Pete Atkin

THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

1. THE LUCK OF THE DRAW

This is one of the earliest songs we wrote together, back in our days in the Footlights Club. Clive would hand me a typed lyric and say something like “Here, sport, see if you can do anything with this.” I’d go away and read it over and see if it suggested a rhythm, or if a phrase suggested a bit of a tune – and that’s more or less how it worked for the next fifty years.

Rhythm and tempo were nearly always the first things I needed to find, though. I almost never started with a chord sequence – that came last, after the rhythm and the melody, and it often, perhaps usually, changed as the song developed. But I do remember that I wrote this (on the guitar) just after I had discovered how to play a minor-sixth chord. I loved the openness, the ambiguity of how it sounded, the way you can change the feel of it by shifting just one of its notes. And *The Luck Of the Draw* starts with a minor-sixth chord, a bold statement of ambiguity, of being in two minds.

The advent of the long-playing disc meant that songs no longer had to last a maximum of two or three minutes, the length of a single. (That dated back to when three minutes was the most you could get on one side of a a 78rpm disc.) Unfortunately, that meant that sometimes a song would be stretched out too far, made longer than it should have been, but the other side of that technical coin was that there was now no reason why songs should always be even as long as two minutes. There were some wonderful ultra-short songs by writers like Rodgers and Hart, and we were grabbed by one of the Mamas and the Papas’ songs that lasted barely one minute. Anyway, this was a short song, at least in its original version – no longer than it need to be.

But it did still have a middle eight – the kind of second tune that forms a variation after the main tune has been repeated. (The ‘eight’ dates back to when the conventional shape of a tin-pan-alley song was 32 bars: an 8-bar verse, repeated, an 8-bar variation, then another pay-off repeat of the main 8-bar tune.) I’ve always liked middle-eights, and we enjoyed sometimes playing around with them, extending them, taking them musically somewhere else, sometimes turning almost into another song. This is a tight one, though, one that the bloke singing the song uses to own up. It turns some odd harmonic corners and finds its own way back to that minor-sixth chord at the start of the last verse.

1. SCREEN-FREAK

Clive did sometimes choose titles that are hard to remember. They are sometimes the kind of title you might give to a poem, but a song is not a poem, and a song title needs to work a bit more like a label. But never mind.

This lyric sprang from a temporary job Clive had in London in the years between arriving on the boat from Australia and deciding he needed to get his life back together by doing a post-graduate degree at Cambridge (and by starting to write songs, of course). He worked as an assistant projectionist at the National Film Theatre under Waterloo Bridge, which meant he got to see three or four or five or more different movies every day. He had no idea when he wrote this that his experience could now be shared by anyone who has access to the internet and cable or satellite TV, but that has meant that almost everyone can still understand what he’s talking about.

I tried to give this a frankly nostalgic kind of a waltzing tune. I wrote a string arrangement for its original recording, but my budget couldn’t run to the full-size Hollywood orchestra I heard in my head. I wanted those sublime high-pitched French horns you get in *Singin’ In The Rain,*  the ones that still raise the hairs on the back of my neck every time. But the arrival of Mr O’Higgins at the end of this version comes pretty damn close for me.

1. THE TROPHIES OF MY LOVERS GONE

Sometimes a song starts its life from its title. This title comes from William Shakespeare, lifted out of the middle of one of the sonnets, perhaps (dare I say it?) not one of the best ones. I’m not altogether sure I understand what it means in the original, but once again Clive spotted its possibilities.

I think this is one of his most skillful lyrics. It still amazes me every time I sing it, and it was right at the top of my list of possibles for these sessions.

1. CANOE

One of Clive’s most astonishing lyrics, I think. I’ll let it speak for itself. People who’d heard me sing it just once years and years ago sometimes came up to me years and years later asking me to sing it again.

One of the astonishing things about it, I think, is the fact that it has no rhymes (apart perhaps from one or two accidental ones). I tried to give it a different kind of musical shape too.

I start out most songs trying to get the right rhythm and tempo, and in this case I nicked the piano triplet idea from the very beginning of the Beach Boys’ *Sail On Sailor*. The triplets have now almost completely disappeared.

1. CARE-CHARMER SLEEP

Here’s another one of those titles that are hard to remember. It’s another title phrase that Clive nicked from an out-of-copyright poet, in this case Samuel Daniel, who died long before anyone even had the idea of copyright (not that you can copyright a title anyway, not even now, it’s important to remember).

Samuel Daniel’s poem, which has the same title, and which is pretty good, nevertheless has nothing else in common with Clive’s lyric.

This is another small song, another one which has a middle-eight. It’s a very short middle-eight, but it’s harmonically very twisty-turny, using an idea I myself nicked from one of the great tin-pan-alley songwriters. (I’m not saying who. You’ll have to work that one out for yourselves.)

1. HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Clive hardly ever commented on my sloppy Cambridge-native accent, but I had an instinctive tendency to pronounce ‘history’ and ‘geography’ each with three syllables, and Clive was insistent that ‘history’ should have two syllables, and ‘geography’ four.

Not many of Clive’s lyrics are as close to autobiographical as this one, but as usual he turns it into something we can all understand. I sang it live at the Pheasantry not long ago, and afterwards someone came up to me and said my performance of it made him cry. I apologised and promised I’d try to do it better next time.

