

**ROBERT SHELTON MEMORIAL CONFERENCE
INSTITUTE OF POPULAR MUSIC, UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL
1st MAY 1999**

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT, ALFIE?

by Spencer Leigh

Interviews with pop stars have reached epidemic proportions. When the new album by Blur was released, their lead singer and songwriter Damon Albarn was everywhere, telling everyone about his breakup from Justine from Elastica and how it led to their new single, "Tender Is The Night". (Significantly, no-one asked him whether he had been reading Keats' "Ode To A Nightingale".)

This talk is about conducting interviews and, in particular, about **creation and concealment**. Some musicians are not prepared to discuss their work, whereas others talk about it endlessly. I would like to consider whether their silence affects critical acceptance and whether a song is more highly regarded when we don't know its origins.

I shall be looking at this from a personal perspective of interviewing musicians for BBC Radio Merseyside and music magazines.

Quite often at a radio station, someone will be assigned to a news story that they know nothing about. Alternatively, a member of the public might come into the station with a news item of which the reporter knows nothing. How does the reporter cope with such situations?

Simple.

There are two questions that will get him through any interview

- What's it all about?, and
- When did it all begin?

The reporter can pick up on the answers to either of those questions and have no difficulty in completing the interview. I can guarantee it.

That works for news, but **it doesn't work for music**. I doubt if Van Morrison would respond kindly to me picking up his new CD and asking, "What's it all about?" or "When did it all begin?" Or, indeed, any other question I might want to ask him.

Even perfectly amiable characters might object to such loose questioning as "What's it all about?" I've never had any trouble with Alvin Stardust: he's a good talker and can explain himself well. However, he appeared with Vanessa Feltz's talk show on BBC-TV on 1st February 1999 and mimed to his hit record of "My Coo Ca Choo": sample lyric,

*Tomcat, you know where it's at,
C'mon, let's go to my flat.*

He sang this masterpiece and sat down. “Alvin,” said Vanessa, “you must have sung ‘My Coo Ca Choo’ thousands of times. What’s it all about?” “I don’t know”, said Alvin, “You’d better ask the writer.”

No matter how good an interviewer you are and no matter how cleverly you put your questions, **your subject might not open up to you.**

Rudyard Kipling said, “Why do I refuse to be interviewed? Because it is immoral! It is a crime, just as much a crime as an assault against my person, and just as much merits punishment.” No one holds such extreme views today, but they may feel that an interview diminishes them and their work. Saul Bellow called interviewers “thumbprints on his windpipe”. Lewis Carroll regarded interviews as an unwarranted intrusion into his private life.

The interviewees can be placed in different categories. First of all, there are the **grumpy bastards**: the artists who rarely cooperate with interviewers. They are usually difficult, complex people.

- Bob Dylan is at the top of the list. He was furious when he read his “Playboy” interview with Nat Hentoff : “It was just dumb bullshit that I would not say and Hentoff told me that ‘Playboy’ wrote in things to make it sound better.” (Did they or did Hentoff?) Dylan’s relationship with the press deserves a book in itself. He often throws the question back at the interviewer. “What are you trying to accomplish?” becomes “What do you think I am trying to accomplish?”
- Van Morrison is often caught passing time in greasy spoon cafes throughout the UK, but he rarely gives interviews. His PR, Keith Altham, told him that “The Sunday Times Magazine” would give him the cover story in exchange for an interview. “I told you that I don’t give interviews,” said Morrison, “I pay you to say no.” “Well, go and hire a parrot,” said Altham, “I quit.”
- In 1988 Chuck Berry was pressured into giving interviews to promote his autobiography. He agreed providing no interview was longer than three minutes. The hapless journalists would be confronted with Chuck Berry and his stopwatch. To make matters worse, Chuck said, “Pardon” and “I didn’t catch that” to nearly every question.
- Frank Sinatra hated talking to the media, probably because they would ask about upon his lovelife and Mafia links. He was the first star to physically attack a journalist and since then, Oasis and Bjork have also landed blows.

Almost as bad as the grumpy bastards are the **blankety blanks**, the artists who may be interviewed but rarely say anything significant:

- Little Richard earns much of his current income through appearances on US chat shows, but he rarely says anything sensible. He ignores direct questions and delivers well-honed lines - for example, "I am the most beautiful man in show business" and "Brian Epstein offered me 50% of the Beatles." He talks rubbish, rather like an American disc-jockey of the 1960s, and possibly he regards the interview as just another part of show business.
- Despite an obvious depth to his work, Freddie Mercury never gave anything but frothy interviews. I assumed that this applied to the rest of Queen, and so I had some trepidation when I recently interviewed Roger Taylor. "Do you talk about Freddie?" I asked. "Of course," he replied, "Ask what you like." "Okay," I said, "Bohemian Rhapsody, what's it all about?"

