

A Conversation With

Vashti Bunyan

*"Catch one leaf and fortune will surround you ever more" –
'Rose Hip November'*



Sometimes it's the glyphs in the margins of history that tell us the most about a particular period, and the experiences of English singer-songwriter Vashti Bunyan throughout the 1960s resonate with the spirit of that decade in a way that makes them a valuable addition to our understanding of its psychedelic tumult. Her small body of work is at last becoming a little more accessible through reissue of the 'Just Another Diamond Day' LP on Spinney Records, its eloquent mysteries left for us to unravel like an enigmatic set of verses left in a time capsule. Originally released by Phillips in 1970 with no publicity, 'Just Another Diamond Day' is now one of the iconic major-label rarities of the period, fashioned by angels and utterly unattainable in its original issue. But it didn't come from nowhere. Typically, Vashti's journey started with the discovery of Dylan's early work, his lyrics putting cross-hairs on her angst as it did for many others at the time. In turn, she was discovered by Rolling Stones manager and pop-impresario Andrew Loog Oldham, who took her on board the unstable paisley dirigible of his Immediate label. She was given the Jagger-Richards composition 'Some Things Just Stick In Your Mind' to record for a first single in 1965, an infuriating impost for someone who thought herself primarily a songwriter. Her song, 'I Want to be Alone' was consigned to the flipside. The single sank without trace, as did a subsequent, but superior single recorded for Columbia in 1966. At least for the second single, both sides,

'Train Song' and 'Love Song', came from her pen. Caught in the vortex of confusion and ceaseless motion that was the dynamic of the Immediate label at this time, she recorded a number of further sessions, none of which ended up being released, although a window on this time is thrown open briefly thanks to Peter Whitehead's 'Tonite Let's All Make Love In London' documentary, which featured footage of Vashti recording the superb 'Winter Is Blue'. The track also appeared on the soundtrack album for the film, but acetates of other songs recorded at these sessions have crumbled in dusty closets, and may be difficult to recover. Thankfully, a superior recording of 'Winter Is Blue' did survive, and was 7

After the lack of progress became too much, she left it all, following the hippie dream up and down the length of Britain in a horse and cart with partner and child and some visions, and nothing much else. A non-specific journey for meaning and place, trapping the decade within the prism of its nomadic isolation, luckily producing a travelogue of songs for posterity. In "Just Another Diamond Day" we can hear Vashti orchestrating the slow turning wheel of the seasons accompanied by a shifting palette of fields and villages, towns and cities, projecting songs into the corners to tame the deepest of the shadows, or to celebrate moments of clarity. These songs so impressed the legendary Joe Boyd that he left her a standing invitation to record them for his Witchseason production company when she came to rest. In 1968, a brilliant selection of musicians was assembled to record 'Just Another Diamond Day'. Robin Williamson from the Incredible String Band, Dave Swarbrick and Simon Nicol from Fairport Convention, and especially Robert Kirby, arranger of Nick Drake's 'Five Leaves Left' and 'Bryter Layter', and contributor of

brilliant string and recorder settings for many of the 'Diamond Day' songs. The record is at once a pastoral symphony and a field worker's song, a Picasso painting and a child's sketch, a poem and a documentary of life on the road. The songs coalesce on substrates of consciousness like ideas, moods and moments captured by an antique box camera. Like the "slow glass" in Bob Shaw's memorable novel, they offer the contemporary listener a frozen moment to hold up to the light. The opening track 'Diamond Day' sets the mood of effortless lyricism that informs the whole record, celebrating days where fields were ploughed and seed sown so that her children could eat - days that must have been harder than this song's lightness of touch suggests. The hippie/pagan theme of the transforming power of nature is also established early, in the stunning 'Glow Worms', as words like "dawn-time mist begins reflecting light/waking sun will soon forget our night" are readily accepted - carried under your guard by a deceptively simple melody and one of the simplest arrangements here - just acoustic guitar and close-miked vocal. The distance between the artist and her life is virtually non-existent throughout, but especially on 'Timothy Grub', which tells the story of the beginning of the journey with preternatural vividness. Skilled folk-blues songwriting elevates on 'Where I Like to Stand' to a higher plane, Swarbrick's violin a perfect counterpoint to Vashti's vocals.



'Window on the Bay' deserves to be rated with Denny's best, or even Anne Briggs' 'The Time Has Come', as does the staggering 'Rose Hip November', arguably the song that projects everything that works about this record like a perfectly formed hologram you can carry around with you like a spirit lantern. With an arrangement that is Byzantine in its complexity, the more you listen to 'Rose Hip November' the more righteous it's cornucopia of string resonances and recorder exhalations and vocal whispers seems. And whether desperately envisioning a utopian destination as in 'Hebridean Sun', or painting an iridescent word-painting as in 'Rainbow River', these songs glow like stained glass backlit by the setting sun.