The title for this one is not stolen (for once), but the lyric does contain an entire line-and-a-half nicked from William Shakespeare. (It’s not the bit about the airline terminal.)

1. AN EMPTY TABLE

When Clive sent me the first draft for this, he said he wasn’t even sure if it was a song. That may have been partly because it doesn’t consist of a neat set of regular lines and regular verses – it’s more conversational, more like the introduction to something that doesn’t actually happen. I even manufactured a couple of moments where it almost sounds as if the main bit of the song is about to start, but where the bloke who’s singing it gets distracted again.

I ended up moving lines and sections around quite a lot until it finally seemed to hang together.

One of the things I have always enjoyed about Clive’s lyrics is the way they are so strongly visual. I often think they’re like scenes from a movie. And this always seems to me to be a small movie, probably in black and white with some flashbacks that are in colour.

There’s only one line in this lyric which makes the song perhaps a bit tricky for a female singer. And there was one female singer who wanted to sing it, and who as a result asked if Clive could change that line, which he did. ‘With your lovely shoulders bare’ was replaced with ‘Looking far too cool to care.’

1. THE EYE OF THE UNIVERSE

It’s not just a nicked title in this case, but a whole line in the refrain nicked from that sadly inadequate sailor Percy Bysshe Shelley.

I always liked the piles of images in this one, crashing into each other like a string of bad dreams. A song to make you want to stay awake.

The main bit of the verse is not a conventional chord sequence – it’s kind of modal, where the tune floats around over a scale, a bit like a folk song – until all of a sudden it shifts abruptly into something different all the way to the end of the chorus, when it drops back to that first idea for the next verse.

1. A KING AT NIGHTFALL

Another title phrase that Clive lifted from a poem, this one by T.S.Eliot – a phrase, an idea, that was sitting there, and Clive used it to create this whole mini-screenplay. I suppose there are some elements here of King Charles the Second on the run, but it’s mostly about having to face up to a major change in circumstance.

On the original recording in 1973, I tried to create a kind of Gil Evans-ish arrangement of spooky-sounding horns, but this time I’ve gone for something a bit less strongly rhythmic. I even asked Rod Youngs not to drive the tempo but to play kind of hesitantly, decoratively, almost orchestrally. I wanted it to feel more uncertain, a bit dangerous.

1. WINTER KEPT US WARM

Yet another nicked title, and another one from T.S.Eliot – quite a famous one, in fact, from near the beginning of *The Waste Land*. Once again Eliot doesn’t explore or explain the idea, which left Clive free to have a go.

Julie Covington recorded this beautifully on her very first album in 1970 (before I made my very first one), so I hope it’s OK for me to have a go, even though my singing can’t possibly compare.

1. I WOULDN’T HEAR A WORD AGAINST THE SPRING

Another one from way back, this was a conscious attempt to write a classic type of slightly jazzy tin-pan-alley song. The idea for it came as a semi-jokey reaction to Fran Landesman and Tommy Wolf’s *Spring Can really Hang You Up the Most*, which itself was intended as a hip version of Eliot’s ‘April is the cruellest month.’ Hey, that’s three songs in a row that have some kind of a debt to old Tom.

1. THE PARTY’S MOVING ON

Julie Covington used to sing this back in our early days. I suppose we wrote it as a kind of modern alternative to *The Party’s Over*. But she never recorded it, and neither did anyone else – until now, that is. It was always a shoo-in for a tenor sax.

1. HAVE YOU GOT A BIRO I CAN BORROW?

A title that came straight out of everyday life. But since we wrote it, everyday life has more or less lost touch with the Biro. Originally we had to have permission to use it in the title because it was still a registered brand name. the Biro Corporation kindly gave us the required permission on condition that it was always spelled with a capital B. I have ever since always been careful to sing it with a capital B.

And it’s a title that was once famously – or infamously – misprinted on a CD cover as *Have You Got A Bird I Can Borrow?*, which is a song I think we wished we’d written, but sadly didn’t.

Clive was increasingly housebound in his last few years and I’d sometimes go and see him and sing him some of the old ones which he’d sometimes almost forgotten, including this one. “Damn!” he said, “I still can’t write any better than that.” (If you ask me very nicely I’ll tell you specifically which bit of the lyric he was referring to.)

1. TOGETHER AT LAST

In 1975, after I’d recorded what turned out to be my last vinyl LP, a collection of some of our silly songs and parodies, Clive and I toured the first version of our two-man show. (The second version didn’t come till nearly 25 years later, but never mind that.) We titled it *Together At Last*, and decided we needed a special closing number. We wrote it in a way that would enable us to alternate the lines, and in a way that would allow Clive to make the most of his vocal abilities.

We never recorded it. I knew the lyric was in the archive, but I was going through some old notebooks last year when I found I had written down the tune, such as it is. So here it is. I did think about recording myself double-tracked, so as to reproduce the alternating-line idea, but that seemed a bit too self-conscious, and I decided to keep it small, with just me and my ukulele – plus the inventive bongos of Gary Hammond.

I suppose we should have thought of updating it for our later tours – it is an eminently updatable song, after all – but we didn’t, and I think – and hope – it was the right thing to leave it as it was in 1975.