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Abstract

An account of Australian Ross Grainger's meetings with the British singer songwriter guitarist Nick Drake (1948-74) during the period 1969-70, including discussions at London folk clubs.

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Memories of Nick Drake (1969-70)

Ross Grainger



Nick Drake, 29 April 1969. Photograph: Keith Morris.

I first met Nick Drake when I arrived in London after attending the Isle of Wight Pop Festival in 1969, which featured as its curtain-closer a very different Bob Dylan to the one I had seen in Sydney in March 1966. However, on thinking about it, Dylan's more scaled down eclectic country music approach - which he revealed for the first time - kind of prepared me for what I was about to experience in London. The day after I arrived at my temporary London lodgings with friends living in Warwick Avenue, I went to *Les Cousins* in Greek Street. *Les Cousins* was, at the time, a well-known folk music club near Tottenham Court Station in Greek Street, Soho. I first heard of this famous folk music venue through hearing some Bert Jansch songs sung by Donovan on his early albums while I was in Australia and had subsequently imported records from both Jansch and another guitarist, John Renbourne. Through hearing and reading about Bert Jansch, John Renbourne and, eventually, Al

Stewart, Ralph Mc Tell and Davy Graham I also came to realize that *Les Cousins* was the premier place for aspiring folk musicians like myself. I had left Australia with a reasonably high profile having played at many of the folk clubs in and around the Sydney area where Gary Shearston, Mick Driscoll and Marianne Henderson had played.



The first time I went to *Les Cousins* I noticed a rather gangling guy wearing a coat. He seemed to be constantly tuning and re-tuning his guitar in the corner near the bottom of the stairs. This gangling guy wearing a coat turned out to be Nick Drake. He seemed virtually inconspicuous as the place was crowded and most people were standing up while he sat on the floor. I only noticed Nick as he seemed to be determined to look inconspicuous which seemed very strange in a place where most musicians came to actually show what they could do and to get attention. However, he wasn't doing a very good job of being inconspicuous as,

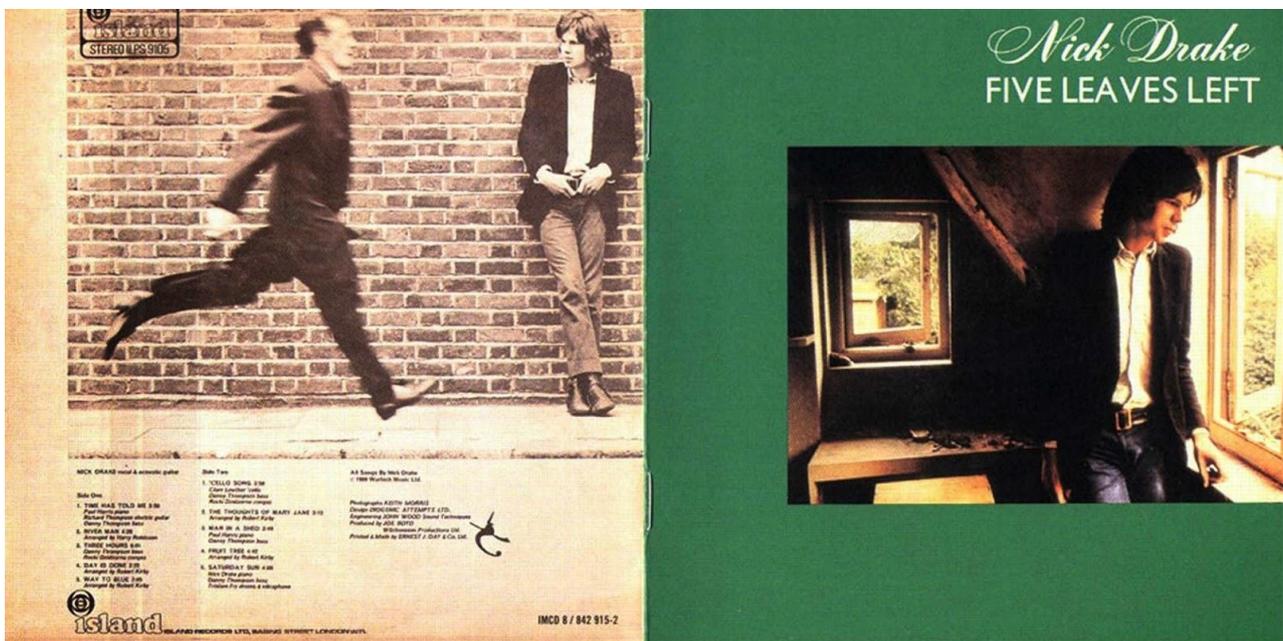
besides being the only person wearing a coat and sitting on the floor, he seemed to always have a 'joint' in his mouth while constantly tuning and retuning his guitar and, at the same, allowing his long legs to make it difficult for people to step past him. However, I did not take too much notice of Nick at this stage as my focus was on getting myself a gig that evening, even though I knew no one. I can't remember who I actually asked about being given a chance to play, but I think it was someone called Tony who seemed to be in charge. As it transpired it was relatively easy to play a short set in between some of the more established acts. This was no doubt due to the fact that *Les Cousins* was the place

