

Scott Walker "The Drift"
Released worldwide May 8, 2006
4 A.D. Records

album notes by Ian Penman

OK: begin.
Tell us what you know.
Some coffee first: a little coffee?
NO coffee. BEGIN!

There are a lot of things people forget about Scott Walker, such as –
Stumble.

There are a lot of records you pretty much just keep for the sake of keeping; then there are –
Blank.

(Sigh)

There are a lot of 'classic' (i.e. ageing) rock groups where all is ego and restriction. The bass player only plays what he plays and hasn't listened to anything new in two decades; the drummer is really only interested in salmon farming and collecting china pigs; the singer thinks he's Stooges era Iggy reborn but he's nearer Danny La Rue. Such bands continue to tour the world, but the worlds they encompass narrow to the size of a major chord or two, and the most pedestrian of lyrics ...
(rock-and-roll-must-never-die).

This are a lot of ways Scott Walker might have gone and this is one of them: into showbiz purgatory, yet another bogus man trolling the world like a pale Xerox ghost of himself, before an ensemble of the best session musicians money can buy, maybe even a 'triumphant return' at Glastonbury, the midday sun spearing his eyes and his soul up for grabs as he drags up from absent depths the debris of a long ago hit, a song he must carry around like an overweight angel, a devil on one shoulder whispering in his ear DO IT, DO IT, cash in on the public interest, the re-issued you, all the nostalgia of a trumpet of Alpert, a ridiculously ersatz & anachronistic man child for the cameras, all the cameras ...

(Begin - again! No more looking backwards...)

There are a lot of things people forget about Scott Walker; journalists use words like mysterious and reclusive but is this really so? Draw up an honest profile of Scott Walker (based on the several things we know for sure about what he likes, how he lives,

what he doesn't like: that he prefers home to limelight, say, European poetry and philosophy to tabloid blether and TV, experimental or classical music to craven pop) and you might find yourself looking at somebody very much like ... yourself. How strange is that?

He never went away ... but he's back again, 63, and younger than ever before. His spirit soars.

There are a lot of ways you might introduce the stunning, the towering singularity of Scott Walker's new work *The Drift*. As the critic Cynthia Ozick once said of novelist William Gaddis (three novels in thirty years): he may not have been "prolific", but "instead he has been prodigious, gargantuan, exhaustive, subsuming fates and conditions under a hungry logic."

Hungry logic? Oh yes: songs you feel you could almost run a finger along and come away with brick dust or splinters, traces of blood curdled sand. I won't try and "introduce" any of the songs on *The Drift* or try and offer any explication of what (so far) I think might be their general drift – I think you need to feel them as I did, as a species of shock, a series of shocking headlines history forget to give to us, delivered into your lap, the immense and beckoning blistering NOISE of it (a truly GLORIOUS, a gloriously non-pareil bank stream current of noises), but also the microscopic attention to 'background' detail, layer upon layer, quotations, discrete little sonic movies full of scent and chill and bruise, clue and ricochet and close up. He more or less invents a world with each new song – the shock of which being partly that he should treat (in this whiny backwater called rock) subjects like this at all, that he should treat us with this immoderate cast: Cossacks framed in mnemonic petals, ill-fated lovers rubbing shoulders like dead moons, Elvis baying in Memphis moonlight, Mussolini hanging like something from a Francis Bacon tarot deck, songs for and from all our Black Septembers, all our German autumns, all the nines, elevens, ones, zeros in a mangle of newspeak.

There are a lot of ways he is not in a band, or handcuffed to an out-dated image of himself, which in reality means that Walker can paint any sound he likes, any combination, a *Guernica* of song, a Kiefer or Kitaj of song, can hire somebody to punch a side of beef or charm mosquitoes into your ear with their humid soprano or ask the orchestra to sound like Penderecki inside a dossier's box. Why? Because no one else will. Because there are all these things he hears inside his head and after all, anything can be done in the modern recording studio, so let us start from

scratch and paint a picture in the air: a dream, say, of the veldt at night where the locust chorus suddenly stops and the air sounds like threnody itself and cold lightning shoots across the sky like a whore exhaling crack and the death-coin Flugelman glides from hut to hut his midnight greeting like an infected kiss ...

And there are a lot of ways that The Drift may not be to your taste, certainly – it is full on, unrelenting, quicksilver, it is intense and Baroque and more Cubistic in its multiple perspectives than we are used to in most popular song; but you cannot, you MUST not dismiss the attempt, the artistic nerve and insanely singular vision needed to undertake such a thing in the current climate.

There are a lot of things Walker may be attempting across the 70 minutes of The Drift and one of them may be this: working out ways to SOUND OUT the present moment's shame and recess and emptiness, the lingering sense of disappointment and of accounts left unsettled. How to make this (into) sound, how to make it echo in the dialogue that needs to be carried on beyond the end of this or that world, how to sing songs for the dead that won't shame the dead further, how to address all the mass graves – grave in the sky and grave in our hearts - how to make a sound from all this insane tragedy and bad blood and sly disappearance, how to do this without betraying the dead, how to end and how to begin again but most of all: how to sing the ends of man, whilst at the same time starting the heart of Song again, singing this world anew, precisely because things don't end, they linger on in the atmosphere, in history's sudden draughts and secret rivers and thermal drifts, so many voices in the hidden air, so many whispering ghosts, so many ... bad ends.

There are a lot of self-proclaimedly 'experimental' artists clamouring for our attention, but who else gives us so much space in song, yet still a recognisable song, one marked by sex and pity and perplexity and rage, all the while keeping his ego to a bare minimum. Who else allows so many other voices - unlikely, unmoored, unmourned voices - into his song? Who else gives us language back as such a shock and surprise, as here, in the incredible risk and wager and CRISIS of The Drift, hear how sweeps and heaps of gory or holy or horrific confusion and reflection and fall are rendered with so precise and unfaltering and unique an ear eye and throat, by this man alone, out of time, our first and last and best recording angel, the last Modernist left standing, the only one left alive, Scott 2006.

No more time.

End here, end now.

And - then?

And then? Start to listen all over again ...

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