

Poetry Archive: Part I

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Section 1: Lyrics and the Elusive Muse (1976-1992)

*I consider myself a poet first and a musician second.
I live like a poet and I'll die like a poet. - Bob Dylan*

As said in the intro, **But Seriously** was my first pure poem, but certainly not my first effort to write verse. My goal for years was to be a songwriter, and preparation for this website involved sifting through all my old scribblings and yellowed papers, looking for anything from the early years worthy of publication here. It is hard to be objective about the quality of a pieces you wrote more than forty years ago, and how they fit into your literary development, but there seems to be something worthwhile there.

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My home was filled with Beatles music while we were growing up. I'm not old enough to remember clearly when the Beatles appeared on The Ed Sullivan Show, but I do remember a television on with loud music coming out of it, and my father singing and dancing around the room as I had never seen before. He was a big fan, obviously, and he played guitar and sang a lot of Beatles songs at house parties every weekend. One of the fondest memories from my relatively well-adjusted childhood is of the countless nights I went to sleep listening to him play and sing, with guests laughing and singing along, glasses tinkling, as sleep took me away. So, my chosen path as an entertainer should not be surprising.

On the morning of December 9th, 1980, my father came to my bedroom door and intoned solemnly: "Get up, my son. It's not a very good day." Walking into the living room, I could hear the commentator talking about John Lennon and the Beatles, and my parents were sitting in silence, staring at the screen in a mournful trance. John Lennon had been assassinated in New York City the night before.

It would not be wrong to say it felt like a member of our family had died. We loved John and the music he and his mates created. Those songs, all those magnificent songs had been the soundtrack of my life. Now it would never be the same again. We always knew how important the music of the Beatles was to our lives; we discussed it often. But on this terrible morning we had cause to realize just how much the music

and its writers had become part of us and our lives.

Six days later I wrote a song for John. I had been trying to write songs for two or three years, but this is the first lyric that needed to be included here. It was the first songwriting session in which the words and music came to me simultaneously. Forty years later, I still get compliments about the song and requests to play it:

When Giants Fall

*So, John is gone.
A man of peace is killed by violence.
It makes no sense
to me.
So, on and on,
this foolish world keeps moving to an end.
So why pretend
to see?*

*He wanted to give peace a chance.
May this be a remembrance.
“...a brotherhood of man”, he said.
I just can’t imagine now he’s dead.
But for Yoko, Richard, George and Paul
we must be strong when giants fall.*

*My mind recalls
a group from Liverpool gave us a sound,
and it was heard all around
the world.
The curtain falls,
but we still hope that someday they will play.
Oh, but should I say
we were?*

*He asked us to give peace a chance.
May this be a remembrance.
“...a brotherhood of Man”, he said.
I just can’t imagine, now he’s dead.
But for Yoko, Ringo, George and Paul
we must be strong when giants fall.*

To this day the memory of writing these words is as clear as ever. Probably because I was sitting between my aunt and uncle on our living room sofa at the time; but most likely because for the first time I was hearing the melody as I wrote the lyric.

It's a cliché, I know, but writing this song did a lot to help me help myself deal with losing one of my biggest heroes; a man who would inspire so many artists and activists for years to come.

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Sometimes the going can be rough in a relationship. We are not always on good terms, for one reason or other, differences of opinion and so on. And for a young man who wants to be a songwriter, this is just the kind of thing that may end up captured in a song. In my case, thoughts of hurting each other with words, apologies, and possible reconciliations gave rise to my first, and to date only lyric of fiction. A melody written more than a year earlier had stayed with me despite the poor lyrics that accompanied it, and I decided to marry this new idea to it:

Apology Accepted

*In the mist of early Sunday morning, always Sunday morn.
At the curb a taxicab is blowing, blowing his horn.
You can keep the bracelet.
You can keep my key.
I think we've used up every possibility.
Oh, please.*

*Well it's fitting that it all should end at your place, 'cause I should leave.
The horn again, can't say good-bye at this pace, but I believe...
That if you find another
I'd be up a tree
I've got to have you, Baby, don't you see?
It's how it's got to be.
But you can't take that Sunday morning off of me.*

*The taxicab is long since gone, and you don't mind a bit.
I guess that we'll just have to make the best of it.
But for how long?
And you can't take that Sunday morning off of me.*

* * *

Not long after writing **Apology Accepted**, I began my pursuit of a university degree in philosophy and German; and, when I felt well enough, I would perform my solo act somewhere downtown. As mentioned, it was during this time that my first two pure poems came to be. **But Seriously** was first, then came my summer semester in the Black Forest where **At Home...In Germany** was written.

