

Martin Simpson
**purpose
+ grace**



"I am one of the last of a small tribe of troubadours who still believe that life is a beautiful and exciting journey with a purpose and grace well worth singing about."

E Y Harburg

Purpose + Grace started as a list of songs and a list of possible guests. It is a wide mixture of material, from a traditional song I first heard 50 years ago, other songs that have been with me for decades, waiting to be arranged, to new original songs. You stand in a long line when you perform songs like this, you honour the ancestors, but hopefully the songs become, if only briefly your own, or a part of you. To call on my friends and peers to make this recording has been a great pleasure. Turning the two lists into a coherent whole was joyous. On previous recordings I've invited guest musicians to play their instruments, here, I asked singers for their unique contributions to these songs. Accompanying song has always been my favourite occupation, so it made perfect sense to have vocal and instrumental collaborations.

In 1976 I had just released my first album and had been picked up by a heavy, old school music business manager whose avowed intent was to make me a star. I was not averse to the concept, and went straight from small folk clubs to opening shows for Steeleye Span at the biggest halls in the country. Early the next year June Tabor asked me if I would accompany her on tour. I was ecstatic and duly reported to my manager, who told me I was a star and didn't play for other people. I disagreed and failed to be the next big thing, but started ten years of intense learning as June's accompanist. In 1980 we recorded **A Cut Above** for Topic which included Richard Thompson's **Strange Affair**. After 30 plus years it feels most appropriate to revisit the song with June.

During that period, I was living in the Lake District and was frequently visited by Dick Gaughan, who was very busy, both solo and as a member of Five Hand Reel. Dick has been a massive influence on me, as a player and a singer and a friend. I heard him sing on many occasions back then, and I was always deeply moved by the emotional quality and content of his live work. Among the songs that Dick sang was **Jamie Foyers**, and I asked him to write out Ewan MacColl's Spanish Civil War adaptation for me, so I could learn it.

When the idea for this recording was first suggested, I wrote out a wish list and top of the list was Gaughan singing **Jamie Foyers**. The song in its traditional form tells the story of the death of a young Scots soldier in the Peninsular War. Ewan MacColl lost two friends who fought against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War, and he turned his friends into a more recent Jamie Foyers. Having recorded this song, I suggested that we try a version of the Anthem of The Depression - **Brother Can You Spare A Dime**, and it was done minutes later. Yip Harburg wrote the lyrics for this song for a revue called Americana, which was a commercial flop. Brother... however became a massive hit for both Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee despite the American right wing's attempts to have it banned as anti-capitalist propaganda. Harburg wrote the lyrics for *Somewhere Over The Rainbow*, *Only A Paper Moon* and *Lydia the Tattooed Lady* amongst many others. He was blacklisted in the 1950s, but continued to write. The fact that record companies ignored the earlier attempts at censoring this beautiful, radical writer because he was making them rich is massively ironic.

In 1958, Banjo Bill Cornett of Hindman, Kentucky, made a home recording. The following year he was recorded by musician, artist and folklorist John Cohen for the Folkways album **Mountain Music of Kentucky**. Cohen wrote in his notes that Cornett was distrustful of folklorists, and was very protective of the songs and tunes he played. He told Cohen that he had made a recording of his best material, and was considering what to do with it. Those recordings were eventually released by the Field Recorders Collective 44 years later, under the title **The Lost Recordings of Banjo Bill Cornett** (FRC304). There are 22 tracks, including 1'13" of Banjo Bill talking about his project. I based the song **Banjo Bill** on his words.

"This is Banjo Bill Cornett, I'm at home today, thirteenth day of February 1958. Here by myself, nobody but me around and that's when I usually play the banjo and sing and whatever. My children grew up, and they fell for this rock'n'roll music - honky tonk music whatever you might call it. I don't like that and I catch them all gone, my wife gone and then I carry on to suit my own self and I'm making this record to give somebody - I don't know who I'll give this recording to, I want to give it to someone who will keep it and if there's any people after I'm gone who'd like to hear my carrying on as far as my singing and banjo playing is concerned, I'd like them to keep it." **Bill Cornett**





Cornett was an extraordinary player whose breadth of styles on the 5 string banjo extended much further than any other traditional player I know of. He was a treasure trove of the riches and diversity of American folk song. Amongst the songs he recorded is a version of Barbara Allen which inspired the version here. The scale used is pentatonic with no 3rd - 1 . 2 . 4 . 5. b7 .

When I was about 8 years old, Miss Cook, the music teacher at Brumby Junior School taught my class a version of **Barbara Allen** and I still remember vividly how much I was moved by the song. I even asked if I could take home my copy of the lyrics on purple ink roneoed paper, which I can still smell. Miss Cook was otherwise memorable for her vicious accuracy with a ruler across the knuckles.