'Just Another Diamond Day' should have come out in 1968, when it was recorded and made perfect sense, rather than in the 1970; a giant existential hangover of a year with Altamont fresher in people's minds than Woodstock, and the technical flash of progressive rock in the ascendant. Few cared, and Vashti had already moved on. In the end recognising that there were most fruitful avenues to pursue than wrestling with a recalcitrant music industry to get her voice heard, Vashti left the making of music to concentrate on living a normal life, with all of the tangled strands of love, children, work and general floating down time's great and meandering river that is the lot of most of us. Thanks to that other great and meandering river, the Internet, Vashti Bunyan is now somewhat accessible again, and we were luck enough to be able to conduct this interview with her earlier this year.

PT. Can I start by asking you where your interest in music came from? I'm interested in people's early influences and musical experiences and memories. How you learnt to play guitar and sing?

VB. My father had a large collection of classical records and played Handel, Bach and Mendelssohn very loudly every Sunday. I wanted to be the choirboy who sang 'O For the Wings of a Dove'. asked for piano lessons but it didn't happen, so I watched other kids. When I visited my grandmother who had a piano I played what they had played. I learned to play by ear. Eventually I got violin lessons but I didn't exactly take to it. I couldn't learn how to read music. Then I went to art school, and there I met a friend - Jenny Lewis - who taught me to play guitar. This I loved. We played and sang together, Everly Brothers, Buddy Holly, Carol King and the like. We also wrote songs. I was thrown out of college.



How did you manage that?

Painting took a back seat after about a year at art school - once I had learned to play guitar. I skipped days on end, and also got a little involved in the experimental theatre which was evolving in Oxford at the time. The originators of Monty Python were amongst my friends then. It was a good time for invention and creativity in Oxford those years, from 1963 to 1965. Young people beginning to realise their power to change the old order radically.

My musical side did not go down well with an incoming principal of the art school. In an argument, I said "art is art whatever medium", and he said "well go and do your art somewhere else - here you Paint and Draw". The previous principal had been more of a mind to let me stay as long as I shaped up and did the work required of me, but the new guy - sweeping clean with new broom no doubt - said I hadn't done the work in the previous year and so must go, which was fine by me.

When my brother sat me down for a talk about my future - at the request of my parents who didn't know what to do with me as I hadn't come home with the expected undergraduate wanting to marry me and take me off their

hands - he said what do you want to do? I said "I want to be a pop-singer". He laughed so much that he sealed my fate.

Nothing was going to stop me after that.

What did you do next?

Went to New York for the summer, bought "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" and thought I'd discovered the answer to everything. I was 19 at the time. I wanted to blur the join between 'folk' music and pop music. I wanted to be just me and guitar, but I was not at home in folk clubs or amongst folk musicians. I loved pop music, I was fascinated by pop songs, but I didn't want to be like all other girl singers seemed to be, I just wanted to be me with a guitar and my quiet sad love songs. I was a scruffy and sulky girl and had no idea how to be a sparkly star!

Why do you think that "The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan" had so much impact on you?

I think part of the reason was upbringing. I was a post-war child, and had a sheltered existence in that there was little access to music other than my father's classical records, and what was being played on BBC radio and



crackly Radio Luxembourg. The only way my generation found out about what was going on in America for instance was by word of mouth, and if you didn't come across anyone who knew more than you did - or who had older siblings who had found out more, it was a bit of a bleak outlook. Although I hate to admit it, Cliff Richard and the shadows, Adam Faith and all the young British guys who were being promoted on early Saturday night pop music slots on TV were the only other easily accessible performers when I

was very young. So I became interested in pop songs. I loved the way pop songs were constructed, and when later I came to learn guitar it all seemed so easy. But then I thought that the lyrics were mostly stupid. Hence, when I found Bob Dylan I was ecstatic. Someone was saying something, someone was explaining what was happening. My world was narrow - I could see

that much - and his lyrics let me out of that world and into what I saw as the real one which had been hidden from me. I knew I was angry but I didn't really know what about. He gave that anger a voice.

Some of the people I met at art school and at the University introduced me to traditional folk music which I liked for its simplicity and the longing in some of the melodies. However, folk music and the world it inhabited did not appeal to me in general.

Arran sweaters were not my style. But Bob Dylan - also categorised as a 'folk-singer' - appealed very much. As much as anything, I think his apparent loneliness was the attraction. Him and a guitar and harmonica, and no looking backwards, it was all new and all now, whereas previously folk music for me had been something preserved in aspic.

Can you elaborate on what you meant by "blurring the join" between folk music and pop music?

I wanted to use the melody - the beauty of the melody - and keep any arrangements simple and uncluttered with maybe a cello or violin, perhaps a flute here and there. And the lyrics - well I had no real control over what came out of my head any more than I do now. I'm sure I didn't really think all that much about it. I was no clever person, I just knew what I wanted, and it wasn't to be a folksinger nor was it to be a girlie pop singer singing songs written for her by other people. I wanted to stand up on a stage by myself with my guitar and sing my own music, and *not* be a folksinger! I wanted to be on pop TV and radio...

