

Author-

DON'T MAKE
ME LAUGH!

*- The Life and Times of a
Spontaneous Scribbler -*

peter kerr



“We haven’t got a plan, so nothing can go wrong.”
(Spike Milligan 1918 – 2002)

“Life is a lot like jazz – it’s best when you improvise.”
(George Gershwin 1898 – 1937)

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AUTHOR’S NOTE

While the contents of this book are factual, the names of certain individuals and businesses have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Chapter One

‘PUFFING AGAINST THE WIND’

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‘Your writing is good,’ said the literary agent after weighing up the publishing potential of my first novel. ‘*Very* good ... at times.’ He glanced down at the manuscript, nodding pensively. ‘Yes, and the story’s good too. Hmm...’ He paused, looked up and shook his head. ‘But I’m afraid no publisher will take it on. It’s just that, well, to put it bluntly, the humour keeps getting in the way!’

I was tempted to ask him for examples of which bits of humour got in the way of what, but thought better of it. I’d lost count of how many agents and publishers I’d submitted the book to, only to elicit the same reaction from every one of them, though expressed in a dozen different ways. Humour was so subjective, they’d say. One man’s meat and all that. Yes, and besides, humour was difficult to sell, unless of course the author happened to be a famous

comedian – a TV ‘celeb’ of *some* sort at any rate – and then the books would fairly fly off the shelves, even if not particularly humorous or actually written by the notable name emblazoned on the cover. That was the way of the book business these days, and I’d either have to give up going for laughs or give up trying to be an author.

Fair enough, but the trouble was I *wasn’t* going for laughs. I wrote just what came into my head, transferring it straight onto the page as the story unfolded. Nothing was planned. There was no pre-meditated plot and no deliberate intention to inject humour into what, in this case, was a genuine whodunnit, complete with mandatory murder, good cops and bad cops, obvious suspects and unlikely culprits, convoluted twists and turns, cliff-hangers, blind alleys, red herrings, car chases and even a dead cat. Oh, and the expected spattering of swear words as well. With most of the action taking place between popular beauty spots in my native Scotland and spectacular locations on the Mediterranean island of Mallorca, *The Mallorca Connection* had seemed an apt and commercially attractive title to me. It was serious stuff, gripping too, I reckoned, but tempered here and there by those little shafts of humour that crept into proceedings of their own accord. As I say, nothing was planned. The way I saw it, if unravelling the mystery wasn’t actually a mystery to me as I wrote it, there would be fat chance of it coming across as a mystery to the eventual reader.

Anyway, I suppose I’d have taken that agent’s advice and spared myself the confidence-sapping

punishment of more rejections by jacking in the writing caper there and then and redirecting my creative urges towards something less discriminatory, like knitting socks – *if*, that is, I hadn't already had another book accepted by a publisher a few days earlier. I'd called it *Snowball Oranges* and, would you believe, it was also set in Mallorca.

From my perspective, the only difference between the accepted book and the snubbed whodunnit was that one was a true story, the other a product of my imagination. I knew only one way of writing, the one that came naturally, so why, I wondered, were the results of my labours publishable when based on fact but not when made up as I went along?

Of course, there was a lot more to it than that: things like how strongly the subject matter would appeal to a large enough slice of the book-buying public, how easily they might identify with the characters, how much the settings appealed and so on. In short, publishers are in business to make a profit, and not all books have the same sales potential, no matter what their genre. I already knew that well enough, but such basic realities tend to get shoved to the back your mind when you're smarting from the sting of yet another rejection – and feeling just a wee bit sorry for yourself as well.

Fortunately, on this occasion I had the good news of a publishing deal for *Snowball Oranges* to console me, so I placed the whodunnit on the back burner, offered up my heartfelt thanks to Lady Luck, pinched myself and looked forward to relishing the joys that finally becoming a published author would bring.

I had a lot to learn...

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It all started ten years earlier in 1990 when, at the tender age of fifty, I began jotting down brief notes about certain aspects of what my family and I had experienced after giving up farming barley and beef on a modest scale in our home county of East Lothian (known as ‘The Garden of Scotland’) to try our hands at growing oranges for a living on a little farm nestled in the lower folds of Mallorca’s Tramuntana Mountains – a place, culture and type of agriculture we knew precious little about. There was nothing orderly about my notes: just bits and pieces scribbled on random scraps of paper as they came to mind. And I had absolutely no intention of developing them into a book. It was simply that friends used to ask about how we’d adjusted to the language, the heat, the food, the age-old ways of our Mallorcan farming neighbours and countless other details of what they regarded as our time spent ‘living the dream’ in the Spanish sun. The fact was, though, that we *hadn’t* been living the dream – not in the generally accepted sense at least – but had been working as hard as we could in pursuit of that elusive ‘living’ that is the pot at the end of every small farmer’s rainbow. Consequently, I had already started to forget most of the details of the supposed *dolce vita* aspects of our experiences, so decided to jot some down for future reference before they escaped my memory completely.

I should probably mention at this point that our return to Scotland a couple of years earlier hadn’t

really been planned either, nor indeed had leaving family, friends and everything we were familiar with to go and live in Mallorca some three years before that. Yet it wasn't that we'd been acting impulsively on such life-changing issues, particularly as they also involved our two sons, Sandy (18) and Charlie (12), but rather that we were playing the cards fate dealt us in what seemed the best way at the time. And with no aces up our sleeves by way of a comfortable cushion of funds to fall back on should things go wrong, the consequences of those decisions couldn't have been more crucial – not to mention the cause of many a sleepless night as well.

