

The Aeschylean Phrase

“The president of the immortals, in Aeschylean phrase, had ended his sport with Tess.”
Thus ends Thomas Hardy’s novel, **Tess Of The D’Urbevilles**. The setting is Salisbury Plain, as the dawn breaks over Stonehenge: Debra recounts, through the words of a traditional song, another mis-happenstance in that exact part of South West England. Its scamping hero meets his downfall, dashing the dreams and hopes of its heroine.

Like Hardy’s novels, the songs on this album are concerned with chains of events, with simple twists of fate, with incidents and outcomes. These are collisions of coincidence, catalysts of catastrophe, cannons of consequence.

I’ve enjoyed Debra’s music in an amazing variety of contexts - from small living rooms to large theatres, from festivals to folk clubs, from the open mountains of Andalusia to green meadows of New England, from concert halls filled with folkies to lecture theatres stuffed with students. Every time, she has surprised and delighted. More importantly she has always sounded perfectly right - she always *belonged*. This new CD finds her perfectly at home in a very new context.

Familiar as we are with Debra’s acapella singing and the deft accompaniment of her guitar, the settings here are an unanticipated delight. What we’re hearing is yet another coming together. Debra’s roots take in much more than folk - here her music is spiced with flavours of jazz and country, pop, blues and folk-rock. What Hardy-esque chain of events led to the man who invented folk-rock drumming to be on hand in Boston and available to lend his deft hand (and ears) to the masterful production of these subtly complex tracks? Or, for that matter, to the availability of legendary and a much-in-demand guitarist to lend his distinctive talents throughout?

So many elements. Such a complex compound. Debra’s new CD is not just chemistry; it is alchemy. Let’s not forget Aeschylus’ best-known phrase -

*“From smallest seed the mightiest tree may rise
When soil is good and rain gifted from skies”*

-Nigel Schofield, Free Reed Records, W. Yorkshire, UK

Transformation Through Devastation

**Dedicated to the memory and spirit of my brother, Michael Strassman
(1959 - 2007)**

As an impressionable teenager almost 40 years ago, I stumbled upon a genre of music that not only changed my life, but also deeply affected my younger brother, Michael. Groups such as Jethro Tull, Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span gave us a connection that wasn't shared by our other three siblings and through the years, got us through "each pothole and bump in the road". He was excited to know that I was working with Dave Mattacks, whose credits include the three aforementioned bands, and Michael was looking forward to hearing the results. Alas, it was not to be; after a five-year battle with a methamphetamine addiction, Michael left us in 2007.

After Michael's death, Dave and I began preparing these songs for recording. As we progressed, I was finding that they became more meaningful. Studying each song, the realization came to me that there were bits of Michael's 47 years in the stories that were being told. It's been a year since we said goodbye to my brother and I can say with certainty that this recording project was a large part of my healing.

I have been very fortunate to work closely with Dave Mattacks and Mike Barry. With "Fond Desire Farewell" I feel a connection to those sounds that formed an impression on my brother and I in the early 1970s. I have been given a great gift and opportunity; Michael would have approved.

-Debra Cowan, August 2008

SONG NOTES AND LYRICS TEXTS:

YON GREEN VALLEY (traditional-from the singing of Chris Coe)

Collected in 1952 by Patrick Shuldham-Shaw from a retired sailor in Shetland, this song appears in the published collections of Peter Kennedy, Helen Creighton and Grieg-Duncan. I love the positive outlook of the young lady and particularly her parting shot: "A contented mind bears no slavery".

For a young man courted me earnestly
It was with his wishes I did comply
It was his false vows and flattering tongue
He beguiled me love when I was young

In yon green valley we both went down
Where the pretty small birds come a-whistling 'round
Changing their notes from tree to tree
As the sun arose on yon green valley

As I sat down by my love's right hand
He swore by Heaven, by sea and land
That the rising sun he would never see
If ever he proved false to me

For eleven long months he proved true and kind
But a short time after he changed his mind
He changed his mind to a high degree
And he bade farewell to yon green valley

O hold him fast, don't you let him go,
For he his mine, and it's well he knows
Don't you mind of the promise you made to me
As the sun arose on yon green valley?