You came back from the US in 1965, to London and the club circuit?

Yes, it had been a stop-gap. Since I had a sister living in New York I went to stay for a bit. I realised it was a whole lot easier to find 'The Music Business' in Britain than in US, so I returned, to find a girl called Marianne Faithful had kind of done what I had wanted to do, only she wasn't a songwriter. That made me sulkier than ever. I avoided folk clubs and played wherever I could find anyone to let me. I remember a place called the Dark Room where no one even heard me above the noise of the crowd. I auditioned all over the place, tramped Tin Pan Alley looking for anyone who might be interested in what I had to say but they were all Establishment agents

and managers with no imagination past “how will she look in a ball gown”. I was skinny and wore a big black jumper and a mournful expression - get the picture?

Can you talk a bit about the events leading up to meeting with Andrew Loog Oldham and the recording and release of the 'Some Things Just Stick In Your Mind' single?

One night I played reluctantly at a party given by an actress friend of my mother. Monte Mackie was there, who was an agent who knew Andrew Oldham. I got a call the next day to say she had told him about me and he wanted to meet me. I had a cold but went to her office which was big and plush and dark with a grand piano covered in framed photographs expressing fondest love from her clients. I croaked out my songs. Andrew said nothing and I thought him less than impressed. He was so beautiful, Italian shiny box jacketed suit, blond hair, much prettier than me. From another world, one I had absolutely no knowledge of, but was utterly entranced by.

Later, Mrs Mackie called me to say I was to go to Andrew's office. There he handed me an acetate demo of the Mick Jagger Keith Richard song 'Some Things Just Stick in Your Mind'. I was thunderstruck. I wanted to record my songs. It was my father who persuaded me to “compromise my girl”, and so I went back to Andrew and he promised that the next single would be a song of my own, and that the B side of this one would be a song of mine called 'I Want to be Alone'.

I was in heaven during the recording. This was especially so during the recording of my own song, hearing it arranged by David Whittaker and played by 'real' musicians. Nicky Hopkins and Big Jim Sullivan. Jimmy Page was a session musician then and was in there too. And then Andrew and

Mick Jagger putting in some percussion. I was very nervous and shy, probably said nothing to anyone. I don't know what they could have made of me.

It must have been a strange experience doing the promotional whirlwind for that record.

It was. Six weeks of interviews and TV shows up and down the country. I loved it until I realised I was being portrayed as a rather dumb version of Marianne, following in her footsteps. This began to upset me as I knew we were very different. I thought I was a musician and songwriter and that she was a star, a performer and someone who had a way of dealing with the world I envied and admired but knew I didn't have. Andrew says now that this was not what he wanted for me, that he in no way thought me a replacement for Marianne, that he knew I was different, but the journalists and newspapers made the story and there was nothing he could do apart from pull the plug on the whole thing. Looking back, I'm very glad he didn't. This was in about June 1965 I think.



Did they really dress you up in a plastic mac?

Yes, for “Thank Your Lucky Stars” - imagine how much I sulked about that. I had been wearing a

black plastic mac at least a year beforehand and thought them outmoded. I preferred jeans and t-shirt and denim jacket or leather jacket at least.

I gather that by the beginning on 1966 you decided that the kind of circus that surrounded the release of that first single wasn't for you and you withdrew from it in favour of playing your own material solo with acoustic guitar. Can you tell me how this time was, and about the Alasdair Clayre connection?

I enjoyed that circus hugely till it went quiet on me. Before I met Andrew I had been very busy, running around performing where I could and banging on doors. Then the six weeks of ‘Some Things Just Stick in Your Mind’ were full with interviews and TV and radio. Suddenly it all went silent and I had nothing to do. I was left with having been publicised as a Marianne Faithfull follower - which I hated and still do - and nothing much else. There was an attempt at another single but the promise to record one of my own songs didn't happen and I was given a song written by Jimmy Page - a session musician then. I was fed up at that, sang the song unwillingly and it was probably really bad. I have no record of it.

I had met Alasdair Clayre in my last term at art school. He was interested in old folk music, and wrote poetry which he used to leave in a milk bottle at my door. He lived in a loft in the east end of London, and knew Pete Seeger. Everyone there was a lot older than I was and had no link with pop music at all. I saw that there did not need to be such a huge gulf between folk and pop. I loved some of the old music but couldn't see why it had to be played traditionally or performed by traditional musicians.

I believe you made a single 'Train Song' around this time. How did this come about?

I had a song called '17 Pink Sugar Elephants' which I'd written in a moment of frustration with Andrew and the lack of phone calls or other direction, and the tune just happened to fit one of Alasdair's songs - 'Train Song' - which had no music yet. I met a Canadian producer called Peter Snell - I can't remember how - and he was taken with the recent songs and he bought me out of my contract with Andrew. 'Train Song' and 'Love Song' were recorded with a session guitarist and cellist only - in contrast to the enormous orchestral and percussive backing of Andrew's productions. It came out on Columbia and disappeared. Without much in the way of promotion, and being just a quiet small song, it had no chance, but I had to try it for myself.