Those aspects of our life didn't need the help of notes to remember. My wife Ellie and I had been chasing our own particular rainbow on several different roller coasters during almost twenty-three years of marriage, with each ride proving more variety-spiced than the last – and a bit more scary at times too. So, what had made us adopt a way of life that many would liken to following the flocks of wild geese that fly in from the north to graze the green fields of East Lothian every autumn, only to take off again for pastures new come spring? We have to go back even further to find an answer to that...

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As I would relate years later in a book called *Thistle Soup*, I come from a farming background, and my ambition since childhood had always been to step one day into my maternal grandfather's straw-filled wellies, though it soon became clear that I was

perched one branch too low on the family tree for that to happen. At school, an ability to draw and paint quite well conspired to steer me even farther off the muddy path to the farmyard and towards art college, then potentially – though the thought made me shudder – to teaching, or even worse, to being imprisoned forever in the design department of some dark, satanic ceramics or wallpaper factory.

A career in the administrative side of farming seemed a logical compromise – at least to my parents, though somewhat less to me. In due deference to them, however, I bit the bullet, applied for a post as an Executive Officer in the Ministry of Agriculture, was accepted, then promptly drafted into the Ministry of Labour instead. And you don't encounter too many Aberdeen Angus cattle waiting in line for welfare benefit at the local 'broo', the unemployment bureaux that existed in most Scottish towns of any size back in the '50s! Nevertheless, I was duly assigned to a department in the Ministry's Edinburgh HQ, where I was responsible for collating weekly employment/unemployment/industrial stats from all the 'broos' in Scotland and converting them into a narrative that would be easily understood by Edward Heath, the then Minister of Labour and future Prime Minister of the UK. Though it didn't occur to me at the time, I was actually sharpening my creative writing skills, albeit in the most uninspiring of ways and certainly without any chance of injecting the slightest modicum of humour into the text, intentionally or otherwise.

I stuck it for almost two years and escaped before the promise of a secure, generously-salaried, perquisite-

sweetened and early-pensionable future lulled me into accepting a life that I feared would snuff out any spark of creativity that nature had kindled in me. To the astonishment of my superiors, and what I sensed was the tacit dismay of my parents, I resigned from the civil service, forsaking my feather-bedded future for one of the most insecure careers imaginable.

I became a professional jazz musician.

This could give the impression that I was behaving like a spoiled brat who had taken for granted an opportunity to progress in a career not open to many of my age at a time when the country was still recovering from the harsh years of post-war austerity. It was late 1960, I was not quite twenty, yet seemingly prepared to ignore any sacrifices my parents had made to set me on the road to a potentially more comfortable life than the one most hard working folk of their generation had endured. But the truth was that I deeply appreciated all my parents had done for me, and while I knew the risks involved in shifting to a career path pock-marked with pot holes big enough to swallow a horse, it was the only way ahead I could see. Years later, my mother confessed that she had been so worried at the time that she asked our family doctor if he thought I was right in the head. To which he replied that if I wasn't already nuts, I soon would be if I continued forcing myself to stay in a job I truly hated. Although outwardly the epitome of sanity, it was rumoured the doc had only studied medicine because he'd been coerced into following in his own father's footsteps. So, it's very possible that he

knew exactly where I was coming from on the going-nuts front.

Maybe, like me, he should have mapped out an escape route by learning to play the bagpipes in his youth. Because, bizarre as it may seem, that's what started me out (albeit inadvertently) on the road to becoming a professional jazz musician. It's an episode I would one day write about at some length in a book called *Don't Call Me Clyde!*. But suffice to say for now that it was being introduced, by a fellow member of our local boys' pipe band, to a film featuring the clarinet artistry of Benny 'King of Swing' Goodman that prompted me to do any farm jobs I could scrounge at weekends and during school holidays until I had saved up enough to buy a beat-up old clarinet of my own. A like-minded chum did similarly for a trumpet, another for a trombone, yet another for a drum kit, until we had ourselves a six-piece jazz band.

Village hall engagements around the county eventually graduated into bookings at bigger venues farther afield, a radio spot on a network talent show, and eventually a recording date with a Scottish company that resulted in the release of two singles. By this time I was a reluctant Executive Officer in the Ministry of Labour, and when those records found their way into the hands of a German jazz club proprietor who was sufficiently impressed to offer the band a two-month contract, the escape hatch was opened and I was on my way to freedom.

Or so I thought.

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Dame Fortune may well favour the brave, but she's also capable of kicking the foolhardy up the backside, and that's how it seemed she had decided to treat me at the end of what had been eight exhausting but exhilarating weeks as the leader of a full-time professional jazz band in Germany. Playing from 8pm till 2am seven nights a week with matinees on Saturdays and Sundays was hard going, but such things are taken in your stride when you're twenty and enjoying every minute of being paid for doing something you would gladly do for nothing. Then Dame Fortune paid me another visit, this time wearing her reality boots...

We returned to the UK with not one solitary offer of work. The so-called Trad Jazz Boom of the early '60s was rapidly gaining momentum, fuelled by the unprecedented pop chart success of jazz bands led by Chris Barber, Kenny Ball and Acker Bilk, with the result that there were more hopeful combos vying to emulate them than engagements to go round. While the boys in my band went back to their day jobs, I gulped down a slice of humble pie and braced myself to join the queue lining up for dole money at the local 'broo'. If you've resigned your position as an Executive Officer in the Ministry of Labour, there's no way back in – except as a 'customer'.

