

## UNCHAINED MELODY

by John Clare\*

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**L**et us move into a parallel idiom in order to make a point. When the painter Matisse was very old he kept painting through medical problems and sorrows, though everyone including his family assured him that he was saying nothing new. Matisse and Picasso were at certain times rivals and at other times friends. For periods both were probably the best known painters in the world. Picasso's position remained high for the rest of his life. Both experienced Nazi occupation. Both experienced aspects of the First and Second World Wars. Picasso's once famous work *Guernica* (a city bombed by Franco's military during the Spanish civil war) was a graphic depiction of the grotesquerie, horror and pain of war. A horse is screaming as I recall. An electrified tongue protrudes at sharp angles then lolls toward death. Matisse however felt that in such times an artist's duty was to keep those things alive that made life worth living. Picasso joined the Communist Party. Perhaps both viewpoints are valid.



*Picasso's Guernica, painted in 1937... PHOTO COURTESY PABLOPICASSO.ORG*

Late in Matisse's life one of his daughters disappeared. She had been carrying messages in and out of Paris for the French Resistance. It must have hurt deeply that she had often repeated the dictum that artists should be concerned with the world's

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crises, not pre-occupied with pleasantries, pleasures, satisfactions and solutions to aesthetic puzzles.

You might well say that Matisse was deeply self absorbed. Clearly he was also deeply obsessed and absorbed by his work. One, you might say, consumed the other. We should also note that he deeply loved his family and friends. We should say too that according to the British writer Hilary Spurling there is no foundation to the stories that Matisse slept with his models. In fact he entered a very different relationship with each, and each was made to feel that she had cooperated in the making of masterpieces. When they spoke about him it was to describe him as a kind and thoughtful old man. In most cases they were accommodated and cared for as part of the family. Previously some had been obliged to work as prostitutes.



*Henri Matisse: a kind and thoughtful old man...*

One of Matisse's outstanding late projects was the creation, in rhythmically cut, shaped and painted paper - such as he had used in his early impressions of dancers. This work was called *Jazz* and it served as cover and frontispiece for a book he worked on for Verve (which was also a jazz label).



*Matisse's work Jazz: rhythmically cut, shaped and painted paper...*

In fact a second *Jazz* collage was executed by Matisse. Both became very popular indeed. Like many that were dismissed in his late period.



*Matisse's second Jazz collage...*

Every age - in a human life or that of a country - has its traumas, and there are few artists who continue beyond middle age to expand their idiom in ways that will please or seem relevant to the young. Irksome judgementalism has flourished in many regions. To this day young people I know sniff at The Beatles and declare the consistent aggression of the Rolling Stones vastly superior. To me anyone who fails to appreciate the invention, variety and sheer beauty of The Beatles' music - or that of the later Beach Boys' creations - is limited by their terror of being identified with the wider population, middle of the road and all.



*Paul McCartney (left) with John Lennon. It was McCartney who suggested the two piccolo trumpet solos on Penny Lane... PHOTO COURTESY ROLLING STONE*

It was the unspeakable Paul McCartney of course who suggested the two piccolo trumpet solos on *Penny Lane*. He had heard Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos* the night before. Oh dear, how bourgeois! According to John Lennon anyway.

Incidentally they were not improvised. George Martin wrote them quickly and they were played in single takes by leading classical trumpeter John Wilbraham. If they don't give you a thrill something is amiss. Just knowing that there was a Penny Lane across the top of William Street, Kings Cross near the neon Dunlop tyre with the arrow pumping through it gave me a curious charge. More recently I returned from Brisbane to find that it was now Pennys Lane. Bar staff down William Street said they missed it too.

Incidentally I admire the Stones now too. Their covers are quite remarkable, particularly the one that begins with when the train left the station. Please excuse my vagueness. I am just more or less moving toward clarity after my (fourth is it?) stroke. Jazz has been the dwelling place of angry comparisons and there are few of us who have not been guilty at some time. Traditional jazz is superior to modern, and vice versa. Jazz is superior to everything. This seems oddly more vehement among those who have decided to migrate to some other idiom, particularly those invincibly relevant forms that grew out of jazz. It is here that many migrate, sneering back over their shoulders.