that allowed you to see what you could do. The first night they put me on in between two well-known folk artists, John Martyn and Michael Chapman. I only performed, from memory, four songs although I could have played a couple more. However, I made the decision before I got on stage to play a short set so as not to get a reputation of being a stage hugger.

The moment I started singing my first song - a translated Chinese poem, which began with the words, 'From my room the world is beyond my understanding, but when I walk I see that it consists of three or four hills and a cloud' - I noticed Nick had stopped tuning his guitar and was looking straight at me with a curious smile. I couldn't miss noticing him, as he seemed to be giving me more attention than anyone else at that stage. By the time I finished the last song of my short set, however, I had lost sight of Nick as the number of people showing an interest in my music had grown and more people were standing close to the stage so I could no longer see him. When I finished my set, someone close to the stage leaned over and said, "That was interesting, you sound a bit like Leonard Cohen." I was a bit taken aback as I had never before been compared to Leonard Cohen although I liked his music. Then he said, "You ought to talk to the guy sitting on the floor. He does songs like yours." I went over to where Nick was tuning his guitar and introduced myself and asked him when was he going to play? Nick said he wasn't sure when he was playing. I was going to ask him what he thought of my set but I thought better of it as I could see even then that he was shy and so he might not like questions that might seem confronting. I told Nick that I had just seen Bob Dylan perform at the Isle of Wight. Before he could reply, someone came over and asked Nick was he going to play any songs from his recently released record when his turn came to play.¹ Nick just said, "Maybe, I'm not sure."

¹ Nick Drake's first album, *Five Leaves Left*, was produced by Joe Boyd and released on the Island label on 3 July 1969.

I was somewhat surprised that Nick had released a record as I was familiar with the music of most artists on the British folk scene. However, I had never heard of Nick Drake and his face was not at all familiar. In fact, he didn't look like someone who would be involved in the folk scene at all. He seemed to me rather like the kind of young man you see playing classical music in an orchestra. There was also something upper middle-class in the way he moved and spoke, although I had never seen an upper middle-class person continually smoking joints the way Nick did. By also wearing a coat and boots like the kind you wear to ride horses, it only added to the impression that he was a slightly dishevelled unforthcoming member of the upper British middle-class. I soon noticed that Nick's slightly dishevelled upper middle-class persona made him stand out from most of the artists playing there that night as other artists such as Wizz Jones and Michael Chapman had distinct working-class accents, and John Martyn was from Glasgow. However, Nick did not speak in that rather off-hand formal English upper middle-class manner. In fact, his voice seemed warm, soft and expressive.



Nick Drake, *Five Leaves Left*, July 1969.

He told me he had only just released his first record, which explained why I was unfamiliar with his work. I asked what the title was and he said, "Five Leaves Left." Given that I was familiar with the Rizla cigarette papers he was using to make his joints, the connection was immediately obvious, so I laughed. He then offered me a 'toke.' It tasted dry and I asked where the hashish was from. He said it was from Morocco.

A couple of minutes of silence followed while we exchanged puffs on Nick's joint. He then said out of the corner of his mouth, "You're Australian, aren't you?" I asked him how he knew. He said he picked that up from my songs, which gave him the impression of wide-open spaces and harsh sunlight. And then he said, "Of course, you sound Australian." To my surprise he said that he was born not that far away and I asked where. He replied, "Burma, Rangoon."