Then, just as quickly as my ride on the big dipper had hit rock bottom, I was on the way back up again, and in the most unexpected of ways. The Clyde Valley Stompers, Scotland's answer to Barber, Ball and Bilk,

having already achieved the status of a ‘super group’ north of the border, were about to broaden their horizons (and earning potential!) by moving their base from Glasgow to London. Their clarinettist had opted not to go, and as they liked what they’d heard on those two records that opened the German door for me, I was asked if I would be interested in joining them. *Would I?* I clambered aboard their bandwagon before it had even stopped to pick me up.

And so began a period of hard but regular touring work that promised to provide the foundations of a rewarding career and, in so far as can be expected in the music business, a secure one as well. After just a year traversing the gold-paved highways and byways of England on a packed date sheet of one-night stands, the trombonist/leader of the Clyde Valley Stompers (who, crucially, was also the legal owner of the band’s name) decided to retire, while continuing to control its financial affairs from the Channel Islands. He was still in his thirties. Although I was only twenty-one and pretty much the ‘baby’ of the group, he handed me the baton, ostensibly because I was the only member of the line-up with any experience of leading a band, but more likely because none of the other lads was naive enough to take the job on. The Clydes, to give them their abbreviated handle, had a history of friction between their decamping leader and a few of his erstwhile sidemen, with money being the root of all ill will, as I would find out to my cost in the fullness of time.

For the present, though, I grabbed with unbridled enthusiasm the dream-come-true opportunity to front

a top-line jazz band. As might be expected, there were problems aplenty in trying to convince the public and promoters alike that a greenhorn wannabe could not only hold the band together but also maintain its high-flying status in the face of ever keener competition. London, like any big city, is no place to lose your grip when you're holding onto the survival ladder by the skin of your teeth.

But survive we did, thanks in no small measure to being signed by up-and-coming record producer George Martin, soon to become immortalised through his work with the Beatles. Our jauntily jazzed-up version of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, recorded under George's supervision in EMI's iconic Abbey Road Studios, climbed swiftly into the UK's top-selling singles chart, propelling the Clydes for the first time into the razzle-dazzle world of mainstream pop music and all the lucrative dividends that come with it. Unfortunately, those dividends didn't materialise as quickly as expected in the wage packets we received from our agent. But fulfilling all the radio and TV engagements that rolled in on the back of our hit record kept us sufficiently sidetracked to allow any related misgivings to pass – at least for the present.

Film work involving top box office names of the day also came our way: playing the title music over the opening credits of a new Norman Wisdom movie called *On The Beat*, and actually appearing in *It's All Happening*, the latest big-screen production starring Tommy Steele. All these extra commitments had to be fitted into a hectic schedule of one-night-stands

that differed from the previous norm in only the size of the venues and, presumably, the size of the fees. Yet the contents of our wage packets remained unchanged.

Though jazz musicians are generally regarded as fairly easygoing creatures who have a way of making light of life's bothersome intrusions through the buzz they get from playing, they are by no means a soft touch when it comes to money, which is notoriously hard to come by in their line of business. Accordingly, they are not inclined to easily submit, without appropriate recompense, to the nomadic lifestyle dictated by the Clyde Valley Stompers' management. This eventually manifested itself in an ominous sequence of defections from the Clydes' line-up, until the matter came to a head by my asking the absentee owner of the band's name (via our London agent) for all financial comings and goings to be made transparent. I was immediately fired.

Thus, after three years on the up-and-up, my seat on the big dipper of life bottomed out. Again.

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It's said that everything happens for a reason, and looking back to the early '60s I can see that having my future as a jazz musician so abruptly nipped in the bud did actually kick me off on the path to becoming a published author a quarter of a century later. It turned out to be a long and twisting path, and not without its share of puddles either, but thanks to one positive aspect of my experience with the Clyde

Valley Stompers, at least I'd have good company and support along the way.

The future looked so rosy following the success of *Peter and the Wolf* that I took the plunge and married my schooldays sweetheart Ellie, who was immediately introduced to the loneliness that can often greet a new arrival in London, particularly one who has an itinerant jazz musician for a husband. But she took it all in her stride. She shared my optimistic outlook and was ready to take the rough with the smooth while laying the foundations of what we hoped would be a long and happy life together. And within a year, the arrival of our baby son Sandy added to the atmosphere of good cheer, only to be snuffed out by the sudden termination of my services as leader of what, financially at least, had never stopped being someone else's band. We duly made our way back home to Scotland, bruised, broke, but not beaten, and set about building a new future for our little family.

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Chapter Two

‘WHEN ONE DOOR CLOSES’

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By 1990, when I started scribbling those notes about our time as rookie orange farmers in Mallorca, twenty-five years had passed since the end of my career as leader of a top-flight jazz band in London. On returning to Scotland, I had initially tried to earn a living as a freelance musician, but although a few local gigs and even some TV work did come my way, it soon became apparent that this precarious pursuit of my old trade was unlikely to generate enough money to feed three mouths for long. The roller coaster may have ceased to nosedive, but only because it seemed there was nowhere lower for it to go.

And that’s when an aptitude for writing that had earned me a plaudit or two at school resurfaced to help things along. A journalist contact in Shetland, where I had toured with the band the previous year, invited me to contribute a weekly record-review

column to the local newspaper. There was only a small fee involved, but I was glad of any addition to the family coffers, no matter how modest. Dame Fortune then took it upon herself to give me an extra boost by extending the uptake of the column to three other papers in different parts of Scotland. Of a sudden, I was 'syndicated' – not quite in the George Bernard Shaw league of music critics, admittedly, but very grateful to be afforded my first venture into print, even if only as a temporary source of extra income.

