



SHARRON KRAUS

BY JOHN CAVANAGH



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scene

like a miniature folk apocalypse with her debut CD 'Beautiful Twisted' (Camera Obscura 2002), British singer/songwriter Sharron Kraus has quickly established herself as one of the strongest voices of the new folk underground. 'Beautiful Twisted' sounds like a lost early 70s UK progressive folk release. One can imagine it's release back then; the pure folk wave represented by singers like Sandy Denny, Shirley Collins and Anne Briggs having receded leaving darker artists like John Martyn, Richard and Linda Thompson and June Tabor to play the field with material ranging from the troubled to the downright suicidal. It would have fit right in. Kraus's work has the some of the chill quality of the Tabor of 'Abyssinians' and while few can touch Tabor vocally, Sharron has

the hurricane force of her song writing and arranging to compensate - her work sounds unmistakably her own. In any case, the music world took notice. 'Beautiful Twisted' appeared in the Richie Unterberger's top 10 of 2002 in US Rolling Stone, and garnered raves from both the folk and rock press.

Kraus weds timeless melodies to lyrics that bypass the feel-good side of folk, thrusting a shovel into the soil of our bloody past. Characters as earthen as any from Chaucer populate her world, and are vessels for tales of doomed love, enslavement, incest, obsession, death and the kind of stuff that happens after death in a pre-rational world, all of which

is the marrow of folk immemorial. The cover of her jaw-dropping sophomore effort 'Song of Love and Loss' is a superb painting of the Tarot card The Hanged Man, which is reversed signifying loss, setting a Yang that is carried through the record with great cohesion. The opener 'Gallows Song/Gallows Hill' is an original composition that is brilliantly integrated with a traditional Appalachian piece for a "post-folk" tour-de-force. The Yin of the record is carried by lighter and more optimistic pieces, like the exquisite chamber piece 'Come to Me', the exhilarating 'The Fastest Train' and even the jaunty graveyard humour of 'Murder of Crows'.

A restless collaborator, Sharron shares time between Oxford in the UK and Philadelphia in the USA, where she is an integral part of the

"Fishtown" underground folk scene along with Espers, Jack Rose, Fursaxa and Scorces. She added another dimension to the Iditarod's 2002 "Yuletide" CD on Elsie & Jack, and has albums in progress with Dave Muddyman of Loop Guru, and California singer/songwriter Christian Keifer. The Loop Guru collaboration has Muddyman adding an electronic undertow to unaccompanied versions of folk standards sung by Sharron, and makes one wonder what dark delights would issue from collaborations with kindred spirits Martyn Bates and David Tibet.

Her activities before 2001 have been hitherto somewhat shrouded. There are hints of

various cobwebbed endeavours in gothic rock and dark folk, but Sharron has always been economical with hard facts about her musical background, and her label describes her as “somewhat of an enigma, and refreshingly reticent in providing trainspotterish biographical details”. This interview, captured with Sharron partway through recording ‘Song of Love and Loss’, fills in some back-story, as well as being a nice illustration of the point that one can’t necessarily infer the disposition of the artist from the tenor of their work.

Episode 1: 2003, in an Oxford graveyard on a sunny September day.

By the time this appears, you’ll have relocated Philadelphia for a while. What’s there, what’s happening and why do you want to do that?

SK: It’s one of those “oh, it’s time for a change! Let’s go somewhere else” things and that’s as good a place as any, but mostly it’s a bunch of musicians that I met last summer – Brooke, Greg and Meg of the Espers and Tara (Fursaxa) and Heather of Charalambides is moving over as well – so a bunch of us are moving in together and it’s a kind of stereotypical bunch of musicians who just want to live together and record together and play together and do that thing.

Sounds a bit hippie man!

SK: It does, doesn’t it (laughs), yeah! I think it’s a combination of a bit of hippie-ness, but also just when you get onto something quite single-mindedly, wanting to be with other people who are doing it the same way... the time that I spent with them seemed like they’re on that wavelength too, so they’d be good people to be with and a good laugh, lots of fun.

Although you grew up in Leicestershire and Oxford has been your base since 1990, you seem to need these extended



trips. What do you get from that?

SK: It’s partly because Oxford is small and quite narrow in some ways, but also some of it is that I think I’ve always had a bit of a travel bug or always wanted to see what it was like to live in different places.

Where have you been so far for extended field trips?