Tell me about the 'Winter Is Blue' recording, which wasn't released but the sessions were filmed for Peter Whitehead's "Tonite Let's All Make Love In London" documentary?

I was going crazy with boredom after 'Train Song' and all it took was a phone call from Tony Calder and I was back in the studio making demos of new songs. The duo Twice as Much had had a hit with the Jagger/Richard song 'Sittin' on a Fence', and Tony said "there you are you see if you hadn't gone off to try it by yourself you could have had that one". Again I said "but I want to record my songs". I had met up with a guitarist called Mike Crowther and we had worked out a few simple arrangements.

Anyway, Andrew chose 'Winter is Blue' and sent it to Art Greenslade to arrange. Art changed a bit of the tune, which a year before would have had me stamping around in a rage, but I was beginning to lose the huge confidence I had started out with and just let them do it. I was somewhat terrified of Andrew, and just once found the courage

to say I thought the guitars at the beginning needed to be played a bit softer, and he mimicked my little voice and I don't think I uttered another word. In fact I was terrified of all of them. All the Small Faces were there that night, and PP Arnold, and I sat staring in wonder around me, that I was there at all. I was shy, hopelessly quiet and unable to deal with the people I had chosen to work amongst, and yet had this enormous ego about my music. I don't know where it came from.

Peter Whitehead was at the first session filming for his documentary. That all went over my head and I had no idea about it until the film came out. The first session I thought went well, and I have a demo of it which I like a lot. Andrew wasn't happy with it however and we had another try. You should never go back over things! The second one was not so good, and this is the one which ended up on the soundtrack sadly. It was to be a single, but one day I was called to the office and Tony Calder told me they were not going to release it because Cliff Richard wanted the song. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I have never believed him, but recently when I told Andrew I hadn't believed it he said "well you know it just might have been true". As he pointed out, Cliff Richard did cover a Stones song ('Blue turns to Grey'), and that that all things seemed possible at that time. It could have been that Tony wanted Cliff to want it. Everything was moving so fast for everyone else involved with Immediate, and I think that if a production didn't grab them straightway it just got lost in the tide.

Incidentally, I still have acetates of the demo sessions that led to recording 'Winter is Blue'. They went to the Hebrides and back with me and have been stored in various attics and barns since. They are completely grimy and green with mould, but we are

about to try to clean them up for a possible CD collection of singles and demos. I hope I'll be able to clean up the version of 'Winter is Blue' I like.

From what I understand, you had an enjoyable time with Immediate during 1967, but not much happened in terms of releases. "Coldest Night of the Year" was one of your compositions, right? The hook-up with the Twice As Much guys obviously happened through Andrew Oldham? It must have been frustrating not to see that come out at the time?

My memory of that time is hazy. It wasn't long after 'Winter is Blue' before I was called again to meet Twice as Much and start rehearsing 'Coldest Night of the Year'. I didn't write it, it is a Mann/Weill composition. Another Immediate band had recorded it - The Factotems, I can't remember if theirs was ever released. Probably not! (Editor's note: It wasn't) . These were my best days at Immediate, rehearsing and being able to input ideas and not be ignored. We wanted a Beach Boys kind of sound and I think we got it. I love the recording still. We worked in Andrew's Hotel room. It was at the time Brian Jones was really getting bad and everyone seemed worried sick about what was to happen to him and the problems he was causing. Again, I sat with wide eyes and witnessed this extraordinary play being acted out, different Stones drifting in and out of the hotel room whilst Andrew Rose, David Skinner and I rehearsed the song over and over till Andrew Oldham was satisfied. On our way out of the hotel, the Savoy I think it was, Andrew - flourishing an enormous joint - went up to a stiff uniformed doorman and asked for a light, which he got before swanning out the revolving door. A precious moment, remembering how much more seriously risky this was then than it would be now. Gered Mankowitz has found some photographs he took of us on

Primrose Hill. I have no recollection of the photo-shoot, only the ride in ALO's Rolls with the Mamas and Papas playing LOUD and California dreaming around London. (Editor's note: this story also appears in an interview with John Kearney on his unofficial Immediate website at <http://www3.sympatico.ca/johnfk/vashtiinterview>).

But 'Coldest Night of the Year' was shelved with no reason given. I only found out three years ago that it was included on the second Twice as Much album 'That's All' which came out much later.

Tell me about the recording of 'I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind' and meeting Mike Hurst? Was he an Immediate house producer at the time? This was before his time with Deram?