It was now 1966, and this change in my luck continued by being offered a chance to get involved in the technical side of record production by the Edinburgh studios responsible for those two singles that had provided me with an escape route from the civil service and subsequently the chance to join the Clyde Valley Stompers. Within a couple of years, I had progressed to being a record producer in my own right, using to good advantage the experience of having worked as a musician under George Martin, the producer who, through the massive success he'd gone on to achieve with the Beatles, had become one of the most highly regarded in the business.

It should probably go without saying that having an ability to empathise with the musicians involved is an essential for anyone entrusted with control of a recording session. A studio can be an unnerving place for any performer, no matter how experienced, and I'd learned that George Martin's maxim of creating a relaxed atmosphere at the start of proceedings should be the overriding priority of whoever is sitting in 'the booth'. The knobs and faders at his fingertips are

inanimate objects to be tweaked and twisted at will, while the musicians on the studio floor are human beings, and frequently fairly sensitive ones at that, no matter how hard they try to appear otherwise. So, I made it my rule to adhere to the relax-'em-first policy, and it served me well over the coming years when, as a freelance producer, I had the privilege of working with a wide range of recording artistes whose talents were as diverse as those of Jimmy Shand, the legendary king of Scottish Dance Music at one end of the spectrum, and the Krankies, quirky stars of British TV comedy at the other.

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In 1970, an unpredicted wind of change snapped a few twigs on the family tree and presented me with the longed-for chance to get a foot in the farming door, not as an office-bound administrator this time, but as a rain-or-shine, mud-on-my-boots, hands-on plougher of my own furrow.

Four or five hundred acres is considered an optimum size for an arable farm on the fertile expanses of East Lothian, so by those standards the fifty-acre holding we took the tenancy of was generally considered to be no more than a decent-sized field. To me, however, Cuddy Neuk represented not only a doorway to a long-coveted way of life but also a link to my childhood and all the cherished memories associated with it. For this was the little spread my grandfather had used as a stepping stone to a larger, more viable farm after coming south from his native Orkney

shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. It was where my own family lived until I was eight years old, and no matter how far away life eventually took me, Cuddy Neuk would always mean 'home'. I loved everything about the place.

But the reality that faced us when we took over could not be disguised by any amount of rose-tinted nostalgia. The farm was in a pretty run-down state, with only the most basic set of implements, and even those were on their last legs. But Ellie and I welcomed the challenge to return Cuddy Neuk to its former trim, productive state, and we put our shoulders resolutely to the wheel.

Our first concern was to get the land back in good heart, which hard work alone would not accomplish. We would need to invest in machinery that was fit for purpose, enough good seed and fertilizer to give our first crop of barley the best chance of producing a decent yield, and we would also have to buy livestock to contribute to the long-term fertility of the soil, as well as helping create a more diverse farming business for the future. All of this would take money – much more than the meagre funds we had at our disposal.

Any notion I may have entertained of instantly becoming a full-time farmer had to be quickly stifled. If I was ever to reach even a fraction of the way towards achieving that goal, I'd have to fund the effort by maximising my income from producing records. Inevitably, this would often involve spending more time away tending microphones and tape recorders than ploughing fields and scattering seeds, meaning

Ellie would be left to see to the day-to-day running of the farm. She also had to find time to look after our second son Muir, a boisterous wee lad who had been born three years earlier, although big brother Sandy, now seven, was always keen to lend a helping hand when he came home from school every evening. All in all, then, the cogs in our new-found wheel of fortune were clicking nicely into place, and even if there never seemed to be enough hours in the day, we couldn't have been more contented with our lot.

Just when we thought life couldn't get more hectic, along came the chance of even more recording work, which the hard facts of our financial situation dictated I was obliged to accept. America's mighty RCA Records had recently decided to set up their own production and distribution operations in the UK, having previously delegated those activities to British affiliates. RCA's policy was to quickly establish a 'stable' of British artistes embracing a broad range of musical output, whether classical, pop or what they classified as 'regionally typical', which included the music I was involved with in Scotland. I just happened to be the only freelance producer currently operating north of the border, so without any pushing on my part, the door to a significant source of additional revenue opened in front of me. All I had to do now was find performers of the right calibre to fit the bill: no easy task in a relatively small talent pool where the best-known names were already under contract.

While progress in netting suitable artistes was indeed slow when it came to the most popular types (singers of homespun songs, folk groups,

Scottish Country Dance Bands, etc.), I did manage to sign for RCA a military band of some repute which, having only recently returned home after several years abroad, had escaped the attention of British record labels. The Royal Scots Greys were one of Scotland's oldest regiments, with a long and illustrious history that included a legendary role in securing victory for Britain at the Battle of Waterloo. Yet 'The Greys' were about to fall victim to cuts in the government's defence budget by being amalgamated with another regiment and, though unthinkable to staunch upholders of military tradition, given a brand new name.

Amazing Grace by the Pipes and Drums and Military Band of what had become the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards was recorded as a last-minute filler for one side of an RCA album called *Farewell to the Greys*, a record the American company judged would have extremely limited sales potential. Who, after all, apart from people with sentimental ties to the old regiment, would be interested in buying an LP commemorating its change of name? In a nutshell, RCA's primary concern was to exploit the popularity of global superstars like Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton, not to finance a trip down memory lane for a handful of old soldiers in Scotland.

The album was recorded nonetheless, albeit on a budget commensurate with the company's lack of belief in its profitability. Despite all that, a fortuitous airing of one particular track on a late-night BBC radio programme in the spring of 1972 generated such an overwhelming public response that RCA

were compelled to release it as a single. *Amazing Grace* shot promptly to the top of the UK pop charts, emulated that success internationally, and ultimately became the biggest-selling instrumental single of all time, with sales grossing some thirteen million.