In 1969, Hedy West, the Georgia born singer, banjo player and guitarist, came to the Scunthorpe Folk Club and utterly inspired me. That night I bought from her a copy of her Topic LP **Ballads**, which is on my turntable as I write. The original autographed copy is very worn, so I play a second copy. This record has been one of my favourites for forty years, and I learned **The Sheffield Apprentice** from there. On Hedy's version she sings the opening line "I was brought up in Cornwall", which was sung to Cecil Sharp by Mary Gibson Marian County, North Carolina in 1918. Mary Gibson famously said that she liked Sharp because he was "so nice and common".

During the time I lived in the French Quarter in New Orleans, I was lucky enough to meet and become friends with the late writer, story teller and bon viveur Coleen Salley. She was a gem, a funny, charming, brilliant woman with a 'Yat accent that could strip paint. At Mardi Gras Coleen was lifted into a shopping cart and pushed around the Quarter by friends, as The Krewe of Coleen - a one woman Mardi Gras float. When my daughter Molly was very little, Coleen sent her a copy of her book **Epossumondas Saves The Day**, and we treasure it.

Little Liza Jane is used by Mardi Gras Indians as a chant, and I wrote some lyrics for Coleen and Alex Chilton and for the people of New Orleans and the Gulf Coast. The recent BP oil-spill in the Gulf of Mexico is one of an almost endless series of abuses and pollution which that region has suffered at the hands of the petroleum and chemical industries. The Mississippi banks from Baton Rouge to the Gulf are commonly known as Cancer Alley.

I recorded a version of **Lakes of Ponchartrain** on my 1985 Topic album **Sad or High Kicking**. I learned it from the Cajun bluegrass band The Louisiana Honeydrippers, who made one excellent record for Arhoolie in the 1960s. Having lived in New Orleans, I felt qualified to revisit the song with a different feel. Thousands of Irish emigrants ended up in New Orleans. The city has a great Irish culture and heritage. The levees and drainage ditches which stop the city being inundated were largely built by Irish labour. Ten thousand Irish died during the construction and their memorial is a small Celtic cross on the central median of an Uptown New Orleans road. When the Civil War broke out, the Union Navy sailed up the Mississippi and took New Orleans, the young Irishman in the song fled north through the swamps. There is so much history in the few verses of a folk song.

I learned **Bold General Wolfe** from The Watsonsons. Wolfe was a fascinating man. The son of a General, he joined the Army at thirteen and rose to prominence in combat and in training. He was a reformer and a very popular officer amongst his troops. In 1759 he led the British Army against the French under General Montcalm at the battle for Quebec City. His victory gave North America to the British and ended the Seven Years War. Wolfe was shot three times during the battle and died of his wounds.

Sometime in the early 1970s I visited Hull to see the Watsonsons at their home, and I was greatly taken by an old fretless banjo they had - I coveted it a great deal actually! Almost 35 years later I did a gig with Mike, Martin Carthy and Chris Parkinson at Skipton Cattle Market. I asked Mike about the banjo, which he informed me was languishing in his shed. He told me I could have it if I got it fixed up. My friend Barry Murphy has painstakingly restored it to playing condition, straightening the warped neck, making new friction pegs and replacing the old split head. The first time I played it I started to write the tune for Mike - **Don't Put Your Banjo In The Shed Mr Waterson**. Mike has always been one of my favourite singers - his version of *Tamlyn* is a tour de force of ballad singing. I can think of none better.

One of the marvellous aspects of folk songs is their ability to move and to morph. There is no better example than *The Unfortunate Rake*, an 18th century English song about a young man expiring of syphilis. The song became *When I Was On Horseback* in Ireland, *The Streets Of Laredo* and *Tom Sherman's Bar Room* in the Western US and *St. James Infirmary* and *The Dying Crapshooter's Blues*. The main character changing from Rake to Cowboy to Soldier and Sailor, and here changes gender. ***The Bad Girl's Lament*** also known as *One Morning In May* comes from the singing of Texas Gladden, a traditional singer who knew 300 songs by memory. She was recorded by Alan Lomax in Virginia in 1941.

I met Fay Hield here in Sheffield and have played guitar for her at the Bright Phoebus events which have also allowed me to meet and work with some of our finest young musicians including Will Pound, Sam Sweeney, Hannah James, Sam Carter and, of course, the venerable Jon Boden. Fay got *Bad Girl* from the American singer Molly Andrews.

I've been working on a song for my friends Stan and Harold for several years now - it's a long way from finished. Stan and Harold are Native American veterans of the Vietnam War. Bruce Springsteen wrote ***Brothers Under The Bridge*** about Vietnam Vets in California and my friend Josh Michael sent me a live solo recording by Bruce which was exquisite. I sing it for Stan and Harold with love.