Some artists are not good at explaining themselves:

- Billy Fury always gave hesitant interviews and, indeed, he rarely spoke in his early years as he was afraid someone would equate his Scouse accent with ignorance.
- The country star, Don Williams, is a silent Texan and is happiest when the question can be answered "Yup" or "Nope". My own interview involved me asking such questions as "How many hats do you have?" to avoid his Yup and Nope answers.

After the grumpy bastards and the blankety blanks, we have **the spindoctors**. They memorise their press releases and no matter what you ask they give you the official answer, rather like a politician.

- Alan Price and Cliff Richard are good examples. Listen to how quickly and how skilfully they answer questions. They hear a key word and they're off. The one advantage is that ten minutes with them is the equivalent of twenty with anybody else.
- George Martin has been interviewed so much since his retirement that I can predict his answers to any question word for word.
- Tony Barrow who was the Beatles press officer, acted for John Denver on a promotional tour of UK radio stations and he told me that Denver was brilliant at handling interviews. He would say to an interviewer, "What an interesting question", and answer it as though he had never been asked that before. The interviewer felt he was getting a scoop. But it might be 6pm and he had already been asked the question five times that day. John Denver was treating the interviews like concert appearances and this is a very American approach.

Then the **naughty boys**. It must be boring to be asked the same questions repeatedly so they change their answers.

- Ray Davies of the Kinks changes his stories so much that no-one can now say what "Waterloo Sunset" is about.
- Willie Nelson has changed his story about writing "Crazy" for Patsy Cline.

Then we have the **lazy bones**, which is tied up with the American acceptance of the **fake interview**. Take this recent interview CD with the country star, George Strait. I make my scripted remarks and George replies. If I follow the script, it starts:

Interviewer: "Hi, George, how are you?"

Track 1; "I'm doing good."

Interviewer: "I really love your new album!"

Track 2: "Well, good. I'm glad to hear it."
and so on.

I never did this of course, not least because I would hate to be caught out. However, I did broadcast a section with a slight change to the questions:

Interviewer: "Hi, George, how are you?"

Track 1; "I'm doing good."

Interviewer: "I couldn't stand your new album. Don't you think it's about time that someone told you you're recording crap?"

Track 2: "Well, good. I'm glad to hear it."
and so on.

Except for the occasional press reception, Colonel Parker nixed interviews with Elvis Presley. He wanted to maintain the distance between the star and his followers, and the lack of interviews encouraged this persona, although many thought it was because Elvis was incapable of expressing himself coherently.

Such an attitude is a rarity but there are artists who refuse to answer certain questions because they want to retain the mystique. This usually relates to songs:

- Don McLean will answer any question you ask him, except "What is 'American Pie' about?" He will say, "It's about my pension."
- Mike McCartney will not disclose what the Aintree Iron is in "Thank U Very Much".
- Carly Simon will not say who "You're So Vain" is about.
- Jimmy Webb will not explain his lyric for "MacArthur Park".
- Bobbie Gentry will not say what Billie Joe McAllister threw off the Tallahatchee Bridge.
- Procul Harum won't discuss the lyrics of "A Whiter Shade Of Pale".

To be fair, it can be disconcerting when an artist does explain himself. Townes Van Zandt wrote a folk music standard, "If I Needed You", which contains the line "Loop and Lil agree, you're a sight to see." I asked who Loop and Lil were. He said, "They're my parakeets." Similarly, it would have been better had Paul Simon not explained that the refer to "silver girl" in "Bridge Over Troubled Water" was to his wife whose hair had gone grey.

How does this silence affect critical acceptance? Is a song more highly regarded when we don't know how it came into being? The Beatles' songs are enormously popular, but you don't get the lyrical analysis that you do with Bob Dylan. They've explained their lyrics and even working sheets have been published, for example, the first lyrics to "In My Life" and "Yesterday".

Bob Dylan is the subject of endless university theses and this is because he has not spoken about the work and we can theorise about it. Consider that "Playboy" interview:

Dylan: "But I do know what my songs are about."

Playboy: "And what's that?"

Dylan: "Oh, some of them are about four minutes, some are about five minutes, and some, believe it or not, are eleven or twelve."

Just look at the opening lines of "Desolation Row":

*"They're selling postcards of the hanging,
They're painting the passports brown."*

What on earth does that line mean? If Dylan had told us, there would have been no mystery.