Unfortunately, RCA's budgetary constraints were also reflected in the royalty rate stipulated in my producer's contract, but while I didn't earn anything resembling a fortune from the runaway success of *Amazing Grace*, it did provide us with enough capital over the next few years to add to our limited range of working tackle at Cuddy Neuk, create the foundation of a herd of breeding cattle, construct a spacious all-purpose building to augment the original pocket-sized steading, and generally invest in the little farm's prospects of becoming a viable business.

For all that we were grateful for this financial windfall, we would readily have forfeited every penny and much more besides to prevent the tragedy that followed in its wake. Wee Muir's death, at only five years of age, in a road accident that almost killed his elder brother too, put brutally into perspective the insignificance of material assets when set against the loss of a child. It took a long time to learn to live with that.

It's true, though, that keeping busy is the best way of coping with grief, and as crops and animals have to be tended through bad times as well as good, fulfilling those obligations did much to provide the incentive we needed to pick up the pieces and get on with the task of building a future for our family.

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The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards' single of *Amazing Grace* had become a worldwide phenomenon, not because of any flash of inspiration on my part (as noted earlier, it was recorded as a last-minute album filler, and in only one 'take' at that), nor because of any high-powered marketing push by RCA, but solely because it struck an emotional chord with the many millions of people who heard it. Countering that reaction came a flurry of criticism from certain factions of the 'serious' bagpipe fraternity, who declared it a piece of blatant commercialism that showed a lack of respect for the glorious heritage of Scotland's national instrument. This didn't stop those same carpers from swiftly cashing in on this alleged irreverence by publishing a keenly-priced transcription of the melody for the edification of pipers at large. And although a hit featuring the Highland war pipes was widely seen by music industry 'experts' as a never-to-be-repeated fluke, there were still recording artistes astute enough to grab a slice of the action while it lasted – including one ex-Beatle with a holiday home on the Mull of Kintyre.

As was to be expected, the bagpipe bandwagon soon departed the fickle byways of mainstream pop music, and I was glad to have been distanced from much of the resultant hustle and bustle as it passed through. Yet, in its aftermath, my involvement in its creation did have a positive effect on the demand for my services as a freelance producer. Military bands had suddenly been added to the lists of must-haves by record companies previously indifferent

to their existence, and as I now had a track record in that field, I got my fair share of calls to supply the goods – provided, as had become my stock-in-trade, I could deliver at a cost that kept risk to an absolute minimum.

These new commitments inevitably involved more travelling on my part, since it was cheaper to take mobile recording equipment to where the bands were based than to transport forty or fifty musicians to studios that were handier for the producer. As a result, military barracks in places as far afield as Catterick in Yorkshire, Tidworth in Wiltshire, Knightsbridge in London, ‘Royal’ Windsor, a string of British garrison towns across the north of Germany and even a slightly more exotic Beau Geste style fort in the Arabian Desert became familiar workplaces for me during the remainder of the ’70s.

Meanwhile, long-suffering Ellie kept the home fires burning at Cuddy Neuk, prompting one of her chums to quip that she should be awarded a medal for stoicism – either that or a certificate of insanity! Joking aside, it can’t be denied that trying to keep so many plates spinning at once was often tough for both of us. With the birth in 1973 of Charlie, a new wee brother for Sandy, Ellie had her hands full enough being mother to her own youngsters without having to bottle-feed batches of baby calves day and night. But that was just one necessity of many that were part and parcel of the development of the farm. By the same token, there wasn’t a moment spent away on record production business when I wouldn’t rather have been working at home, whether helping Ellie

with her routine chores or keeping on top of essential field work, the timing of which is set by the passing of the seasons and the vagaries of the weather, not by deadlines imposed by any record company.

Even so, the occasions when one commitment clashed with the other were few, far-between and minor. The window of dates in nature's calendar for each and every operation in the farming year, be it ploughing, sowing, hay making or harvest, is ignored at your peril, and we paid due heed to that maxim at all times.

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As the years passed and my record-review column had long since run its course, providing sleeve notes for some of the LP albums I produced became my only involvement in writing, which was still far removed from providing even the slightest hint that I might one day become an author. But who knows? Maybe fate was helping me keep my hand in, just in case.

And I suppose that even if I *had* harboured thoughts of dipping my pen in a 'proper' inkwell (which I hadn't), finding the time would have proved a major obstacle. As we approached the end of our first decade at Cuddy Neuk, maintaining a balance between farm work and record production hadn't become any easier, although the progress being made in both occupations gave us all the encouragement we needed to carry on regardless. What's more, we were enjoying ourselves!

The farm was now in tip-top trim, with the land

producing decent yields of malting barley and healthy swards of grass for our expanding herd of cattle. We had even started renting a couple of fields on nearby farms for extra summer grazing.

On the record front, demand for the supply of albums featuring military bands had returned to a more rational level since the passing of the boom times sparked by *Amazing Grace*, but as I'd kept my involvement with the 'civilian' side of the market intact throughout, I still had more than enough to do providing record companies with well-tried staples. Time-honoured favourites like Andy Stewart and Jimmy Shand may have stepped aside to make way for a new generation of Scottish entertainers, but I was on hand to help a fair few of those launch their recording careers as well.

So well were things going, in fact, that we made the momentous decision to buy the farm. This, of course, meant arranging a bank loan for more than we would have dared to even think about when taking on the tenancy just ten years earlier. But since then, a combination of hard work and good luck had helped improve and consolidate our financial position. And as there appeared to be no reason to suspect that our fortunes were likely to take a significant turn for the worse in the foreseeable future, we decided that, if we didn't make the ultimate commitment now, the chances were that we never would.