SK: There’s been two trips to California that added up to about two and a half years together, a spree to France as a nanny looking after three kids, which meant being out in the middle of nowhere in the Somme in the winter and not getting a chance to practice my French at all because the people I was living with were an English family, having lots of fun tramping around the French countryside with a nine year old, a three year old and a six year old. Then trips

to India and other bits of Europe, so I’ve got a lot to cover. I want to go to Eastern Europe and just wander around and listen to music and see the countryside.

I would imagine that the children you were looking after in France would get a fairly interesting diet from you of things to look at and listen to...

SK: Yeah, well I was fairly limited in the sense that I didn’t have a ready supply of hallucinogens or anything like that (laughs!), but we went for bike rides or walks and just picked up things to look at, sang songs... we had fun singing songs about people jumping off cliffs and things, much to their mother’s horror!

Bet the children loved it!

SK: They did, they did! That’s one of the nice things about children.

I think you do, when you’re young, have a strong sense of the macabre if you like. Some people might say morbid, although I certainly wouldn’t call it that: I’m remembered by my family as having said, when I was three years old, that I was born under a dark cloud. I don’t know exactly where that came from when I was three, but I think that’s an area you became quite tangibly aware of when you were very young too...

SK: When you get to the age where you start to realise that people or animals die and then they’re gone, that’s kind of weird. During the time I was looking after these three kids in France, my gran died, so I came home to the funeral and when I got back, the three year old was asking me questions about where she’d gone and what’s happened. It was not as if this was a person he knew that had been taken away from him. There was something that was still puzzling him that he kept coming back to, even though he’d never met her, just knowing that I’d gone somewhere because somebody had died. He didn’t quite understand what that meant and I was trying to explain it to him in terms that he would understand that weren’t just “oh, she’s gone to sleep and won’t wake up”, you know, trying to say that she was old, she’s come to the end of her life and she’s dead and now she’s gone. That’s quite a shocking discovery, or just plain weird, because you’ve just started experiencing what it’s like to be alive and it doesn’t really make sense with your experience when somebody’s gone. I think, also, another strand of it is the whole kind of... not having been taught what not to be interested in, you’re interested in death and dogshit and bogeys and sick... just one of those things that we get educated out of being interested in, unless we manage to hang on to it.

Modern life – say the last hundred years – is much more

closed in than older times. If you think about the subject of the whole European fairy tale tradition, way before the Grimms, with writers like Staropola and Basile and back to the oral tradition, they would deal with subjects that would now be considered taboo, especially for the young. Do you think we've lost more than we've gained in some respects?

SK: I'm wary of jumping to that conclusion, because I don't know enough about what was happening then. Were Grimm's fairy tales told to children on a general basis? I don't know. We've got them as stories collected or written by these guys, but I don't know... One of the versions of what's happened is that we've become more sheltered from death and hardship - the lucky us in this part of the world with a good enough income to not have to die prematurely of horrible illnesses, but then there's still the last two wars which meant that a lot of us did come face to face with death. I don't know if I can see a clear trend that is that we're becoming safer or less comfortable with death and all of that stuff. I think there are different strands... there are still stories for children that deal with at least the darker side of the psyche, in the way that Grimm's do... you know, so she comes along and chops off his head and sticks it back on and leaves him: some of the imagery that you get in Grimm's fairy tales is much more graphic than you'd get in Susan Cooper or some of the good fiction for children that's actually dealing with something deep. Then you've got Edward Gorey and people like that... and I guess there another strand was a Victorian split that meant that, on the surface, nobody talked about death or about sex or anything like that, but at the same time lots of people were writing or creating erotica or pornography that was much more graphic than would've existed prior to that. It's a funny kind of thing: sometimes it looks like you've got a society

that's more open about death and sex, and yet there's less interesting literature or representations that come out of that society than a more repressive one. Do you know when the Grimm's fairy tales were collected or written?

The older Grimm's are sort of 1800s; the Brothers Grimm are 1850s in the main publication, but some of those are condensed versions of things that went back to the 18th or 17th centuries, very similar stories going back to other writers.

SK: I'm curious about what else was going on at the time, what other stuff was being told or written. I don't know the answer, but I suppose that ties in with this history of quite gory traditional ballads in England, Scotland and then transported to America, and I guess also in Scandinavia and other parts of Europe. There's been a fairly continual strand of story telling, either just in the telling or through songs, that's carried on dealing with death, murder, incest, all of the sort of stuff that people don't really want to experience, but are curious about or want to be able to use as ways to relate to less dramatic situations that they find themselves in. Having stories that allow children to explore those sorts of ideas is necessary, but having a way of carrying on doing it as an adult is also important.