"I mind of the promise I made to you
But I'll have nothing more to do with you
My father's counsel I must obey
So it's goodbye, darling, I must away"

O if he's gone, then I wish him well
For to get married as I hear tell
My innocent babe I will tender care
Of his false promise let him beware

O am I married, or am I free
Or am I bound, love, to marry thee?
A single life is the best I see
A contented mind bears no slavery

WALL OF STONE (© Chris Moore)

One winter's night I went to hear the band "Rust Farm" at Tir Na Nog in Somerville, MA. I loved their sound and purchased their CD "Snows of March". "Wall of Stone" stands out for its ominous message juxtaposed against a jaunty tune. Thanks, Chris.

Past the fences and over the hilltop
Up near the trickling stream
There's an old stone wall where I walked as a child
I returned to that place last night, last night
I returned to that place in a dream

There I spied a black crow a flying
Sleek were the lines of his wing
As he passed overhead dark and evil surely spread
"Here's where the living meet the dead" I swear he said
"Here's where the living meet the dead"

Memories, memories fill my soul
As I stand among these pines all alone
A thousand bygone yesterdays sing an eerie song
As I walk along this old wall of stone
As I walk along this old wall of stone

Dark clouds gathered the rain was a-falling
And what a vision I did see
'twas my own tombstone in the ground by the wall
And I heard my voice give a moan, give a moan
For tomorrow's was the date on the stone

Life is short and days are numbered
Cast not your will to the wind
For the day's gonna come when they slowly beat the drum
And they march your bones to the sun, to the sun
Then your days here on earth will be done

Memories, memories fill my soul
As I stand among these pines all alone
A thousand bygone yesterdays sing an eerie song
As I walk along this old wall of stone
As I walk along this old wall of stone

JEALOUS WORDS (© Richard Thompson)

The great thing about Richard Thompson's songs are the many levels that can be found in his lyrics. Thanks to Gordon Campbell of Miglo Records in Auchtermuchty, Scotland for suggesting I record this song.

O sweet Rosie Lee
Like a sister to me

Jealous Words
Won't lie still

But you thought I was playing you smart

Jealous Words
Won't lie still
In my heart

You saw us there dancing
And you thought us romancing
Suspicion has ripped us apart

Jealous Words
Won't lie still
In my heart

With your interpretation
Of my reputation
You blinded yourself to the truth
To add some more weight
To your ramblings of late
Well, dear won't you bring us some proof

How you cursed and you cried
When you locked me outside
You said I was bad from the start

In my heart

O I knew when we met
You'd never forget
Each pothole and bump in the road
And if I left your side
What a blow to your pride
You're that better than me, I suppose

O the doubt in me's growing
And it hurts me just knowing
Another night's sleep will depart

Jealous Words
Won't lie still
In my heart

Jealous Words
Won't lie still
In my heart

Jealous Words
Won't lie still
In my heart

RUINS BY THE SHORE (© Nic Jones)

On one of my UK tours, a recording of Nic Jones' brilliant guitar work and singing kept me company on many of the drives. When I first heard "Ruins", I was drawn in and decided that I had to learn this wonderful anthem of our times.

Sometime between ice-ages they first appeared
Fell hungry on the beasts and fish they speared

Now all their bones are blackened
And their faces are no more
As we walk among the ruins by the shore

They worshiped gods and thought they'd never die
But now the spiders nest the tombs wherein they lie

And all their bones are blackened
And their faces are no more
As we walk among the ruins by the shore

They dreamed of golden cities raised into the air
But greed drew their simple hearts into its snare

Now all their bones are blackened
And their faces are no more
As we walk among the ruins by the shore

Kings, tyrants and their empires on the Earth held sway
Their belief in science took their souls away

And all their bones are blackened
And their faces are no more
As we walk among the ruins by the shore

We search the heavens and the silent sky
Hoping that life will fall on blinded eyes

But all our bones will blacken
And our faces be no more
As we lay among the ruins by the shore
As we lay among the ruins by the shore.