This buoyant outlook was given an additional lift in 1981 when I was asked to produce an album featuring the Krankies, Scotland's off-beat comedy duo currently amassing legions of new fans through

weekly appearances on *Crackerjack*, the BBC's flagship TV programme for children. I solved the problem of their musical repertoire being a bit short on recordable material by composing several tailor-made songs. This was a new departure for me and I thoroughly enjoyed it, particularly writing lyrics aimed squarely at a young audience, which gave me an opportunity to play with words in a way I hadn't done before. The fun I had is exemplified in the lyrics I rustled up in an effort to capture the spirit of the Krankie's famous catchword, *Fan-dabi-dozi*. Very few nursery rhyme characters escaped the net!

*When Little Jack Horner met Jack and Jill,
They boogied on up to the top of the hill:
To the Owl and the Pussy Cat's disco night,
And they Rock-a-Bye'd Baby in the pale moonlight.*

Chorus:

*It was Fan-dabi-dozi, Fan-dabi-dozi,
Fan-dabi-dozi and they danced all night.
Fan-dabi-dozi, Fan-dabi-dozi,
Fan-dabi-dozi, yeah, that's all right!*

*The Little Old Woman Who Lived In a Shoe
Rode a Cock Horse to the party too.
She saw Miss Muffet and the Crooked Man;
They were boppin' with Mary and her Little Lamb.*

Chorus:

It was Fan-dabi-dozi, Fan-dabi-dozi etc...

*Wee Willie Winkie and the Three Blind Mice
Were jivin' with Pretty Maids and that was nice.
With a Hey Diddle-Didle and a Ding-Dong-Dell
The Cat Played the Fiddle and he sang as well.*

Chorus:

He sang Fan-dabi-dozi, Fan-dabi-dozi, etc...

But not even the infectious sparkle of the Krankies could brighten the clouds of recession that were gathering over Britain in the early '80s. Record companies were not immune to the related downturn in demand for their products, and the result was a swift and sweeping reduction in output. Almost overnight, the market for my offerings fell from upwards of a dozen albums per year to zero. And with the resultant loss of income came the harsh realisation that we would no longer be able to meet our obligations to the bank.

Though heartbreaking, Cuddy Neuk and all the bittersweet memories it embodied would have to be sold.

* * * * *



Chapter Three

'FROM A PRUNING HOOK TO A HAMMER'

*

We arrived in Mallorca towards the end of 1984, having put our dashed hopes for Cuddy Neuk behind us, and determined to make a go of our new venture come what may. The prospect of growing oranges for a living in a sunny climate may seem like the stuff of dreams, but we knew the reality could well turn out to be the opposite. Basics like communicating in a strange language and getting to grips with a totally unfamiliar branch of farming presented even bigger challenges than those we'd faced when taking on the tenancy of Cuddy Neuk some fourteen years earlier.

We had made the decision to purchase the little orange farm of Ca's Mayoral after coming across it by chance while taking a short break in Mallorca following months of trying to buy a substitute for Cuddy Neuk in less fertile parts of Scotland, where land values were correspondingly lower. But with limited capital at our disposal and borrowing ruled

out, asking prices for properties that might have suited our purpose were always tantalisingly beyond our reach. Once again, it seemed force of circumstances rather than a choice of alternatives was dictating the path we were set to follow.

No matter how much we tried to convince ourselves otherwise, making the move to Mallorca could justifiably be described as bordering on the foolhardy side of derring-do. Yet our determination to continue farming within the constraints of our budget remained undiminished, even if it meant migrating fifteen hundred miles to a foreign land to make it possible. It didn't take long for our resolve to be tested. Severely.

'Look!' beamed a well-meaning Mallorcan neighbour on our arrival at Ca's Mayoral. He was gazing with a mix of delight and amazement at the effect a freak snowstorm was having on the surrounding landscape. 'The weather has come from Scotland to welcome you!'

'So much for picking oranges in the Mallorcan sunshine!' I said to myself, smiling gamely while thanking him for his kind words. But although snow was the last thing I expected to see right then, I wasn't unduly concerned. I knew that even light falls, never mind mini blizzards like this one, were quite rare on the island, and mostly confined to the mountain tops anyway. The oranges on our trees down here in the valley would only resemble snowballs until the sun came out again; which it duly did, almost as quickly as it had disappeared. If this was the worst Mallorca had to throw at us, *no problema!*

Then we were informed that the removals van, which had been due to arrive ahead of us with all our goods and chattels from Scotland, was still making its way southward through France. Still, we thought, doing without a few familiar home comforts for a day or two wouldn't do us any harm. *No problema!*

Then the previous owners' two mongrel dogs and accompanying pack of semi-feral cats trooped into the house to give us the once-over, before exhibiting their opinions in cryptically-placed deposits of cat poop and selectively-aimed squirts of dog pee. But, hey! we thought, they were only innocent animals reacting to unwanted change in the only way they knew. They'd soon come round to accepting us. *No problema!*

Then the water boiler packed in. Still, we thought, it would be no great hardship to make do with boiling the kettle for essential needs until the local plumber came to our rescue. A couple of days at most without showering? *No problema!*

Then, a week later, the septic tank choked, causing the contents to back up and ooze out over the ground floor of the house. Another job for the plumber, who still hadn't come to fix the boiler. *Problema!*

But all of these setbacks paled compared to being informed by a neighbouring farmer that, although our orange trees might look fine to us, they had been neglected for so long that they'd become riddled with disease. Drastic measures would be required to return them to any kind of productivity – if indeed that proved to be possible at all. We had, he said, *un problema profundo*, which meant in any language

that we had bought a complete lemon of an orange farm. We had been victims of our own naivety and, yes, foolhardiness too.