There were another bleak few months during which I nearly sold all my songs to another female singer whose manager wanted material for her. I never knew who it was. Tony Calder heard about it and sent me to see Mike Hurst and play him the songs, maybe to see if they were any good before letting me sell them away. Mike liked 'I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind'. I think he was producing for Immediate then, yes. He was very different to Andrew and Tony, much more easy for me, and I enjoyed working with him very much. I can't say he was nice and they weren't, just that he lived more or less on the same planet as I did. The first session went well and we were pleased with the result. Andrew heard it and said it needed more, more strings, more substance, more everything. He was no minimalist. We tried this but it didn't work. That was the end for me, I was completely desolated when they didn't want me to work any further with it.

How did 'I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind' end up on Phil Smee's "Circus Days, Vol. 1" compilation?

I kept an acetate of the original recording. The acetate was with some other studio recordings on acetate demo discs that were the only things I kept with me from music days. (I left all photos, newspaper clips etc in a box in my brother's shed. He sold his house, but five years later bought it back. Miraculously the box was still there or I would have nothing but the acetates.) In 1968, when I had reached the Hebrides by horse and wagon, a writer called Iris Macfarlane (who had helped us in many ways throughout the journey and beyond) liked that song when I played it to her so I gave her the acetate as a thank you. I didn't have much else to give her. She doesn't remember how she lost it as she has moved many times since then. Somehow it must have found its way to London and the collection of Phil Smee who put out an album of 'Pop Syke Obscurities' called Circus Days in 1990 and included my demo. I knew nothing about it, being blissfully unaware of any music of mine being out in the world at all. I thought it all long forgotten and disappeared. It is a great example of what you give away coming back to you in the end. If I hadn't given the acetate to Iris it would be in the same scuffy bag along with the others here and would remain unheard, and possibly damaged beyond repair.

And 1990s noise-popster Lush covered it as well. Did you hear about that, and ever get any royalties from 4AD?

In 1997 I got a computer for the first time. Typing my own name into a search engine (apparently the thing most people do when they first get on line) brought up a few surprises. I learned that 'Just Another Diamond Day' was rare and getting silly money on the collector's market and was 'wanted' on quite a few lists. I saw

that the soundtrack of 'Tonite Lets All Make Love In London' was out on CD and included 'Winter is Blue', and also I found out about 'Coldest Night of the Year' on the second Twice As Much LP. The most exciting was Circus Days as I had not heard 'I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind' for nearly 30 years. A friend found the lyrics to 'I'd Like To Walk Around In Your Mind' on a Lush site, and I phoned 4AD and they sent me a copy of the single. Lush had heard the song on Circus Days, but didn't know who had written it so it was not credited to me. I was really, really pleased to hear someone of this time singing my old song. They got the chord sequence slightly wrong, but otherwise I like their version, and yes, I did get royalties. First time ever apart from the odd seven quid that used to come from 'Diamond Day'. For this and many other things I am grateful to the Internet!

It seems like Immediate had a habit of shelving projects, the classic example being Billy Nichols' fantastic 'Would You Believe' LP, which was never released, because I believe that the label wanted to put its money into promoting the Small Faces 'Ogdens Nut Gone Flake' instead. I always thought that with bands like The Nice, Humble Pie, and the Small Faces, they would have been on a sound financial footing, but clearly this was not the case, as evidenced by the fact that they went under in 1969. Any final thoughts on the Immediate years?

It has taken me 30 years to come to some kind of understanding of the pace at which Andrew Oldham and Tony Calder were living, and that someone as easily bruised as I was could never have been able to deal with them, nor them with me. If something didn't work straight off for them then there was always another project to take their attention. That was their brilliance. Always new ideas, new people, energy and disregard for risks. I loved Immediate.

Although I was scared senseless by Andrew I adored him - his extravagance and irreverence and his strutting about like an Infant King. He behaved outrageously but he drove his way through the grim old guard of the music industry and reclaimed it. It was just such joy to witness and be a small part of the big *Fuck You*.

I was there at the beginning of Immediate and often regret leaving it before it really got going, but I did my share of being around the office and staying there till someone could find time to listen to me. I think the shelving of 'I'd Like to Walk Around In Your Mind' just finished me off, broke my spirit. A few months after that I left London and the music business for ever (I thought) and set off with a horse and wagon for the other end of the earth, as far away from my failure at being a pop singer as I could get.

After leaving Immediate, you took a job a vet in London's King's Road? How did that work out?

That was my first and only real job. I was persuaded by a long-suffering family to forget music and join the real world. This was a Big Mistake. I ended up taking home a large dog brought in to be put down, and a baby monkey. At this stage I was back living at my parents, and we already had two other dogs. My mother was seriously ill and my father couldn't cope with me and my animals. I was what would now maybe be called depressed - panicky and miserable. Prescription drugs proved to be another bad idea.