THE RAINBOW (traditional-from the singing of Swan Arcade)

Collected from George Orton of Barrow-on-Humber by Percy Grainger, this is a wonderful song about how a woman takes charge and wins the day. A large nod to the trio Swan Arcade- Jim Boyes, the late Dave Brady and Heather Brady- for providing the inspiration that gave us this version.

As we were a-sailing down by the Spanish shore
Where the drums they did beat and loud the cannons roared
We spied a lofty army, come bearing down the main
And it caused us to hoist our topmost sails again

Now there was a gallant damsel, a damsel of great fame
She was the Captain's daughter and Nancy was her name
She stood upon the deck me boys and loudly she did call
"O hoist up the colours and load the cannonballs"

"Now", our captain said, "Be ready, boys, be ready and stand true
To face the Spanish army we lately did pursue
For to face the Spanish army lay along the ocean wide
And without a good protection, boys, we'll take the first broadside."

Well, it's broadside to broadside these vessels o'er they went
A-sinking one another, it was their full intent
And at the very second broadside, our captain he was slain
And the damsel jumped in his place to fetch command again

O, we fought for nearly four hours, for four hours or more
'Til we had scarce a man on board our gallant ship to steer
'Til we had scarce a man on board to fire off a gun
And the blood on our decks like a river it did run

"O for quarters, for quarters!" these Spanish lads did cry
"You have had the best of quarters," this damsel did reply

“You have had the best of quarters that e'er we can afford
You must fight, sink, or swim, me boys, or jump overboard”

And now the war is over and we'll take a glass of wine
You can drink to your true love, and I will drink to mine
Here's a health unto that damsel that damsel of great fame
And a health unto that royal ship, the Rainbow was her name

THE NIGHT OWL HOMEWARD TURNS (© Steve Tilston)

Steve composed this song about the Norsemen's first ventures to England's shores, but I believe that the song's subject matter is timeless.

The night owl homeward turns
As the dawn sweeps the sky
We must rise and gather up our flock
Push tears from our eyes
We will tread the secret pathways
The ancients did roam
For now comes the last time we'll call this place home

And their longboats have been spied
Gathering on the strand
Where they hover like a pack of dogs awaiting command
With their iron and their fire
They will cut through the spray
And the word is that this time
Their intention's to stay

All the young men's talk is brave,
They must make a stand
With their courage flowing from a jug
Old swords in their hands
How easy they embrace the old gods of war
And their blood flows the moral defending the shore

The night owl homeward turns
As the dawn sweeps the sky
We must rise and gather up our flock
Push tears from our eyes
We will tread the secret pathways
The ancients did roam
For now comes the last time we'll call this place home

CRUEL WAS MY FATHER (traditional)

I had learned a version of this called “In the Month of January” that was collected by Peter Kennedy from Sarah Makem. To me, Makem's tune was always hauntingly beautiful, but the story never quite made sense. Many years later I found another version of the song in the Helen Hartness Flanders Collection, sung by Mrs. Christine Henry of Providence, RI. We

decided to put Mrs. Henry's lyrics to Mrs. Makem's tune to give this sad tale a setting that befits it.

'Twas on a frosty morning the snow lay on the ground
A fair maid was walking a few miles out of town
A few miles out of town against the winter's frost and snow
She had a baby in her arms she had nowhere to go

O cruel was my mother she barred the door to me
And cruel was my father for I know he kept the key
Cruel was that winter's night that pierced my heart with cold
But crueller was the false young man who sold his love for gold

She came unto to a lonely grove and there she did kneel down
She prayed unto her Saviour dear for mercy on her soul
She kissed her little baby's lips and laid it by her side
She raised her eyes to heaven above
And then laid down and died

Early the next morning this fair maid was found
Her little baby's fingers were frozen to the ground
When her mother heard of this, she wrung her hands and she cried
It was for her father's cruelty that caused them both to die

So come all ye pretty fair maids a warning take by me
Never try to build your nest at the top of any tree
For the leaves they will wither and the roots they will decay
And the beauty of a fair young maid it soon will fade away

LILI MARLENE WALKS AWAY (© Bill Caddick)

Bill Caddick's songs have been on my radar ever since I heard June Tabor's renditions of "Barmaid's Song" and "Unicorns". I heard "Lili" a few years ago and was struck again by Bill's imagery in the lyrics and the melody he composed.