At one time, had you been writing or singing the kind of repertoire that you do, that would've been seen as part of a story teller tradition, but now there aren't so many people who would explore those topics comfortably, and it probably means that the audience on some levels will start making assumptions about you, that you're this black-clad woman who is pursuing the Rites of Abramelin, which you're quite clearly not!

SK: I'm not having a black day today (laughs). Although we are conducting this interview in a

graveyard! That question opens up all sorts of tangents, one being what is the relationship between somebody's art and who they are, what kind of life they live. One thing I've had that's either amusing or annoying depending on how somebody comes across and what sort of assumptions they're making is that some people think I must be depressive, even suicidal or an interesting eccentric or any of a number of things, most of which is not really true. That question is so big, it opens up in so many directions. It doesn't seem the case that what I'm writing is only appealing to a very, very small niche of people who are bitter and twisted, depressive, murderous, incestual, whatever! Either the number of people who are like that is bigger than you expect or they know what I'm writing is interesting to perfectly normal people! It doesn't seem like the society that we live in is one in which people don't want to hear those sorts of stories, or maybe if the stories are told in way that's also got a layer of humour or that's musically interesting as well, it's palatable, whereas if it's just "here's a story of death and gore", it would be less appealing.

What kind of feedback do you get from people who have enjoyed your first album?

SK: I don't think people tend to give very detailed feedback, so you don't have a clear picture of what their experience was. You get to know which bits they liked and which bits they didn't and I suppose I get a sense of which songs affect people strongly and which have less impact. 'Twins' is a funny one, because it's a story of incest, but I don't think of it as one of my sad or sinister songs because the character telling the story is having an experience that gives her something...

...There's no abuser and abused in it...

SK: ...it's a kind of dream-like experience and it's not meant to

seem traumatic. I'm not sure for what sort of reasons, but a lot of people really find that song powerful. So I suppose the feedback that I get that's most detailed in a way, is from people that talk about what sort of atmosphere the songs create and if I hear that somebody's listened and it's conjured up the images of being lost in a wood or being out in the frosty misty stillness of a winter's night, that's the most illuminating feedback that I think I've had. If people say "this reminds me of so-and-so" and it's somebody I haven't heard, then I'll go and listen, so it sometimes introduces me to new music that is likely to be interesting to me.

Speaking of new music, you seem to be someone who is interested in collaborations: earlier in 2003 you recorded enough material for an album with Christian Kiefer and I wonder how you came to decide that would work, because to go and spend time with someone for a fairly intensive writing session seems a fair commitment to take on chance.

SK: Collaborating is something I love. Writing songs and developing them all on your own seems like it takes longer because there's nobody to add in "oh, I think that bit should go there" and then you can listen and go "yeah, yeah, that means this bit will happen..." If you're working with other people, there's double or triple the amount of imagination, so you feed off each other and come up with something that surprises you all, whereas when you're doing it yourself you have to wait for the next stage of your own inspiration and sometimes that takes longer and it's less of a kind of leaping from one bit to the next and the real high-speed excitement of getting something to come together right there as you're doing it. Any chance that I get to go and collaborate with somebody that I think is gonna be on the same wavelength or that I find inspiring, then I'll jump at the chance. Recording with the

Iditarod, we just kind of fell into doing it because we were travelling and playing shows together and started jamming with each other and then Jeffrey had a dream that we were all going to record an album together, so we thought, why not? We'll just do it, we've got an extra week or two to just get stuff down - and it worked! When I was in California and had the chance to spend a week or so with Christian Kiefer we decided, yeah, let's just write a bunch of songs and record them and see if we get them all done in a week. It seemed like it was an impossible thing to get done, but it would be exciting to try to do it, so it was a week and I'm not gonna think of something better to do with that week, so let's give it a go and it was brilliant, it was very inspired and one of the things that I think most exciting to me about making music is it's just unique - the combination of ideas that each of you have that come together and feed off each other.

There's the other thing, which is

less of a collaboration, with Loop Guru...

