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Scott Walker: Not easy on himself

Scott Walker, the one-time hearthrob now a recluse, has released his first album in 11 years. Robert Webb tracked him down

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In 1995, Scott Walker, the moody, boy-band pin-up turned existential, cult figure, broke a 12-year silence with the album *Tilt*. Stark and uncompromising, as brittle as pencil-lead, it confounded many listeners. Eleven years on, now signed to the independent 4AD label, Walker has finally completed the follow-up, a 10-track, exquisitely packaged work entitled *The Drift*, his third studio album in almost 30 years. No less dense than its predecessor, *The Drift* tips the scales as the most weighty album to be issued by a major artist this year, possibly this decade. That's "major" as in important, not mainstream. Walker, 63, hasn't been mainstream for almost four decades - not since he was chasing The Beatles up the hit parade, as one-third of the Walker Brothers. Now, the legend is back. But from where, exactly?

On and off, the last few years have been spent composing *The Drift*. "Songwriting is a long haul," says the famously shy Walker. "I'll sometimes work on three songs, and then not go back to them for months, just waiting for the next piece to fall into place." Walker is no multi-tasker. He composed and produced the score for the 1999 movie *Pola X* and in 2000 curated the *Meltdown Festival* on London's South Bank. In between, there have been one-offs with the likes of Nick Cave and Jarvis Cocker. "I can't do two things at once," he says. "While I was doing the soundtrack, [the director] Leos Carax kept me flying back and forth to Paris for a couple of years. Then *Meltdown* took time to plan out. Then there were deaths in the family..." It took another two years for him to divorce his record label. Work on *The Drift* was continually put on hold. "If I say it took four years, that would be being generous."

Fundamental to Walker's songs are his carefully-metered lyrics: the musical arrangements have been pragmatically stripped down, even compared to the bare-boned *Tilt*. "The reason it takes so long to do the lyric is because it informs everything: how I sing it, what sounds we use, even the drum parts," explains Walker. Just as the songs took time to gel, recording in London was also a drawn-out process, taking more than a year, rather than the usual two or three months for such a project. This, explains Walker, was largely because people weren't available when they were needed.

Walker keeps our appointment with admirable punctuality, but it took some fixing. He doesn't like interviews much: "If I have nothing to say, I keep quiet," he has said in the past. But, eventually, his gentle, mid-Atlantic drawl loosens.

He was born Noel Scott Engel, in Hamilton, Ohio, the son of a US naval officer. His recording career began as a high-school student in 1957, with a long-forgotten single, "When a Boy is a Man". Living in California in the early 60s, he spent his time grooving to West Coast jazz and reading Kerouac. By the time of the British invasion, Scotty Engel had played bass on the Sandy Nelson hit "Let There be Drums" and was with a band called The Routers. Then he teamed up with the singers John Maus and Gary Leeds for the Walker Brothers. Maus suggested moving to the UK, partly to avoid the Vietnam draft and partly because of The Beatles. They arrived in 1965.

The Walker Brothers were an instant success. Their elegantly-produced hits - "Make it Easy on Yourself", "My Ship is Coming in", "Another Tear Falls" - and the trio's blond good looks soon had them dodging hordes of teenage girls at the stage door. Scott's honeyed tenor was key to the Walkers' sound. "I guess we're kinda sellin' Jack Jones through our hair," he said at the time. Then the lights went out and Scott released four solo albums, which dealt with the flipside of hippydom and are now recognised as influential classics.

The last of these, Scott 4, has since achieved cult status, even lending its name to a band. In 1969, however, it was a different story. Scott 4 was the stone that sunk Walker's career in the decade that followed. "At the time, it didn't sell too well, although now it's considered to be a pretty good album," he says. "I was carpeted by the company." Walker was told to lay off his own material. "I started going downhill, imbibing a little too much of everything," he recalls. "I went through this terrible hiatus when I was just singing off-contract." After the commercial failure of Scott 4, Walker was a pop pariah, reduced to releasing albums of check-shirted country covers and MOR throwaways. Finally, via a short-lived Walker Brothers reunion, he curved off into a musical hinterland all of his own.

The revived Walkers released three albums between 1975 and 1978, the last of which, Nite Flights, was effectively three solo sets rolled into one. Scott's tracks were the blueprint for his new direction. Notable among these is "The Electrician", a discourse between torturer and victim, as beautiful as it is frightening. "We knew the company was closing, so we made the album we really wanted to make. I'd snapped by this point. I really wasn't going to go back again," he says. Does Walker see any continuity between "The Electrician" and his later work? "I haven't heard it in years," he says. "There might be a thread working away there, I suppose." Walker is not inclined to retrospection. Once a project is out of the way, he prefers to move on.