Telling this part of the story is not easy to do quickly. I had met Robert Lewis - an art student - at the time of the first single. He was a hitch-hiker that my then boyfriend and I picked up one dark night as he was walking home to his rented cottage in Suffolk. He was a long-haired, romantic Dylan lover. We stayed

the night with him. Next morning he was gone, but a year later (1966) I was in Andrew's office and one of the secretaries gave me a letter addressed to :

Vashti
Decca Records,
London

This was a letter written on old brown paper from Robert. He was now at art school in London and had heard 'Train Song' on the radio. It was a miracle really that the letter was ever forwarded from Decca and that it was given to me. There is an ex-Immediate secretary to whom I owe the next part of the story - and my three children. Robert was full of dreams. He had no money and got by at college by buying and selling old watches which he bought in Suffolk and sold in London. He slept on friends' floors. At about the time that my father got to the end of his rope with me and my animals and my tendency to stay in bed, I met up with Robert again. He was preparing his diploma show and was fed up with sleeping on floors and so was building himself a canvas house behind the art college - in a wood. After a fight with my Dad I joined him. He knew Donovan who also had dreams - and had bought three islands off the coast of Skye where he hoped to start a community of artists writers and musicians.

This was about the time you bought a horse and wagon and started your travelling years?

Yes. Robert knew some young people who had made a pilgrimage to Glastonbury with horses and wagons. They were "opening up ancient ley-lines". They were the children of wealthy parents and Robert was very taken with the idea, but had no resources. The song on 'Diamond Day' - 'Timothy Grub' - tells the story of the time in the wood. We were thrown out by the owners - the Bank of England - given the reason - 'what would happen if

everyone wanted to come and make houses in our wood? If we let you stay, we'd have to let them and then where would it end?" By another great miracle we found the wagon and the horse that same day. We decided to make the journey to Skye to join what we hoped would be a place we could do what we wanted to do - be self-sufficient as possible and rear dogs, horses and children. Donovan lent us the money to buy Bess and the wagon.

I've seen the pictures of your wagon - It must have been very arduous.

Yes it was hard. We set off in May 1968. It rained a fair bit but there were brilliant days too. We lived on £2 a week, a lot of brown rice and nicked cabbages from allotments. And we dug gardens and painted farms along the way, whatever we could find. There are stories here, too many, but everyday had one. It was a good way of getting my head straight. It took my attention from my troubled self and into the problems of living with a horse who needed water and food, a fire which needed wood gathering, a wagon which needed a place to park up every night and a difficult and determined character for a partner. By time we reached the Lake District it was winter and we needed shelter - there was no stove in the wagon. When you are out there with nothing much in your pocket and no where to go is when the miracles happen. We met a retired couple who were just about to leave their cottage to go to a ruin they had bought in the Outer Hebrides. They let us stay in their beautiful Lake District house, not knowing us at all, just trusting that we would look after it. This was Iris of 'Iris's Song' on 'Diamond Day'.

You met Derroll Adams around this time?

Yes - halfway through the journey whilst wintering in the Lake District we went over to Holland

to do some gigs and by chance met him there. He was an old friend of Donovan's who had played with Jack Elliot and Woodie Guthrie as the Rambling Boys. He'd been very ill but listened to my songs and told me not to "hide my light under a bushel", since I'd told him I was through with the music business for good. He hadn't played for a while because of the illness but Robert got Derroll's banjo and put it in his hands. Stiff hands they looked too, but showers of notes sparkled from them and entranced us.

On my way back to the Lake District I stayed with a friend who knew Joe Boyd and sent me to see him. Joe had seen me sing at the ICA in London two-years previously when I was still trying to work with Immediate. He'd wanted to make an album then, but I didn't even go to meet him. If I had things might have been very different. As it was, when I did finally meet him he liked the songs of the journey and said we'd make an album once I'd done and written about the rest of it. We went to have dinner with him and the Incredible String Band that night. I didn't have a clue who they were. There was no electricity, no radio and no record player in our lives.

I believe that you wound up in Skye and Donovan was gone, or about to leave?

The second part of the journey started early March and we arrived in Skye in late summer 1969. Donovan and his friends had gone up to Skye in the summer of 68, in a Landrover. By the time we got there most of the people who had been there and dug the ground and grown the veg and lived the life for a while had gone back to London. Donovan himself was only there for a visit and was on his way back to US. It was obvious we could not stay there and so went on to the Outer Hebrides, found Iris and were told

about a beautiful island called Berneray - which is where the journey ended.

directly descended from John Bunyan himself are true...



Was most of 'JADD' written during these travels?

Nearly all, apart from Glow Worms which was the first to be written, just after Robert and I got together. Probably the most lyrically unreal songs were written whilst travelling through the worst industrial parts of Britain, the more difficult the days the more the dreaming in the songs.

Hearing of these travels, I can't help wondering if the rumours that you are

Apparently they are - although my grandfather and father were a bit romantic about it and my brother was never sure it wasn't a bit of family apocrypha. But I can't say his heritage was even a subliminal influence as my family was completely irreligious and I was never made to read Pilgrim's Progress.

How was the deal to record 'Just Another Diamond Day' actually set up? Joe Boyd presumably made an offer that inspired some confidence in you That something might actually happen and get released?