SK: With Dave Muddyman, who's one half of Loop Guru. It's been less of an intense get-together and do it: we've been working on it over the course of the odd weekend here and there for about a year. He comes from a trance ambient dance background and we were looking at traditional English folksongs and adding atmosphere to them and reworking them or doing whatever we thought would help get across the story or the mood of the song. That was another very exciting project with both of us looking at a song that's been sung by different singers for, some of them, two or three hundred years and thinking about what the core of the song is, what's it trying to do and why does it work? It's a song that's lasted all this time and something about it is magical or affects people in various different kinds of existence. It affected people pre-industrial revolution, whatever, and it's still affecting

people now. What we can do that enhances that and doesn't squash it underneath the aesthetics of the here and now. That's a challenge and, hopefully, we managed to succeed at doing that... we'll see! Again, just working with someone who's coming to the music from a different direction, to find out about new music and relate what you're doing, to have more reference points and be able to share them and build up a map of your own musical landscape... working with other people is a good way to flesh that out and hear music that you wouldn't have found.

Your musical landscape is obviously very broad ranging in what you listen to and are happily prepared to be involved in. I can't see you as the sort of person who would be playing something you didn't have great commitment to and I know that you were involved with a band called Obsidian. The growlly Dutch band?

SK: No, no: that was a kind of goth-grunge band based in Oxford. It was quite growlly and heavy. I'd only just started singing - and that should be probably in inverted commas - and I was wanting to sound like Andrew Eldritch, so I was singing, probably, an octave below where I should have been singing and playing really discordant keyboard and jumping about. So that was a kind of goth band and other people in the band were coming from, mostly, a rock/goth background, but having said that, the songs I was writing at the time were not much different to the songs I'm writing now in terms of the subject matter and even the melody and the chord structures. Songs like 'Twins' and 'Godstow' actually came out of the end of that. When that band disbanded I was just left with a four-track and writing some new songs of my own and messing about with some of the songs that we'd done as a band. Those songs got shelved for about five years, then some of them re-emerged at this point.



You've got a very open mind to instruments, to pick things up and have a go. There's a bit of a charity shopper mentality to all that, in a good way.

SK: (laughs) Instruments are amazing aren't they? You can't think of an instrument that's boring, well, what would be a good example of that?

That horrible keyboard they used in the late '80's?

SK: A Juno something? That's one example, but you could do something with one of those if you tried as well.

Yeah, with a clawhammer!

SK: Mmm... One of the things with electronic instruments is to start off with something really mainstream, "this is the sound that people are using", then mess around with settings, twiddle knobs, tweak it and turn it into something completely different - discover a new sound that's hidden in the boring old collection of sounds. The keyboard I was playing in Obsidian was a Yamaha with a hundred pre-set voices and most of them were really naff, but I found that if you dropped everything by an octave and used the sounds that were supposed to be flutes, you could tone it down and make it just go whoo-who-who and there was a cello sound and once you stuck it down really low, you just got this subsonic *wooooh-wooooh*, like somebody sawing a tree in slow motion under water! Then there was a music box sound that was really good for "spooky stuff that happens in the nursery" atmosphere. But then you think of really gorgeous acoustic instruments, like hurdy gurdys and you just look at them and think "what on Earth is that? What does it do?" and you push some knobs, twiddle something round and you've got this completely unique noise that just leaps out of it.

You've also got an eye for detail. I'm thinking about the albums you put together yourself which little bits of ferns and things inside the inlay tray, and tickets which you prepared for a show before leaving Oxford.

SK: I like music to happen in a slightly wider context of people experiencing music in a way that will be enhanced by the surroundings. This gig that we had just before I left Oxford was in a gorgeous chapel that's been there since 1100 and something hidden off one of the fairly main roads. It's big enough to seat about sixty people, small enough to play completely acoustically and the acoustics are gorgeous, the feel of the place is amazing: really, really special. Part of what I want to do is play music in places like that, that will turn it into a whole rich experience. Making the tickets special was part of that. Each ticket had a window in the middle with a seed or a dried grass or, in some cases, a dead insect trapped through two layers of see-through sticky backed plastic, so that was partly to give people something nice to remember the show by or just something to add to the ambience of what's in the music.

Episode 2: Later the same day in another Oxford graveyard. Sharron & John are joined by Phil McMullen. The album under discussion is 'Song of Love and Loss' - here a work in progress, and now an actual release.

I hear you've spent some time in the dungeon recently.

SK: (laughs) Yes! Rattling, clanking chains, floggings! No, it was a lovely studio called the Dungeon out in the Cotswolds and we spent a couple of days recording six songs. There were, in total, four other people playing on them, so I wanted to go somewhere that we could set up and play live and get the feel that we get when we've been playing those songs at gigs around here. We had this idyllic couple of days out in the country,

picnicking on the hillside and having horses come and nibble at our carrots...

Ooh-er missus!