Then Christmas night arrived with a storm and a lightning strike that wiped out our electricity supply. Having no lights on the Christmas tree, although no great problem in itself, only added to a creeping sense of homesickness and a despondent feeling that our Mallorcan adventure seemed doomed to fail before it had even started.

And the removals van containing all the bits and pieces that make a house a home *still* hadn't arrived.

* * *

Ill-omened as those first few weeks at Ca's Mayoral may have been, we had crossed the Rubicon and there could be no going back. And thanks to the support and advice of our elderly neighbours in the valley, our luck soon changed and we settled into our new way of life with surprising ease. Even our practice of working as if there were no tomorrow gradually morphed into the *mañana* pace governed by the climate and observed by Spanish country folk since time immemorial.

Our two boys also adjusted to island life with a sense of expectancy that quelled any doubts they may have harboured before leaving 'home'. Our concerns about the culture shock that young Charlie might encounter when starting his new school also proved unfounded. He embraced with delight the informal dress code of jeans, T-shirt and sneakers that

reflected the laid-back atmosphere of the classroom in general. And as his new school chums represented a diverse mix of nationalities, his outlook was broadened accordingly – even if his enthusiasm for certain educational aspects of schooling remained steadfastly limited!

His elder brother Sandy, on the other hand, couldn't have been keener to learn the ropes of farming Mallorca-style. He had already completed a course at agricultural college in Scotland, but the intricacies of pruning orange trees hadn't been on the curriculum, nor had the technique required to plough with a tiny, two-wheeled, walk-behind 'tractor' (or a diesel-powered donkey, as he wryly dubbed it) as opposed to the conventional 4-wheel-drive monsters he'd become accustomed to.

Ellie and I, meanwhile, breathed a sigh of relief that the unfortunate series of events blighting our introduction to our adopted home was now behind us. On the positive side, the experience had taught us that, in the face of adversity, laughter really is the best medicine, and although we didn't know it at the time, it would prove to be a remedy we'd find ourselves re-administering with remarkable regularity. For now, however, the future looked promising and, most importantly, we were enjoying ourselves again!

* * *

As details of our Mallorcan adventure are already well documented in the *Snowball Oranges* series of books, it's probably enough to briefly mention

here that it developed into a thoroughly enjoyable three years: enlightening, fulfilling, occasionally nail-biting but predominantly happy. All things considered, it was an opportunity we feel privileged to have been granted. In fact, if it hadn't been for the detrimental effect that Spain's joining the EU had on small orange-growing businesses like ours, it's more than likely that we would have stayed there for the rest of our days. But, in a farming world with '*Big Is Beautiful*' as its byword, our abiding problem of having limited capital was bound to be even more to our disadvantage when attempting to compete in a location like Mallorca, where the value of land, even in out-of-the-way rural areas, is inexorably linked to tourism. We had been lucky to get a foot in the door once, the 'bargain' price we paid for Ca's Mayoral having reflected the poor condition of its orchards and the resultant absence of rival offers from in-the-know locals. But in the end, just as lightning never strikes the same tree twice, it eventually became clear that snow wasn't about to fall on our oranges for a second time either. Not even to bid us '*Adiós!*'

* * *

And so we revert to the start of this narrative and those notes I scribbled about what folks 'back home' imagined had been our time spent living the life of Riley in Mallorca...

On returning to the UK, our intention was to start a deer farm, which was something we had seriously considered before fate whisked us off to foreign

climes. We eventually found a suitable block of land to buy on the lower slopes of the Lammermuir Hills in south-east Scotland. Again, the scale of the enterprise would be governed by the size of our budget, which had somehow survived the Ca's Mayoral venture, but was still precariously tight. Nevertheless, we had done enough number crunching to convince ourselves that, by following the Mallorcan '*poc a poc*' principle of treading carefully and proceeding little by little, we'd have a fair chance of making the gamble pay off.

After almost two years of preparation, which included divining for water then drilling a well, laying half a mile of underground electricity and telephone cables and actually building a house from scratch, we were finally ready to stock the property with the nucleus of a herd of fallow deer: a relatively small species well suited to our circumstances. It was November, 1989, and our roller coaster was on an upward trajectory once again.

Then the Berlin Wall came down. At a stroke, the British deer farming industry was shaken to its foundations. West Germany, a major market for this country's farmed venison, would now have access to unlimited supplies of the wild variety from the east, and at prices significantly below those required to show a profit for UK farmers.

We watched the TV news footage of elated Berliners setting about the hated concrete barrier with their picks and sledge hammers.

Ellie cast me a sidelong glance. 'Seems your timing has been just a *wee* bit off,' she said, observing a moment of pregnant silence before adding, 'Again.'

There was no answer to that, so I didn't offer one. I just sat there staring vacantly at the telly, stroking my chin and sensing the clouds of doom gathering above my head. 'Aye, right enough,' I ultimately muttered. 'As you say, it seems kinda like it.'

'And just when I was looking forward to putting my stamp on our new house too,' Ellie sighed, pointedly. 'You know ... making a house a home?'

I waited for her to append the dreaded 'Again' word, but she didn't. It really went without saying. I knew she had shown the patience of a saint, putting up with everything from being an itinerant jazz musician's 'widow' in London, to shouldering the responsibilities of keeping a farm ticking over while I was away producing records, and even to lugging heavy crates of oranges about in the stifling heat of Mallorca. On top of all that, she'd wholeheartedly supported whatever venture I came up with, no matter how questionable its chances of success. She really did deserve a medal.

'You know, Ellie,' I said at length, 'I've come to the conclusion that it's high time I gave up this obsession with farming on a shoestring. We've given it our best shots, but let's face it, we're pissing against the wind.'