In old age many invincible values have faded into deep space, while from space there advances the universe that is music, shining, mysteriously dark. For me the first realisation that music was a universe in which no constellation, planet or satellite was without interest came when I was a little boy. On the radio was the curious variety of pre mid 20th century popular music. This included country music, jazz-inflected swing and Latin music. Latin music of a particular kind certainly, but that is what it was. Those guitar and vocal trios were authentic: the trio Los Panchos, the Trio Los Parguayos for instance.

I worked at a riding school out near St Marys in my school holidays and heard nothing but country music .This was long before Slim Dusty. Roy Rogers and Gene Autry on the Saturday matinees were originally just country singers before they



*Gene Autry: just a country singer before he became a singing cowboy on the movies...PHOTO COURTESY CMT.COM*

became singing cowboys on the movies. At home we had a radio and my grandfather had a gramophone, which sometimes slowed down and began to drone like an early bomber squadron. You wound it up and all the notes rose radiantly to true pitch. But Robert Hercules Doyle - a bushman who rode in the Light Horse in the First World War - had everything on that machine. So it seemed to me. Al Jolson, Bing Crosby, Rosemary Clooney, Frankie Laine, Judy Garland etc etc. Plus entire Beethoven symphonies. How? Well, he piled episodes on brief stacks of 78rpm discs on the spindle.

Yet this eclectic man was not without his prejudices either. One thing he could not tolerate was jazz. Not even Benny Goodman. In the second half of the 1950s I returned from Melbourne and found that he had a television. One night the superb Benny Goodman small band - with Gene Krupa and Lionel Hampton - was featured on television and he erupted. "Beethoven would be turning in his grave!" I was tempted but decided not to point out that Goodman's recording of a Mozart clarinet concerto was famously popular.



*Benny Goodman: Beethoven would be turning in his grave...PHOTO COURTESY ALAM.COM*

Jazz, to raise the dread topic again, was a favourite target recently.

One night the Sydney Improvised Music Association hosted a predominantly country-influenced band. At one point the guitarist announced with some relish that many in the audience would have come expecting jazz. No, actually, but he played a very dull version of *The Girl From Ipanema*. Many young people there would never have heard this, and many veterans were unlikely to have heard it since the days of Astrud Gilberto and Stan Getz. A very ignorant choice to send jazz up. Likewise the World Music hero who announced that they had better play a token jazz piece.

*Stormy Weather* it was! He hoped that the purists would not be too offended by their arrangement. *Stormy Weather* was premiered at the Cotton Club a long long time ago by Duke Ellington, whose arrangement was far more interesting. It was never

really a staple of the jazz repertoire. Some in attendance would never have heard it. I had not heard it live for decades.

Personally I have grown weary of those who assume that jazz is the only music I know or will tolerate. What about all the ethnic musics? Also, World Music. In the early 1950s when my father got his big break and we went to Melbourne, where he had been asked to manage a factory, we billeted a Pakistani metallurgy student (Mr Muhamad Hussein as I remember) who played me subcontinental music on either a short wave radio or a tape recorder. I learned to love it, still have some recordings, and have been taken aback when the hip have assumed ignorance on my part. I recommend Sandy Evans's jazz/Indo fusion band. There was one in England in the 1960s when I lived there. In fact I think it was called The Indo Jazz Fusion. My copy was buried under rubble in a fire bombing, the details of which I will not bore you.

What about country music? Well I worked on a riding school (or dude ranch as the Americans used to say) in my school holidays. I slept in the bunkhouse and heard nothing but country music. Before many of my critics were born. As for ethnic and folk musics (the music of the people of course): when I went by sea through to the Middle East I tuned my duty free transistor radio into the local radio stations. Music of the people? Most of "the people" ran from my vicinity when this music (weird to their ears) issued forth.



*Bela Bartok: he was influenced by the music of the Magyars...*

I think that's enough. I may be deluded but I labour under the misapprehension that I too am a person. The music of the Magyars who influenced Bela Bartok was indisputably of the people. Give it a try.