

TOM JONES

Surrounded By Time

“You know, I wasn’t so well a couple of years ago. When I came out of hospital, I saw the doctor and he said that, taking my age into account, it was time to slow down. Well, really, that was like a red rag to a bull.”

***“I’ll tell you the story as quick as I can
I’ve got nothing but time, I’m Lazarus, man”***

For an artist such as Sir Tom Jones, with over 100 million record sales to his name, certain milestones loom large over the horizon – and with those milestones come certain expectations. A few years ago, Tom’s record label raised the topic of his 80th birthday in June 2020. When you’ve enjoyed 36 Top 40 hits spanning five decades, a new Greatest Hits collection, perhaps accompanied by a TV special, somewhat suggests itself. People start to use the word ‘legacy’ a lot – and not, in this case, without good reason. If you want to talk about ‘legacy’ and Tom Jones, it’s hard to know where to begin. Musical calling cards such as It’s Not Unusual, What’s New Pussycat, Delilah, If I Only Knew and Sex Bomb barely scratch the surface of a career in which also takes in networked prime time TV shows spanning over five decades both in America and the UK, countless Las Vegas residencies and a string of Grammy, Ivor Novello and Brit Awards. But, after a period of upheaval which saw him come to terms with the loss of Linda his wife of 59 years, and spend time in hospital with a bacterial infection, Tom’s instinct was not to reflect upon his legacy, but further extend it.

Having recorded three hugely acclaimed albums with producer Ethan Johns (Laura Marling, Paolo Nutini, Kings Of Leon, Ray Lamontagne), Tom was keen to continue what was already the longest musical association of his career. An avid record collector, there were songs he had set aside for decades, waiting to reach an age at which he would truly be able to do them justice. He remembered a visit from revered jazz composer and singer Bobby Cole after one of his Vegas shows in 1972, in which Cole presented him with a song called I’m Growing Old. Cole figured the song needed a big, characterful voice to inhabit it. Tom agreed – “I told him I really loved it, the melody of it, the chords of it, but I was 33. I just didn’t feel like I was old enough to do it justice at that point. I remember Clint Eastwood saying something similar about The Unforgiven. He had that story as a young man, and he held onto that script until he was old enough to try and do it justice. Sometimes you just have to be patient.”

True to his word, the very first song that Tom recorded after reconvening with Ethan Johns late in 2019 was the Bobby Cole song. What was meant to be a run-through for the benefit of keyboard player Neil Cowley (The Neil Cowley Trio) resulted in an electrifying performance and ultimately the take that you hear on the record, preceded by an evocative archival extract from BBC historical almanac Scrapbook, in which the events of Tom’s birth year are recounted. “I think that performance caught both Neil and myself by surprise,” recalls Tom, “Because I had never sung the song all the way through and Neil had never played it, but that’s the magic you’re always chasing in the studio.”

Recording in his native Wales for the very first time (“I know! Can you believe it? Incredible isn’t it?!”), that first session laid down the blueprint for much of what followed. With the band making full use of Monnow Valley Studios’ residential wing. Surrounded

By Time took shape not just when the red light was on, but over breakfast discussions and walks around the surrounding countryside. It was by no means the only song that Tom had been sitting on for decades, waiting for the right moment. Forty-four years after hearing it for the first time, Tom felt finally able to tackle Bob Dylan's One More Cup Of Coffee in the way he had always imagined it, bringing the correct blend of bitter experience and careworn playfulness to the scenario set out in the song. "Years ago," he smiles, "I was a bit of a tearaway. I would find myself in places where I shouldn't be, with people I shouldn't be with. But for me now, all these years later, when I hear the line about going down to the valley below, I don't just think about the reality of going too far, but also the hangover. I can't be that person any more but I start singing that song, and I'm right back there."

Another song that Tom had stored away in his memory, awaiting its moment was Tony Joe White's deeply prescient ecological lament Ol' Mother Earth. Tom: "For a lot of people, Tony is synonymous with [1969 hit] Polk Salad Annie, but he wrote so many great songs. And he was a really deep thinker. I once spent an entire night with him in Toronto, just talking about songs. But this one, from the very first line – 'Mother Earth, they've made so many scars upon your face...' – it grabs you from the very start."

For Tom Jones and Ethan Johns, the first question to ask about any song when figuring out its suitability for an album is always the same. What does it require in the here and now? Once again, the answer was one at which Tom arrived by digging deep into a lifetime spent listening closely to other singers. As a teenager, among the first records he bought from Freddie Fay's music shop in Pontypridd were 78s by Hank Williams, whose Luke The Drifter alter ego would elect to speak rather than sing his songs. It was this approach which Tom remembered when the time came to record Ol' Mother Earth. As the foreboding undercurrents of the lyric are teased out in a brooding ensemble performance, Tom handles the vocal like a seasoned actor, trying to make sense of the senseless devastation portended by Tony Joe White's original lyric.