I first heard ***In The Pines*** sung by Leadbelly when I was about twelve years old. It has a darkness which I love, whether in the minor key versions or in this major version. The very excellent Dick Connette did a wonderful version of the song which inspired me to sing it again. The first recording of the song was made in 1927 by the old timey guitar and fiddle duo - Henry Whitter and GB Grayson, and it has bounced across racial barriers as songs so successfully do, before and since then.

Martin Simpson Sheffield, May 2011

Produced by Andy Seward and Martin Simpson
Engineered and mixed by Andy Seward at The Chairworks Castleford, Wavelength Doncaster and Greystones Studio Millhouse Green.
Recording assistants: Keith Angel and James Mottershead
Additional recording in Santa Cruz by Barry Philips

Photography by David Angel
Design by Mr. Suff

This is for Kit and Molly, with all my love. It is most respectfully dedicated to Mike Waterson, and to the late Coleen Salley and the late Jan Clements.

Thanks to Stefan Sobell, Paul Reed Smith, Steve Fischer, Stuart Palmer, Holly Wolstein at Highlander pick-ups, Barry Murphy, Gavin Mortimer, all at D'Addario Strings, David Suff and Tony Engle at Topic Records.

Also to Roy Bailey, Ewan McLennan, Kellie While, Chris While and Julie Matthews.

Particular thanks to Andy Seward for translating performance onto disc. Andy Seward uses a Dingwall Super J bass and EA amplification.

Finally to everyone who played and sang on this record, thank you for your generosity and your art.





February, Black History Month at the University Museums



The Essential Ewan MacColl Songbook
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Acoustic Guitars
HOWARD SOULES
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Ke... Mountain Music
MARTIN GUITAR MAINTENANCE
MT PHS
RECORDING
RECORDING

Martin Simpson

purpose + grace

1 The Sheffield Apprentice

Trad arr Martin Simpson
banjo gCGCD capo 2

Martin Simpson vocals + banjo
Keith Angel drums + percussion
Jon Boden fiddle
B J Cole pedal steel
Andy Cutting accordion
Andy Seward electric bass
Richard Thompson electric guitar

2 Bold General Wolfe

Trad arr Martin Simpson
CGCFCD capo 3

Martin Simpson acoustic guitar + vocals

3 Brothers Under The Bridge

Bruce Springsteen
CGCFCD capo 2

Martin Simpson vocals + acoustic guitar
Andy Cutting accordion
Andy Seward electric bass
Richard Thompson electric guitar

4 Little Liza Jane

Trad arr with additional lyrics Martin Simpson
CGCFCD capo 2

Martin Simpson vocals +
acoustic and electric guitars
Keith Angel drums + percussion
B J Cole pedal steel
Andy Cutting accordion
Will Pound harmonica
Andy Seward electric bass
Richard Thompson electric guitar

5 Brother Can You Spare A Dime

Yip Harburg / Jay Gorney
CGCFCD capo 2

Martin Simpson vocals + acoustic guitar
Dick Gaughan vocals
Barry Philips 'cello
Will Pound harmonica

6 Jamie Foyers

Lyrics Ewan MacColl
Tune Trad arr Martin Simpson
CGCFCD capo 5

Martin Simpson vocals + acoustic guitar
Dick Gaughan vocals
B J Cole pedal steel

7 In The Pines

Trad arr Martin Simpson
CGCFCD capo 2

Martin Simpson vocals + acoustic guitar
Keith Angel percussion
Andy Cutting accordion
Will Pound harmonica
Andy Seward bass

8 Strange Affair

Richard Thompson
DGDGCD capo 2

June Tabor vocals
Martin Simpson acoustic guitar

9 Banjo Bill

Martin Simpson
banjo gCGCD capo 2

Martin Simpson vocals + banjo
Keith Angel percussion
B J Cole pedal steel
Andy Cutting accordion
Andy Seward bass

10 Barbry Allen

Trad arr Martin Simpson
BF#BF#BC#

Martin Simpson vocals + acoustic lap slide guitar

11 Don't Put Your Banjo In The Shed Mr Waterson

Martin Simpson
banjo gCGCD capo 2

Martin Simpson banjo + resonator guitar
Keith Angel drums + percussion
Jon Boden fiddle
Andy Cutting accordion
Andy Seward electric bass

12 Bad Girl's Lament

Trad arr Martin Simpson / Fay Hield / Jon Boden
CGCFCD capo 2

Martin Simpson electric + resonator guitars
Fay Hield vocals
Jon Boden fiddle
Andy Seward electric bass

13 Lakes Of Ponchartrain

Trad arr Martin Simpson
DGDGBD

Martin Simpson vocals + acoustic guitar
Keith Angel drums + percussion
B J Cole pedal steel
Jon Boden fiddle
Andy Cutting accordion
Will Pound harmonica
Andy Seward electric bass



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