SK: (laughs) Yeah! Swallows flitting around, tractors and not much else and then the time that wasn't lunch break time, working with the lovely set-up, really nice engineer Rich Haynes... that's about half of the album done and the rest I'm doing at home on an eight track. It's getting there.

Phil: Do you think the idyllic setting influenced the way the album sounded?

SK: No, it came too late in the process. By then we'd already got those songs to a certain point and doing three songs a day with that many instruments is quite a lot to get through. People who've got lots of money and can be out in a studio like this for a month and have time to be affected by your surroundings more. No, it was basically go in there and do it and it was lovely whenever we took a break to look out on grass and every so often the recording got interrupted by a horse neighing! Some of the songs I've written as long ago as a year or year and a half ago and then the other ones, the newest ones, are probably a couple of months old, so it's been building up whilst I've been travelling and playing and it's almost there.

The people that you've worked with on the album are people that you play with quite regularly in Oxford...

SK: Yeah, there's three musicians: the brothers Fletcher - Johnny and Colin - Colin plays upright bass, Johnny plays guitar, harmonica and a selection of other bits and bobs and then Jane Griffiths, who plays fiddle and viola. The gigs that I've done around Oxford in the last year or so tend to rope them in to accompany, so getting the three of them to come and record was really exciting and felt important

for the songs, because they've been playing on them right from the start. 'Song and Dance of the Bees' has got a real need for swarming, buzzing sounds and...

Phil: a chainsaw?

Well, the slightly pretty equivalent of a chainsaw! The first time Jane heard this song, she got her viola and was going *Bzzz-zzz-zzz* with it, super fast and now we've got layers of viola and bowed bass coming out of the speakers at you in a bee-swarming kind of way. The song wouldn't have been the same without them doing that.

Do those things happen organically, or do you suggest an arrangement?

SK: Organically. I hardly ever suggest... if somebody does something that sounds awful, I'd say don't do that, but if you want to play with other people, you want to play with them, you don't want to enforce your ideas on them. If you don't like their ideas, don't play with them. I don't like telling people what to do. They're playing their part: it's up to them.

Can you say something about the cover design?

SK: The main cover image has been painted by Will Schaff, who has also been drumming with the Iditarod and various other projects...

He's done the artwork for Songs Ohia, Godspeed You Black Emperor etc...

SK: We struck a deal last summer that I was going to sing a version of Danny Boy for an animation that he was making of a kind of action man figure beating up another toy. So I did this sweet sounding version of Danny Boy for his animated character to rip the head off another animated character to and he took on the cover for this album. It's a great image. I think my brother's gonna design the layout, if he's got time. He's hard to pin down!

Phil: When I first got to know you, you didn't know anything really about the Terrascope/Terrastock scene. It was like you were working away in one area, and then suddenly two worlds collided. I just wondered about your impressions of this thing that you dropped into, because working with the Iditarod and Tony Dale and soon with Espers... it's like one big family in a way.

SK: I was doing my thing not really knowing if I was gonna find other people who were doing similar stuff. I'd just started taking music seriously, so I'd been playing folk music at Irish pub sessions, then I ended up writing songs and just decided to record all of this stuff with a friend in California when I was living there three years ago. Then I sent out a demo to three labels, one of them being Camera Obscura, just because I'd seen a write-up of the Goblin Market release in the Sunday Times and thought "that sounds really good" and looked up the site, e-mailed Tony and that was a really lucky thing for me. Through him and connections that he opened up, this whole world of music opened up and I stepped into it. It's really exciting to find people who are making music that's very experimental, bands like the Iditarod, the Espers, Charalambides, that are doing something that's very idiosyncratic. You wouldn't lump them all together and say "this is the sound", but there's a common methodology or approach to music that's bringing in maybe some common influences and also field recording, acoustic angle together with some noise elements. The last couple of years for me have been 'WOW!' - this is what I've dreamt being a musician could be like and didn't actually think existed'. It's lovely.

Episode 3: the following morning in Sharron's kitchen.

If people look at your website [www.sharronkraus.com], they'll

see links to people you appreciate, whether it's Leonard Cohen, Sixteen Horsepower, whatever, but the discovery of a folk scene within Oxford was something that took you in another direction.