It was a technique to which Tom returned for the first single to be released from Surrounded By Time, Talking Reality Television Blues. Even in Tom's storied career, this track marked a foray into hitherto uncharted territory. Over six and a half minutes, this modern parable addresses the pernicious effect of reality television on the reality it purports to represent. "*But one after the another we pretended not to act/As we hurdled ever forward towards alternative facts,*" intones Tom, "*Then a show called The Apprentice came on and pretty soon/An old man with a comb-over had sold us the moon.*"

Perhaps to get the full measure of Tom and Ethan Johns' achievement at such moments, it's sometimes instructive to go back and listen to the original versions of the songs interpreted on Surrounded By Time – and Talking Reality Television Blues is a case in point. Transformed in part by a mesmerizing blues guitar motif and the attendant menace of some virtuoso drumming courtesy of Jeremy Stacey, Tom brings to the song the air of a man who, by this point, has truly seen it all now. And perhaps not without good reason, "Well, you see," he explains, "I remembered Donald Trump from way back in the 80s when he used to come to my shows in Atlantic City. He was always talking about 'chicks'... always bullshitting about how successful he was, even when he was in decline and they were closing his Taj Mahal [casino and hotel]. He was going downhill fast, but then, of course, he got The Apprentice gig and that was what set him on his path to The White House. That's what reality television did. But of course, there's nothing real about it at all."

Further mining inspiration from the American folk-blues canon, the second single from *Surrounded By Time* saw Tom and Ethan take a little-known song by pioneering songwriter/activist Malvina Reynolds and hotwire new life into it with a sizzling electric sitar display and an incendiary vocal performance from Tom himself. “Sometimes,” elaborates Tom, “you can see a glimmer of something in a song that hasn’t quite revealed itself. I saw a clip of [Malvina Reynolds] doing this song with Pete Seeger and a bunch of other people, and it was great, but I thought that it needed a measure of aggression for what’s happening now, in this social media age, with people trying to get you to think this and that. And I notice that young people get it in the neck from all directions, which is unfair given that they’re inheriting the mess we’ve made of things. So once you throw all those elements into the mix, it was bound to kick off!”

Here and elsewhere, perhaps the question that determined the shape and feel of *Surrounded By Time* was this: what if this were to be Tom Jones’ final album? “I hope I get to make several more,” he adds, “But at this point, you really have to make it count.” That goes some way to explaining song selections that draw from the entirety of Tom’s story. For *Pop Star*, Tom recast the slightly ironic intent of Cat Stevens’ original lyric with Tom’s own recollections of early success: the intoxicating headrush of “first fame”: “There’s an excitement in that song that I did feel at the time *It’s Not Unusual* came out. Of course, there’s another side of it too. They wanted [Cat Stevens] to be more poppy than he was. So it was sarcastic too, the way he wrote it. But that’s not how I hear it. I just hear excitement at the beginning of your career.” The kaleidoscopic quality of those early memories, propelled within the space of a few years from Pontypridd to the orbit of childhood heroes such as Elvis Presley, Little Richard and Ray Charles, also informed Tom’s version of *Windmills Of Your Mind*, a standard which, incredibly, he had never previously recorded.

Other songs, meanwhile, were informed by recent events in Tom’s life, in particular the contemporary gospel intimacies of the album’s opening song *I Won’t Crumble With You If You Fall*. Originally written by Bernice Johnson Reagon, acclaimed social activist and founder member of *Sweet Honey In The Rock*, the song assumed a new significance for Tom as he and his wife Linda came to terms with her illness. “I was on the road, when I got the call to tell me that things have really taken a turn for the worse, so I rushed back to spend whatever time was left with her. I said, ‘Look Linda, I really don’t know what I’m going to do. I don’t see life after this. She knew was dying, but she was the calmest person in the room. I said to her, ‘I don’t even know whether I’m going to be able to sing, because songs are sticking in my throat.’ And she said, ‘You must promise me that you will. Think of the good times. Don’t think of what’s happening right now.’ So really, the message of the song is me keeping my promise to her.”

On what is almost certainly Tom Jones’ most personal collection to date, two songs in particular seem to draw deepest of all from decades of experience. The Waterboys’ Mike Scott was just 26 when his group recorded the song *This Is The Sea*. But, like all living things, the best songs grow and assume new shapes and textures over time. And something undeniably powerful takes hold when Tom Jones rides a tidal swell of gospel organ and acoustic guitar to dispense words of redemption to his subject: *“Now I hear there’s a train/It’s coming on down the line/It’s yours if you hurry/You’ve got still enough time/And you don’t need no ticket/And you don’t pay no fee/No you don’t need no ticket.”* Recalling the session which yielded this hair-raising performance, Tom says, “What you hear on that is the entire band in the room, just in the moment. And it doesn’t get any

better than that, when you've got a song like this, and you've got a song that can not only bear the weight of all your accumulated experience, but soar with it, do you know what I mean?"

You can hear the same magic at work on the other song which adjusts the anglepoise of hindsight to reveal the arc of a lifetime. Terry Callier himself had amassed a huge body of work by the time he recorded *Lazarus Man* in 1998. Approaching the song, Tom was equally drawn to both characters in the lyric: "This idea that you're both the teacher, and the student. I'm telling the story but I'm listening at the same time. You rise up again. You never die. Not really. That's why I raise my voice again at the end." For Tom Jones, returning from his longest recording hiatus to date, choosing to politely decline the advice of medical professionals, there couldn't be a more apposite way to conclude his forty first studio album. "Every time you drop the needle on the record, I'll be right there with you." He's Lazarus, man.