The recording of Diamond Day was made during a short visit to London at the end of 1968 then we returned to our life in the Hebrides and more-or-less forgot about the album. Joe took the tapes to master them in the US. I was too busy being pregnant on a remote island and trying to deal with gales and a leaky thatched roof to think much about music. 'Just Another Diamond Day' was bound for Island along with all other Witchseason productions, but they didn't want it. Philips took it up on a five year licence but didn't promote it.

There are some pretty amazing musicians on the record. Joe selected these?

Yes he did. As I mentioned before I had lost the thread with music since I had no radio or record player and had stopped reading music papers. I had no idea who Robin Williamson was, and only vaguely who Dave Swarbrick and Simon Nicol were. I had only heard of Fairport Convention because a few years back somebody had handed me a piece of paper with their name and a phone number saying "this band is looking for a female singer" and I'd ignored it, being still determined to make it on my own. Robert Kirby had been working with Joe on Nick Drake's albums and so he was brought in, again I didn't know him.

The material on the record varies a lot more than is usually acknowledged, from songs of child-like innocence, to more windswept folk like my favourite 'Rose Hip November' Would you say this represented the ups-and-downs of the travelling life?

Yes definitely. It must have been the way I protected myself from homesickness and isolation. I'd left everything familiar.

What is the story behind 'Rose Hip November'?

It was written at Iris's house in the Lake District, warm and roofed at last. We had no money and so couldn't have the heating on, but even so we felt wonderfully sheltered and grateful. The song came to me while sitting at the window and watching the leaves gusting around outside, and I remember being so happy to be inside. Living outside changed the way I saw the world to the extent that the trees, hills, roads and everything took on personality. Maybe it was the psychy times, maybe it was just me, but living close to the ground I think had this effect. I felt I was just part of my surroundings. It made me more careful of them. So to me the pine tree really was waiting for the snow.

What happened when you returned to the Hebrides from these recording sessions?

We set about trying to make our dreams into reality against some fairly heavy odds. It is a long story, but our main difficulty was that we were not able to have our horse on the island we'd ended up buying a ruined thatch house on. (We bought the house with an insurance settlement from when a speeding car whanged into the back of the wagon on the shores of Loch Ness.) No islander would lend us a boat to swim her over as they really didn't want her there - and after a while there seemed little point in staying if she couldn't be with us. We'd travelled too long with her to even think of giving up on her. There were many reasons for our leaving the Hebrides - and I am in big trouble for recounting them on a website.

You went back to London again after this?

Yes, we went back to London for the birth of Leif. It was July 1970 and we lived in a great shed at the bottom of my brother's garden for a few months. By October it looked like 'Diamond Day' might

be released in December. Joe Boyd gave me the choice of staying in London to promote the record, or to have one of the String Band's cottages in Scotland. I had grown up in London always longing for the country. I'd tried hard to get away and was back there reluctantly. I didn't want to raise my kid in the city and an offer of a roof was too good to turn down as we were homeless and staying on friends' floors again.

Do you regret not promoting the record now?

I didn't think anything would come of the record. It had been a year from the writing of the songs to the recording, and a further year till release. I thought it had missed its small window of opportunity and that times had moved on and people in general more cynical and less likely to take any notice of it. I chose to forget about it. I succeeded in this for nearly 30 years.

It's a fragile record, very beautiful in mood. The musicians on various tracks must have been pretty sensitive to the needs of the material?

They were. I came to know Robin better later, but at the time of the recording we had only met briefly, and spent one evening rehearsing. He was wonderful with 'Rose Hip November' - also my favourite by the way - and completely understood its mood and seemed to throw himself into it. Dave Swarbrick and Simon Nicol were at the studio one night and we recorded three songs in three takes as I remember and I was amazed at how easily they took up the tunes. I had been so used to singing and playing guitar by myself - it was a shock to be with others - kind of unreal.

Listening to the record now, are you proud of it, and why do you think it has endured in the minds of record fans and collectors?



From here now I can see what it was that we did, and how extraordinary it was. That Joe should have taken such a chance with it, that I had such help from those great musicians and then just abandoned it - is maybe part of its appeal now. I did not expect it to be heard so it is quite unselfconsciously a document of its time. I am hugely proud of it now. More than that I'm proud of the life on the road - having almost nothing and making it up as we went along. I kept very little of 'Diamond Day' except the original John James painting for the sleeve, giving away all the LPs Joe gave me. Someone gave me a tape a few years later but it stayed stuck in the back of a drawer.

What you did next?

We spent the winter of 1970/71 at Glen Row, the Incredible String Band's cottages.

What was it like staying with Robin and Mike and Rose and Licorice and Co?