SK: The person who is most responsible for getting me singing in the first place is an Oxford folk singer called Ian Giles. He's been singing at sessions and folk clubs and there's a band he's been at the centre of for quite a while called Magpie Lane. I first met Ian in an Irish pub in a late night session and at some point in the night he started singing an unaccompanied traditional song and the room went quiet and everyone was like WOW! The experience of hearing someone singing with no frills, nothing to distract you from the voice and the story of the song I think is a really powerful thing to experience and it must've affected me strongly at the time. I started going to sessions a bit more regularly and I started playing tin whistle and eventually started singing a little bit and borrowing Ian's old June Tabor and Frankie Armstrong records and then getting some Shirley Collins, Martin Carthy and all those amazing singers. If Ian had a website, I'd link to that too, but he doesn't at this point. One of the things that makes Oxford a special place for me is that there's some remarkable folk singers here and you can walk into a pub on a session night and have the whole pub listening to somebody singing a song and then joining in on a chorus. It's a really lovely thing to experience. You don't have to arrange gigs and get involved in any kind of music business stuff, you can just go somewhere, sing and hear other people sing. That's something special to me in my experience of music.

It's also a sphere where the actual vocal standard has to be high. I think a lot of people in bands hide behind the instruments, but if you're just standing up there with your voice and maybe a very sparse instrument, you've got to

have the voice, but you've also got to have the confidence to do it.

SK: One of the things about singing in pub sessions is that it strengthens your voice no end. When you start singing, everyone's having their conversations and unless people notice that you're singing, they'll just carry on talking. You need to project and announce the fact that something's happening in order to get them to shut up and listen and also just to fill a crowded, beer-clanking pub room without any amplification. I suppose improving your voice in other ways happens to some extent, but not necessarily, because the audience in a session tends to be very forgiving, because most people have had a few pints by then and they're enjoying themselves. If you're thinking about the sort of environment that would really lead you to notice which bits of your voice you need to work on or where you sang slightly out of tune or the way you phrased something, recording is much better for learning what are the things that I want to improve in terms of singing.

Would you say there are any particular epiphanies in your early life that have led you to where you are now?

One was when I was about six, one of those hot summers that we had... maybe it was '76? I don't remember. It was a summer that was very insect-filled, because of the heat and I remember there being a couple of times when I'd pick up a ladybird on my finger and the ladybird stayed with me all day and that seemed to be a really special thing to be blessed with, you know, to have one of these little insects stay with me for a longer period of time and not seem to just want to go away was a nice bonding experience with the insect world that probably stuck with me, because I've got a definite fascination for insects now. I remember around

about the same age, when I'd been having some basic piano lessons and there was a piano outside a classroom in my school. It was just being moved from one place to another, but for the time being they'd left it in the corridor. A bunch of us were just tinkling around and I started playing something that was one of my basic, grade one pieces on the piano and there was a boy in my class who was absolutely transfixed by this. I think that gave me a sense, early on, how even quite basic music can affect people strongly and can cast a spell on them or ensnare them, so I thought I have to work on this (laughs). Then there's the first time I took acid... ahmm... it's the truth, but I don't know whether it comes across... I had a wonderful experience, I don't want it to just sound silly, because it's the typical drug experience of WOW! I took acid, went out walking in the woods with a couple of friends and got lost in this, actually, very small copse on top of the hill that seemed to be endless and seemed to be a huge kingdom with all sorts of paths that we got lost down and then came out and... oh, so here we are. The trees came very alive, the detail in nature really, really came alive and the colours in nature, in the sky, even the colours in our clothing, everything seemed to be beautiful and surging with life and, basically, I don't think I've looked at things the same since, it made a difference. When I'm looking at something, even though I've only ever had three acid trips, I'm still looking at things with a tuning that I've found as a result of the way things looked then.

I was looking at one of your books on Marc Chagall and there's a painting of The 'Cellist - for whom life and music are one - a 'cellist with a 'cello for a torso, which in some ways, without the torso of a 'cello, sums up your attitude, but it would be a mistake to confine your interest to the purely musical. I think one of the

exciting things that you bring to your songs is the breadth of interests that you have, which is a much range than most people look into.

SK: Is it? (laughs) I don't know. I think the people who are particularly interesting in any field are generally magpies and people who find things that they can bring to what they're doing from all sort of unrelated fields or different places. Maybe some of it is to do with the thing that's detrimental if you're a scientist: if you've got this one theory and everything you see, you try and squeeze into that theory, I think that kind of mentality can be quite fruitful in art because you can feed everything into your obsession in a creative way. That's what seems to happen with a lot of people who are coming up with things that we think of as being unique or exceptional. It's a kind of curiosity about lots of things that gets fed through a very narrow filter and something special happens when you do that.

Written and directed by John Cavanagh, © Ptolemaic Terrascope 2004