It must be very difficult to keep quiet because the natural reaction is to explain. But look at the rewards of silence. Critics can write it about it forever and it has become as mysterious as "The Wasteland". (See Appendix)

Could Dylan explain it anyway? Is he motivated by some force which he can't explain? As he remarked on stage in 1980: "They didn't understand what I was singing about. I don't think I did either."

Such songs become **crossword puzzles** for us to solve, although some regard Dylan's songs like the Emperor's new clothes. I wonder if Dylan has written a book giving the details or whether the secrets will die with him? I suspect the latter. We will never be certain what these songs are about.

I confess to being in two minds about this:

As an interviewer, I hate the way that Bob Dylan won't answer questions. I think he should.

As a listener, I am glad that he won't answer questions because it has given me many additional hours of listening pleasure and debate.

What are the **pitfalls** for the interviewer? **How does he know he's getting the truth?**

- The subject knows he is talking for publication or broadcast and so may amend his comments and be hypocritical. The Beatles' first manager, Allan Williams, states in the book, "The Beatles - Inside The One And Only Lonely Hearts Club Band", that he

is “a millionaire of memories” and that has been “his reward”. Anyone who knows Allan will know that doesn’t sound remotely like him speaking.

- The interviewee may want to present himself in the best light, and I have had an example in recent weeks where I knew my subject was lying.
- No songwriter admits to writing a song while stoned. He does not want you to think that drugs contributed to his muse. This is a pity as a study as to how drugs affected imagination and hence, songwriting is overdue. Would we have had “Sgt Pepper” without drugs? I doubt it.

What are **the tricks for the interviewer?**

- Do research as it is common courtesy.
- Show the interviewee by your first question that you know something about him.
- Hit the ground running. You may have limited time and there may be interruptions. - pop stars rarely switch off their mobile phones. When people say to me, “You’re lucky meeting all these stars”, they ignore the fact that I only meet them for short periods of time. Usually, the more well-known the personality, the shorter the interview.
- Talk to people about themselves. If you meet Nils Lofgren, ask him about his career and through that, you’ll get comments about Bruce Springsteen. If you start “Tell me about Bruce”, you’ll irritate him as he is being used as a conduit.
- Interviewing is about listening as well as having a checklist of questions, so be prepared for interviews that go off at a tangent. This sometimes happens if the performer has got religion.
- Say as little as possible and let the interviewee do the talking. I received letters saying that my interview with Pete Wylie of the Mighty Wah! was my best ever. In truth, it was the interview where I said the least and at one stage, I go seven minutes without saying a word. However, there can be exceptions. Truman Capote interviewed Marlon Brando for “The New Yorker”, and Brando wrote in his autobiography, “The little bastard spent half the night telling me his problems. I figured the least I could do was tell him a few of mine.”

I recommend anyone to listen to Professor Anthony Clare’s superb interviewing technique for the Radio 4 programme, “In The Psychiatrist’s Chair”. I once interviewed Toyah and found that she was appearing on the programme a few weeks later. “Great,” I thought, “I’ll see how his interview differs from mine and learn something.” I put on the programme and he told the listeners who Toyah was. He then asked his first question, “How promiscuous were you in the late-1970s?” If I’d asked that question, I might well have had my face slapped: because Professor Clare is a doctor, Toyah answered it without complaint.

APPENDIX

DESOLATION ROW - BOB DYLAN

1965 track on "Highway 61 Revisited"

Bob Dylan has never explained how he came to write this song.

Some critical assessments:

- **Wilfrid Mellers:** "It catalogues the ills of modern civilisation but these ills cannot be righted by particular actions. The desolation that follows is not merely our own failings and perversities but the nuclear holocaust."
- **Frank Kermode and Stephen Spender:** "We are in a surrealistic town with a circus and there are a procession of figures, all behaving uncharacteristically. All this is a deliberate cultural jumble. History seen flat, without depth, all of them unreality against the flat and dusty truth of Desolation Row itself."
- **Adam Lively:** "Desolation Row combined the details of a Felliniesque festival with a sense of impending and actual chaos."
- **Fritz Werner Haver:** "These colourful, radical people do not accept the values of bourgeois life."
- **Philip Larkin:** "It has an enchanting tune and mysterious half-baked words."
- **Michael Gray:** "Dylan insists that all any individual can do is to hold some integrity of personal perspective."
- **Robert Shelton:** "Does it matter which side you're on if you're sailing on the Titanic? One of the curses of poetic vision is seeing too clearly the difference between how things are and how they ought to be?"
- **Bob Spitz:** "Acid has twisted his entire perspective".