I returned from Germany and continued to attempt writing poetry. Inspired by the promising results with the first two efforts, and somewhat encouraged by my songwriting, I continued with a variety of subjects clad in an array of poetic styles. But a small grove sacrificed itself for my efforts and a serious self-doubt began to take hold. After trying everything conceivable, it became necessary to conclude that Calliope, the muse of poetry, may have visited on those two occasions only, and may never bless me with her presence again. Meanwhile, Aoede, the muse of song, continued appearing in her stead.

Settling down to await Calliope, I went about my daily business, auscultating for her call. And the wait was long. It saw me graduate with an honours BA in philosophy; it saw the breakdown of my marriage of eleven years, and it continued until we became separated. Soon thereafter, still waiting and listening for any sign of poetic inspiration, a persistent medical condition worsened and forced me to withdraw from graduate school after just a couple of months. As a lonely, now clinically depressed and under-employed single parent, I heard nothing – nothing, that is, but a song.

It was written at the Rose and Thistle Pub in St. John's. Just separated from my first wife, I wasn't expecting to be romantically involved for a while. My solo show was to start at ten and it was just after nine. As I pondered my outlook and wondered about the possibility of future love, an idea for a song came to me. The picture of a downcast single father, between lovers, looking forward to the next "whomever she may be", appealed to the romantic in me and promised a shot of much needed optimism. The melody was to come the next day, but looking over the pub that night my eyes settled on two female friends of mine playing cards, and that became the starting point:

In Between

*Well, Fran and George are playing cards at a table by the stage.
They say that I look younger, but I'm feeling twice my age.
You know the festive season's come and gone, and all the bills are due.
My wife and I are splitting, just ain't nothing we can do.
Together, I'm just sitting with myself.
Together, and I sure could use some help.*

*If I get me through the night,
just until the morning light
and keep myself together, together.*

*Well, Fran is getting all the hands, and George can't get no deal.
I can't begin to tell them just how in between I feel.
You know I've got to concentrate on being upbeat for my boy.
Gotta keep on working harder on the things we can enjoy
Together. My son and I can make it.
Together. Yes, I know that we can take it.
Yeah, with my little guy,
we got things we've gotta try
whenever we're together, together.*

*Now Fran has won another game, George said she's had enough.
And I am feeling the same way, you know my future's looking rough.
You tell me you're not sure now, Baby. You tell me we don't know.
I'm looking forward to finding out, then we can start to grow
Together. Got a whole lot more to do.
Together. And I hope that it's with you.
With the end of in between,
just no telling what we'd mean.
You and me, together. Together.*

The speed with which this was written astonished me and gave me an uneasy feeling. It was as though there was something in my possession that I wasn't supposed to have. Looking back now it is quite conceivable that this feeling was associated with having created an artistic work that said all I needed to say on a specific issue. It was cathartic and an altogether satisfying experience in writing verse.

As it turned out, the wait for "whomever she may be" wasn't too long after all. The very next night, just six days after separating from my first wife, my second wife came into view. I fell hopelessly in love again, and with renewed vigor tried to return to belief in romantic love and a full life. All my thoughts, feelings and activities had a more confident tone, and I was beginning once again to live love and love life.

* * *

My next song was my gut reaction to hearing of the scandal regarding the sexual abuse of young boys at the hands of Christian Brothers at the Mount Cashel Orphanage in St. John's, an issue I would address in much more detail years later in my first

published novel *Grace Ungiven (and the innocents left to yearn)*. I cannot say I suffered anything near the level of abuse in those cases, but I've had enough personal experience as a child with sexual harassment and abuse from a trusted adult male to feel more outraged by these revelations than I would have otherwise.