'I think you'll find the word is actually puffing.'

'Puff, piss, whatever. It still amounts to farting against thunder, and it isn't worth the effort.'

Ellie raised an eyebrow. 'So, what do you propose doing instead?'

I stroked my chin again, thinking hard but in no frame of mind to produce any worthwhile suggestions. 'I dunno,' I grumped. 'Maybe I'll write a book

about it!’

Ellie raised both eyebrows. ‘Maybe you should at that.’

‘Me? A book?’ I shook my head. ‘Nah, no way.’

‘Why not? I mean, think about it – you’ve got *plenty* of stuff to write about!’

‘OK, OK, no need to come over all sarky. You’ve had a lot to put up with over the years, I admit, but –’

‘I’m not being sarky. I’m being serious. I mean, you’re pretty good at writing stuff ... look at *Fan-dabi-dози* for instance.’

I gave a little chuckle. ‘Now I *know* you’re having a go at me!’

‘No, I’m not – honestly. What I’m trying to say is that you’ve got the material. You know, orange groves and tapas bars instead of Little Miss Muffet and Wee Willie Winkie – but it’s still about juggling with words, so why not give it a go?’

I didn’t share Ellie’s enthusiasm, but I let the idea simmer for a while anyway. ‘It definitely is *not* my bag,’ I eventually told myself. ‘No, but then again,’ I wavered, ‘there’s no harm in having a look at those notes I’ve been jotting down. Hmm, maybe I’ll get round to that tomorrow. Yeah, now that I think about it, why not indeed?’

But I still had no inclination to develop the hotchpotch of scribbled memory-joggers into a book. With our projected deer farm failing to materialise, I’d have enough on my plate trying to realise our assets by selling the land and house we’d just invested in, as well as attempting to find another source of family income. Again.

Whether it was a genuine, spur-of-the-moment brainwave or just a desperate attempt to head off any ‘bright idea’ I might put forward myself, I couldn’t tell, but it was Ellie who got in first with a possible solution to our latest monetary conundrum...

‘Why don’t we buy an old property, do it up and flog it?’

‘H-h-hold on a minute,’ I spluttered. ‘That’ll take time. Yeah, and it’d tie up all our capital too.’

‘So?’

‘So, where are we gonna live in the meantime?’

‘In the old house we’re doing up, of course. Where else?’

I was dumbstruck. Here was a woman who had stoically endured being shunted around several cramped, charmless flats in London, had made the most of the damp, fungus-sprouting farm cottages we had rented on our return home, had turned the sadly neglected house at Cuddy Neuk into a bright, cheery and comfortable family home (all while having to adhere to a policy of make-do-and-mend), and now she was offering to rough it in what would inevitably turn out to be an indoor building site for months on end. I scratched my head. Perhaps she really did deserve that certificate of insanity her friend had teased her about. For a fleeting moment I was tempted to tell her that I reckoned the Mallorcan sun must have addled her brains, but opted for a more tactful response instead.

‘Look, Ellie,’ I said, ‘I see where you’re coming from and I appreciate the gesture, I really do, but –’

‘But nothing! And it’s not a gesture. It’s facing the facts, that’s all.’

‘What facts?’ I frowned.

‘That it’s time we made what money we’ve got work *for* us instead of using it to chase rainbows.’

This was the first time in all the years I’d known her that Ellie had dug her heels in like this. Not that she wasn’t adept at getting her own way when the fancy took her, but she’d always employed more subtle ways of going about it. Suitably admonished, I took a deep breath, braced myself and motioned her to continue.

She had been thinking about it for some time, she revealed, and had come to the conclusion that now was an ideal time to get a toehold in the local property market. The East Lothian countryside had always been a great place to live, but despite its proximity to Edinburgh had been relatively undiscovered by city dwellers until the recent building of a connecting motorway. House prices were on the rise, so why not try to get in on the act while the going was good? And before I could offer any objections, she pointed out that she’d become a dab hand at papering and painting over the years, and she couldn’t remember a day at Cuddy Neuk and Ca’s Mayoral when I hadn’t toted a hammer or spanner or saw or suchlike either. Necessity had been the mother of making do and mending, she concluded, and what better qualification was there for tackling the transformation of a house in need of some TLC? We’d already done it often enough for our own comfort, so why not do it now for profit?

I could have stated the obvious by arguing that making a profit was liable to be more an aspiration than an inevitability, but decided against it. Ellie had the bit firmly between her teeth, and it seemed only fair to let her have her head. Besides, I couldn't think of an alternative proposition, far less a safer one. All I could do was shrug my assent.

It was only then that Ellie divulged that she had already identified our first project: a lovely old stone-built house in our home town of Haddington, centrally located, with an open outlook to the front, a walled-in garden at the back and even its own private garage.

'Sounds interesting,' I said, guardedly. 'Maybe we should arrange to see round it sometime – depending on the asking price, of course.'

'I've already been to see it,' Ellie piped up with a self-assured smile. 'It's just what we're looking for!'

'Depending on the asking price, of course,' I reiterated, a tad apprehensively this time.

'*And* I've spoken to the owner,' Ellie continued. 'Recently widowed – nice old man – very attached to the house – doesn't want it to go to just anybody – likes the idea of us doing a sensitive refurb. Needs younger people to breathe new life into it, he said.'

'Depending on the price, of course,' I persisted, despairingly.

'All taken care of,' Ellie breezed. 'Quick sale for the old boy, good deal for us.' She tweaked my cheek and winked. 'And don't you worry, Mr Tightwad, it's well within our budget too!'

* * * * *