawn back and would find my eyes wandering out to the street below. There were old trees, Glasgow-Style window frames painted dark green and a crescent rising up to the right of my window with dark tenement buildings dominating the skyline. The street was beautiful no matter the season or the weather. Winter Saturday mornings were particularly beautiful, silent and stark with just the occasional car passing and sometimes a delayed Friday night reveller heading home. On days when I was home by late afternoon I would see kids chasing each other down the road, or shivering against the rain as they headed home under the blossoming halogen. The flats opposite mine looked pretty fancy and for the odd moment I would imagine that when more prosperous days came along I would move in across the street, dragging my possessions across bit by bit. Then I remembered that no longer would I have that

particular view to pass my winter nights and in any case, magical as my time in Camphill Avenue could sometimes be, I was always aware that it was a stop on the road somewhere else.

I had some fun phone calls when I was at 5/12. As a favour to some friends at an American record company I once pretended to be a reclusive Scottish pop star for an obscure magazine interview which lasted an uncomfortable 15 minutes and which tested my acting skills well past their tight boundaries. Don't ask. Another evening I was sitting down with a bottle of wine to watch the UK TV premiere of *The Blair Witch Project*; before I could turn the channel over I got a call from Kim Fowley. When I got him off the phone the end credits were just starting to roll and although momentarily frustrated I soon reflected that 90 minutes on the phone with Kim was almost certainly more entertaining than anything on TV. My favourite call was from Stefan Kassel at Marina Records, Hamburg. By this time Marina had released four of my albums with The Pearlfishers and we had become firm friends – Stefan would often end up playing some music down the line, always from a vinyl source, perhaps a Jimmy Webb song cut by Scott Walker or Bobby Scott singing *The Rainbow Connection*. When Stefan finally had a Beatles epiphany after years of resistance (“everybody loves The Beatles...except me!”) he called up to play *Martha My Dear* down the phone several times, a song I had by that time owned for 25 years. Around August 2004 Stefan called with a story about a dream he'd had. In the dream Marina Records were releasing a Christmas album by The Pearlfishers and he was in the middle of preparing the artwork:

“This would be fucking amazing, David”, he said, “but what's the use in getting excited about something that will never happen? We probably don't even have enough time and we'd only lose money anyway. I mean...you might not even be into it. Anyway, it was a fun dream!”

When he hung up I said to myself, okay, I give it two days and he'll be back on the phone.

“We have to make this happen, David”, Stefan said, two days later, “my inner woman is speaking loud and clear and, as you know, I always listen to my inner woman”.

So, we eventually settled on a mini album format, something I could put together really quickly from a few little bits and pieces already started and some new songs written to order. I sat down at the bay window in 5/12 at my little foldaway table with a guitar, pen and pad and started trying to imagine the Christmas season. Outside, the summer afternoon slowly started transforming into the previous winter, the sun turning pale, the sky wan and gloomy and the kids running around shivering, wrapped in scarves and anoraks. It started raining and the old lady behind the Glasgow-style windows opposite turned on her Christmas tree lights and set the ceramic carollers in her bay window singing. By now it was dark and December. I wrote down what seemed to be in front of me:

Looking out, branches stretch across the avenue
Four pm, children tramping home from school alone
Daylight's almost gone, Christmas lights are coming on.

And then

Birds flew off; November was the colour of my world
Couldn't sleep, couldn't bear to see the dawn
Drove my car into the rain, had to start it all again.

So that's how *A Sunflower At Christmas* got started, not really the story of a season or the story of making a record to order but the story of a journey I was actually taking at the time. *Winter Roads*, to paraphrase the words of the song, eventually led me into some enchanted places and I was grateful for the chance to travel. Next two stops were the slopes of Aviemore and Saint Moritz for a spot of *Snowboardin'*. In this song I channelled all the knowledge I had about this great sport into three and a half minutes - which is about all I was able to get from the Internet. I have no idea what it means to 'spin 540s' or to do a 'rail slide' but they sure sound fun. In addition to typing in 'Snowboarding Terms' into a Google search engine I did some rigorous primary research by asking my friend Carla Hillman about her love of the sport. "What's it like, Carla?" I asked. "Amazing", she replied. *Snowboardin'* eventually ended up on two or three Christmas compilations in Europe, alongside The Beach Boys, Frank Sinatra, Wham and Paul McCartney. I tend to play one of those compilations when friends are around at Christmas, hoping they'll bring it up and I can act casual.

Two tracks on *A Sunflower At Christmas* have their roots in an earlier project – *The Strange Underworld Of The Tall Poppies* – not the album of that name which came out in 1997 but the original concept which was going to be by a fictional band called The Tall Poppies. An earlier version of *Away In A Manger / A Sunflower At Christmas* was recorded for that as was a track called *Magic Reader* which takes its title from a work by the Scottish painter Allan Davie and provides the marimba-based backing track for my little seasonal folktale *The Snow Lamb*. *Away In A Manger / A Sunflower At Christmas* is kind of inspired by Jimmy Webb's *Three Songs*, where he runs *Let It Be Me*, *Never My Love* and *I Wanna Be Free* all together. These songs are really vocal heavy – it's the Pearlies Christmas choir. *Snow Plus Christmas* is a rewrite of a stupid song called *Love Plus Summer* and gave Jim Gash and I a chance to camp it up in quite an extreme way while doing the vocals at East Kilbride Arts Centre. Camp as Christmas, actually. *Ice Race* is a piano exercise, which takes one phrase and repeats it with more and alternate layers of instrumentation and vocals. *Blue December* is one of many versions of the *Young Picnickers* song; this time we added real street noise (recorded by Bill Wells in Hamilton for another project) and fake brass band (me going brp brp).

In 2008 when Alistair Campbell at The Tolbooth in Stirling asked if we'd like to perform the complete *Sunflower At Christmas* we took the opportunity to add an arrangement of *The Holly And The Ivy* which hopefully has a little bit of the menace suggested by earlier versions of that carol. In our version however the 'battle of the sexes' symbolised by the holly and the ivy is resolved in a new line: 'oh love oh love oh love we'll walk through the morning'. We've added that arrangement to the updated version of the album along with a new song, *Come Chase The Snow* (itself based on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Time To Rise* from *A Child's Garden Of Verses*) and unreleased full band versions of *Battersea Bardot* and *Strawberries In The Snow*.

Santa Stefan and Mrs Frank Lahnemann Claus of Marina, Hamburg, The North Pole gave me a chance to fulfil a bit of a songwriter's fantasy with *A Sunflower At Christmas* so I'll dedicate the expanded edition to them and hope those of you who hear the album enjoy it too. Merry Christmas and Ho! Ho! *Hoh!*

David Scott, 2009