The poetic lyrics of the song are pleasing to me, as I believe it demonstrates a more sophisticated style and command of the language, and it remains one of my favorites. It is my love of children and my empathy with them that made this poem/lyric:

Not To Be Denied

*Well history's replete with those
who wearing ordinary clothes
have laid the groundwork for our affluence.
Too often we remember those
who struck the most compelling pose,
forgetting all who have no recompense.*

But listen....

*We have to credit every man,
to give a damn to take a stand.
It's a case of willing, common sense applied.
I tell you now they will not be denied.*

*There's children's laughter in the rain,
while in the shadows future pain
is planning some malicious twist of mind.
When those who wear the robes of trust
forsake it all in the name of lust,
we realize that they're some other kind.*

Or do we?

*Yet in spite of all the pestilence,
the children salvage innocence.
It's a case of willing, common sense applied.
I tell you now, they will not be denied.*

Now me, I've met a lot of them

*who've tried their very best to stem
the progress of my efforts to be free.
The hypocrites, the pessimists,
the jealous ones who've even pissed
upon the candle of my hopes and dreams.*

Now they can't win....

*Because I won't be silenced any longer.
Adversity just makes me stronger.
It's a case of willing, common sense applied.
I tell you now, I will not be denied.
I tell you now, we will not be denied.*

This was the second time that the words and music came together, and it inspired me to continue afresh my pursuit of Calliope.

* * *

Two other nice songs appeared at his time. One came simply because the blues was my second wife's favourite genre of music:

“In Love, with the Blues”

*This is the story of a man.
This is the story of a woman.
This is the story of the future.
This is the story of our love.*

*I thought that I knew what love was.
Thought that my heart was in control.
But now that I've found her it is clear to me,
that it's more a matter of the soul.*

*Now it's our turn, Baby.
No one can stop what we've begun.
Yes, it's our turn, Baby.
I look back and say: “What's done is done”,
'cause, Baby, you're the one.*

*Now it's our turn, Baby,
and we have yet to reach our prime.
Yes, it's our turn, Baby,
and life has a rhythm and a rhyme.
Well, it's about time.*

*This is the story of a man.
This is the story of a woman.
This is the story of the future.
This is the story of our love.*

My love for our parents, and my heartfelt appreciation of how they brought me up, inspired a second song during this period. My sisters and I were blessed with two of the best parents anyone could ask for, and everyone who knew them agreed. They were so special that as children we learned early that ours was not the usual family situation among our peers, and we would have to refrain from talking about it to our schoolmates for fear of hurting them, or them hurting us.

It sounds great as an upbeat song that pays tribute to two special people (see "Tunes"), but I believe it also holds up as much as a light-hearted poem of gratitude. When I recorded it later that year, my father made a special trip to town to play the lead guitar break on the track for me in the studio, just like old times:

New Strings Attached

*Well, I've had it to here. I want to go there.
But they say I can't find it anywhere.
I got lots of faith and plenty of hope,
but they're pushing me to the end of my rope.
Now, I've got what it takes and they say I can't,
but what they say is irrelevant.
'Cause I've been knocked down, but I'm coming back.
Just like an old guitar with new strings attached.*

*I came into this world in fifty-eight,
and my days are numbered at any rate.
But that's alright, 'cause I've been prepared
by a couple of people who've always cared.
My Mother's a lady with a ready smile.*

*She's a living doll with plenty of style.
My Daddy's my friend and as a matter of fact,
he's got an old guitar with new strings attached.*

*We spent many a night with a song and a drink.
He taught me how to play and he made me think,
'cause he slipped in a measure of right and wrong.
And he's still got a way with a song.*

*Many years have passed and I'm still in tune,
without the help of a silver spoon.
Now I'm feeling like a little kid again,
and I'm more alive than I've ever been.
I've found the love of my life at last.
She's helping me make the present past.
I'm an individual, semi-detached.
Just an old guitar with new strings attached.*

Jeff R. Kelland