Joseph is the legless soldier selling souvenirs of the war
Outside a bombed out church where no one wants to worship anymore
Beneath the houses and the ruined flats
Women and children crouch like cellar rats
"Give us our daily bread" they pray
Lili paints her nails, puts on her nylons and prepares to walk away
Lili Marlene walks away

Jesus is the old woman begging on the corner of the street
Where little children sell themselves to anyone for a bite to eat
A piece of chocolate or chewing gum
A candy bar or any little crumb
"Our Father, where art thou?" they pray
Lili combs her hair puts on her party dress and turns to walk away
Lili Marlene walks away

Maria is the virgin on the mattress in a backroom up the stairs
Disciples come in queues at night to kneel between her legs and offer prayers
A pack of cigarettes buys innocence
A jar of coffee for the sacraments
“Forgive our trespasses” they pray
Lili checks her lipstick gives her brightest smile and quickly walks away
Lili Marlene walks away

How to buy the milk to feed his baby growing in her every day
A quick encounter on a dustbin lid along a lonely alleyway
Against a barrack wall at dead of night
Communion underneath the broken light
“Thy kingdom come to us” they pray
Lili smoothes her stockings in a state of grace and slowly walks away
Lili Marlene walks away
Lili Marlene walks away
Lili Marlene walks away

SALISBURY PLAIN (traditional-from the singing of A.L. Lloyd)
Collected by Ralph Vaughn Williams in 1904, this song appears in the *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, co-authored by Lloyd and RVW.

As I walked over Salisbury Plain
There I met a scamping young blade
He kissed me and enticed me so
'Til along with him I was forced for to go

We came upon an inn at last
There for man and wife we did pass
He called for ale, wine and strong beer
'Til at length we both to bed did repair

“Undress yourself, my darling,” says he
“Undress yourself, and come sleep with me”
“Yes, I will,” then says she
“If you will keep all those flash girls away.”

“Those flash girls you say you need not fear
For you'll be safely guarded, my dear
I'll maintain you a lady so gay
For I'll go a-robbing on the highway”

Early next morning my love he arose
So nimbly he put on his clothes
Straight to the highway he did set sail
And 'twas there he robbed the coach of the mail

It's now my love in Newgate Jail do lie
Waiting each moment for to die

The Lord have mercy on his poor soul
For I think I hear the death-bell do toll

THE SNOW IS ON THE GROUND (Traditional-From the singing of Jeff Warner)

Collected from Eleazer Tillett by Jeff's parents, Anne and Frank Warner, this song conveys to me that special beauty that only winter can bring. In Tillett's version, the second line reads "And the birds is all dropped from the trees". We decided to go back to the song titled "Remember the Poor" from the *Forget Me Not Songster* for the original lyric. Other changes made in the lyrics came from another version of the song performed by the New England-based quartet Nowell Sing We Clear.

Cold winter is come with its cold chilling breath
And the verdure's all dropped from the trees
All nature seems touched by the finger of death
And the streams are beginning to freeze
When the hills and the dales are all covered with white
And Flora attends us no more
When you are enjoying a good fire-side
Will you grumble to think on the poor?