The Drift reflects the shifting focus of world events over the last decade or so, from the Srebrenica massacre to Iraq, filtered through the astute brain of a self-exiled American. Why tackle such subjects in rock music? "It's unavoidable today. How directly you take it, though, is up to the listener," he says. "A lot of my songs use a springboard - a political idea. It goes into another world then." Walker's songs rarely explain and never preach: he prefers to let thoughts and ideas channel-hop through the blank verse, requiring some work on the part of the listener. In "Clara", for example, Mussolini's execution in 1945 segues into the American South, a la "Strange Fruit": "This is just a cornhusk doll/ dipped in blood/ in the moonlight". "'Clara' is about how fascism is now in the air," says Walker. "I was trying to find another way to come at it. I'm not an out-and-out fan of the protest song - people strumming in my face. I was trying to find another way to keep the discussion going." He employs an unusual instrument on the track: a side of pork, smacked and pummelled by the percussionist Alasdair Malloy. "I was looking for something to get across an undercurrent of violence," he says.

We talk about some of the other songs on The Drift. The haunting "Jesse", ostensibly about Elvis Presley's stillborn twin brother, is Walker's take on September 11 and American hubris. "I was looking for a metaphor for the Twin Towers," he says. "Skyscrapers don't have any reflective spiritual qualities. There's no mirror effect. It's the same with the dead twin brother. Presley used to talk to him: a dead past." Walker emphasises the global connections: "Memphis is, of course, an ancient Egyptian city, not just Memphis, Tennessee." More cultural references abound in "Jolson and Jones". The "Jones", Walker explains, is Allan Jones, who was the lead tenor in the Marx Brothers' A Night at the Opera. Walker drops into his song a line from Jones's "The Donkey Serenade", a hit in the Thirties. Jones was also the father of Jack Jones, the singer to whom Scott had likened the Walker Brothers all those years ago. A conscious self-reference, I wonder? "As I start to deconstruct these things, I lose the point," he says. "I'm trying to keep them as they came to me and I'm hoping that the listener will bring something as well. Nine times out of 10 it's probably better than what I had." This is certainly true of "Cue", which contains the album's most poetic, if perplexing, lines: "Shoes leading to shine/ Splicing to swine... And the jigger raps pits/ Darkness long." It had a particularly lengthy gestation and is the one song on the album which Walker is reluctant to go into in detail. "That was the toughest song I've ever written. I started that, maybe nine years ago, left it, and then came back to it. Finally it came through."

I ask what he's been getting up to, in between the writing and meat-slapping. "Gambling," he quips. And down the pub playing darts, perhaps? "No! I've never done that," he laughs. Home is London, where he has lived since emigrating. These days he spends his feet-up time painting, reading and working on musical ideas: "I listen to all kinds of music," he says, and has cited Radiohead as a particular favourite. His literary tastes range from the Norwegian writer Knut Hamsun to Dostoevsky.

He has no plans to take the show on the road: "It would be too expensive, and I can't bear things like synthesised strings." Instead, the release of The Drift is accompanied by the broadcast of a documentary, with input from long-time fans such as David Bowie and Brian Eno. And what about that signing to 4AD, better known as the home of bands like Pixies and the Cocteau Twins? This followed shenanigans with his former label, Mercury. Walker rewinds a couple of years. "The company changed hands four or five times. The final person who came in, I actually met - I'd met none of the others," Walker says. "He said he was a big fan. My manager asked if he had heard Tilt, and he said, 'no'." By the next meeting, with the album almost complete, the executive had taken a listen to Walker's previous release. "He was shocked. He said, 'we can't do this'. So we parted company." Walker's manager suggested an independent and wound up at 4AD. Luckily, they liked it. "Usually, when I bring in one of my records, everybody looks like you've brought the plague!"

So how does this very private and self-effacing musician enjoy the spotlight once again? "I have to accept it. I've got to do something, though the record company keeps it to a minimum," he says, with perhaps rather too much glee. "I'm trying to get through it and so far it's fine." We say our goodbyes. The clouds are parting. Perhaps the sun is gonna shine again.

'The Drift' is released on 4AD on Monday

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