Glen Row was eight farm-workers' cottages - numbers 1, 3, 5 and 7

occupied by Mike, Rose, Robin and Licorice. It's a bit difficult describing life there, but it was warm and very insular and quite unlike anything else I've known. A world of its own. It had an air of unreality I guess, what with the success and comparative wealth of the String Band, and the relative struggle of ordinary folks such as us in numbers 2, 4, 6 and 8. The first two months were great, but then things changed a bit. Scientology crept in too much for my liking. I didn't go along with it, was resistant in every way. It made it difficult to stay there. I have kept in contact with most of them though.

This is the stage when you decided to head for Ireland?

Whilst at the Glen we decided to carry on with the search for a place of our own and met people who talked of the cheap farms on the west coast of Ireland. We had an old VW, which was untaxed, uninsured, had no starter motor, which we always kept the pram wheels on the top of so we wouldn't be stopped. In this we crammed all of our possessions that we could, and set off. Bess

was brought over by two girlfriends who hitch-hiked with her. We got a wagon outside Dublin, this time with a stove in it. We had a friend travelling with us with another wagon - Rakis, who had been in Stone Monkey, an offshoot of the Incredible String Band. By time we got to the west the prices had gone beyond us already, and a farm would have been 600 or 700 pounds.

We returned to Scotland after a year, had another baby - a girl, Whyn. After another ten years living in rented farmhouses we eventually found the elusive place of our own where we lived some of the old dream - but with a lot more horses, dogs, transient friends and children, and a semi-successful furniture restoration business, albeit we were a mile up a terrible track which ruined customers exhausts and a few of our prospects. Son Leif left home and joined travelling circus at 16, then joined Circus Archaos on his motorbike and now lives in California doing film and special effects. Whyn went to Glasgow Art School and is now making a living as painter. I had another boy, Ben, well he's still only 14. Robert and I separated when Ben was four and then I fell in love with my lawyer - and moved to the city. We all live in houses which have no land and no horses and no dogs. On to a different life.

I note that there seem to be some parallels with your experiences in the 60s and those of Anne Briggs. I know she was a traveller, was under-recorded, not keen on getting tangled up in the machinery of the music industry - and very much a country spirit. Did you ever meet Anne, and do you feel that there are parallels there?

No I never did meet her. I didn't know of her, or many other musicians from the time. I'm sure I'd have been much happier if I'd known how to be around other people who made music. I didn't think of myself as a musician by

the time I'd made the album - only a songwriter - and so I didn't seek out the company of other music people. I was also very shy about my musical abilities, feeling that almost anyone else was better at it than I was. I like the fact that some of us who didn't go along with the music business thing (although I did at first - just couldn't make it work) are being heard now. Not that musicians starting out now would be cheered to be told "oh never mind if no one hears you, you just wait thirty years". I believe Anne stills lives in the country and I would love to meet her one day. I'd like to know more of her story - I'm sure we would find a few parallels.

In 1997 Vashti got access to the Internet. One of the first things she did (like you do) was to punch her own name into a search engine to see what happened. To her amazement she found that some of her earliest work had appeared on recent compilations, and that her album, rather than being forgotten, was valuable and heavily sought after. Slowly via email she connected with people she thought lost to her, as well as new and old seekers of her work. Three years were spent wrestling with the industry to regain rights to 'Just Another Diamond Day', aided and advised by Paul Lambden at Ryko Music. Ryko had inherited to the entire Warlock publishing catalogue, which included Nick Drake, Incredible String Band, Fairport Convention and John and Beverley Martyn. Vashti had written to Ryko asking if anybody there knew who owned the rights to the recording. Paul Lambden asked for a tape of the album, but (and I find this particularly poignant) Vashti only had her deteriorated and incomplete cassette, and had to arrange a copy to be made by someone else. She was duly surprised to find that Paul actually liked it, still carrying with her the stain of the abandonment of the record on initial release. As she says "it just edged its way out, blushed and shuffled off into oblivion". The fact that anyone liked it was a shifting of a carefully constructed frame-of-

reference, an almost surreal inversion of the way things were supposed to be.

Vashti listened to 'Just Another Diamond Day' again, trying to filter it through late 1990s perceptions to figure out why the songs and their arrangements still mattered to people, some of whom weren't born when the record was made. It did seem that people valued the transportation back to a time where it was possible to "have those sixties dreams and to be able to make them real". So she kept unwaveringly to the task of phoning, faxing and emailing people to repossess the rights to the record, occasionally having to resist the temptation to bootleg it herself. Meanwhile a bootleg CD did come out, but was of poor quality and failed to fill the void. Eventually, Paul Lambden and Sean Newsham created Spinney and made 'Just Another Diamond Day' their first release, so the record is back from the brink of extinction, and from the master tapes, too. She has been asked if she will ever make music again. She's not sure. Her old Martin guitar hung on the wall for 25 years and ended up being given away, but now she has another guitar so you never know. The Terrascope wishes her well with whatever she chooses to do, but will resoundingly rejoice if that includes a resumption of playing and recording.

Written, produced and directed by
Tony Dale ©Ptolemaic Terrascope,
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