When the north wind's ascending and chilling the ground
And the sportsmen again shooting go
And the happy young lads o'er the rivers can slide
And the icicles hang at your door
When our lips and our fingers are trembling with cold
And the rivers are froze on the shore
When the bright twinkling stars they proclaim the cold night
It's the time to remember the poor

When the poor harmless hare is tracked to the woods
With his footsteps indented in snow
And the robin red breast he approaches your cot
And in danger the traveler goes
When your minds are annoyed by the wide swelling flood
And the bridges are useful no more
When your bowl warms with something reviving and hot
Will you grumble to think on the poor

Soon a day it will come when our Saviour we'll see
All nations shall join in one voice
All the world shall unite to salute the sweet 'morn
All the ends of the earth shall rejoice
When grim death's deprived of his killing sting
And the grave rules triumphant no more
Saints, angels and men hallelujah shall sing
That's the time to remember the poor
Saints, angels and men hallelujah shall sing
Then the rich must remember the poor

ALCOHOL (© Ray Davies)

As a kid listening to top 40 radio, I loved the Kinks' popular songs. In my first year at college, I heard another Davies masterpiece, "Skin and Bones" and decided to buy one of their records. I couldn't recall the name of the album and ended up with a copy of Muswell Hillbillies. It continues to be one of my favorite recordings.

Here's the story of a sinner
He used to be a winner
Enjoying a life of prominence and position
But the pressures at the office
His socialite engagements
His selfish wife's fanatical ambition
It turned him to the booze,
And he got mixed up with a floozie
She led him to a life of indecision
The floozie made him spend his dough
She left him lying on Skid Row
A drunken lag in some Salvation Army Mission
It's such a shame

Oh demon alcohol,
Memories I cannot recall
Who thought I would say
Damn it all and blow it all
Oh demon alcohol
Memories I cannot recall
Who thought I would fall
A slave to demon alcohol

Barley wine, pink gin
He'll drink anything
Port, Pernod or tequila
Rum, scotch, vodka on the rocks
As long as all his troubles disappear
But he messed up his life
When he beat up his wife
Now the floozie's gone and found another
sucker
She's gonna turn him on to drink
She's gonna lead him to the brink
And when his money's gone
She'll leave him in the gutter
It's such a shame

Oh demon alcohol
Memories I cannot recall
Who thought I would say
Damn it all and blow it all away
Oh demon alcohol
Memories I cannot recall
Who thought I would fall
A slave to demon alcohol

THE DARKEST HOUR IS JUST BEFORE DAWN (© Ralph Stanley)

The Stanley Brothers created some of the best songs to come out of the beginnings of what is now known as bluegrass music. I think that some of the most beautiful songs are from the American gospel tradition and "Darkest Hour" is no exception.

The sun is slowly sinking
The day is almost done
Still darkness falls all around us
And we must journey on

The darkest hour is just before dawn
The narrow way leads home
Lay down your soul at Jesus' feet
The darkest hour is just before dawn

Like a shepherd out on the mountain
Watching his sheep down below
He's coming back to claim us
Will you be ready to go

The darkest hour is just before dawn
The narrow way leads home

Lay down your soul at Jesus' feet
The darkest hour is just before dawn

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The narrow way leads home
Lay down your soul at Jesus' feet
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Arranged and Produced by Dave Mattacks

[“Jealous Words” arranged and produced by Mike Barry and Dave Mattacks]

Engineered and Recorded by Mike Barry at Babyland Studios, Medford, MA

<<http://www.babylandstudio.com>>

Foundation tracks [except “Wall...”, “Jealous...”, “Cruel...”, “Lili...” and “Salisbury...”] engineered and Recorded by David J. Minehan at Woolly Mammoth Studios, Waltham, MA

<www.woollymammothsound.net>

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Musicians:

Debra Cowan: Vocals, Acoustic guitar on “Wall...” “Night Owl...” “Salisbury...”, English Concertina on “Rainbow”, “Night Owl”

Dave Mattacks: Drums, Cymbals, Percussion, Piano, Pump Organ, Hammered Dulcimer, Wurlitzer Piano, Toy Piano

Duke Levine: Acoustic Guitar, Mandola, National Guitar, Octave Mandolin

Marty Ballou: Upright Bass

Joyce Andersen: Fiddle

With:

Billy Novick: Clarinet and Wolf Ginandes:Tuba on “Alcohol”

Additional Vocals: Mike Barry on “Rainbow”, “Lili...” and “Yon Green Valley”

Ruth Peterson, Mike and Julie Barry on “Darkest Hour...”

Mike, Julie and Liam Barry on “Lili...”

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