I was surprised that Nick was born in Burma, as he seemed so quintessentially English it was hard to imagine him being born anywhere else. When he saw my surprise, he said his father was a British civil service officer who had been posted to serve in Burma and that the family moved back to the UK when Nick was two. I asked where his family lived now and he said in a village in Warwickshire. He then went on to mention that he had attended Cambridge University for a while but I have forgotten the details of that part of the conversation.

The fact Nick was born in Burma seem to give us a link as we were both, in our own ways, the products of the British Empire's 19th century lust for expansion, if not world dominance. Also, the fact that he was from the counties and a loner, and not a Londoner with a wide circle of friends and acquaintances, almost certainly was an ingredient that would allow us get to know each other. Further, I later realized that although our musical styles were very different, we shared a common theme, and that was identifying with, or alienation from, our natural surroundings and society. Unlike the other so-called folk artists, neither of us wrote or performed protest songs or traditional ballads.

After what seemed like an hour chatting about managers, record companies, folk venues and various artists we both liked, someone came over and said it was Nick's turn to play. So, after picking up his bits and pieces Nick ambled onto the stage. Once on stage he began to arrange himself on a stool in a kind of leaning-forward hunch. Once settled Nick began to play. He did about eight songs, none of which I recognized at the time but I later worked out what some of them were.

Nick performed all his songs in what can only be called an intimate but expressive style. He didn't sound at all like any of the singer-song writers or folksingers I had ever heard before. His voice was soft and the imagery seemed so English but yet distant and unusual. There seemed nothing contemporary about either the songs or the subject matter. Yet when he sang, his songs seem to resonate somewhere in some long-forgotten place deep inside. His guitar style was vaguely reminiscent of Bert Jansch and John Renbourn but it had a more understated classical feel. His fingers seem to dance over the frets but there were no elaborate solo guitar breaks. The lyrics, the melodies and the guitar style seem to blend into one in a way I had not experienced before.

The first song Nick sang I later identified was *Man in a Shed*. It had some similarities with a song I had performed earlier in the evening called *Geoffrey's Shack*. Shacks and sheds are popular folk song reference points in Australia but I had never heard either being the subjects of songs by any English artist before. He also performed a song obviously called *Made to Love Magic*, as that was a reoccurring line. Another two songs I later identified were *They're Leaving Me Behind* and *Outside* as both concerned what he seems to see as his alienation from the world and achieving success. The song that impressed me most, however, was what I realized later was called *Cello Song*. Nick did *Cello Song* in what I saw as an Indian raga style song although he had no tabla support that night. But the rhythm gave it a hypnotic feel and the lyrics generated all kinds of exotic images. Particularly when he sang the lines, "You seem so frail, in the cold of the night, when the armies of emotion go out to

fight. But while the earth sinks to its grave, you sail to the sky on the crest of a wave.” Another song he sang that night I eventually deciphered was *Fruit Tree*.

After Nick had finished his set, he came back to where I was standing and I told him I thoroughly enjoyed his music as I could see he needed some kind of reassurance. I said I particularly like the first and last songs he sang (*Man in a Shed & Cello Song*). He just smiled in what I later recognized in that sheepish Nick Drake way. Nick then did what I thought he might do: roll a joint. I said, “I dunno how you can afford this stuff.” Nick just chuckled.

The reason I remember these songs is Nick sang mostly the same songs on other occasions that I saw him play, except that one set included what I later realized was a longer version of *Riverman* than the recorded version; and on another set he played *Hazy Jane*. As *Cello Song* impressed me the most of those performed that night, I asked Nick could he write down the final verse, as I couldn’t completely understand the words. When I heard it, I was still thinking about the previous verse. He seemed surprised when I asked him the words of the last verse of *Cello Song*. I then realized he thought I had just been kind and condescending when I said I enjoyed his set and he was actually surprised that I had listened so closely. I then said, “I lost you after you sung “When the armies of emotion go out to fight.” The imagery was so dense, unusual and conjured up all kinds of thoughts and feelings that I had failed to listen to the closing lines. He then pulled out a note pad and wrote the closing two lines. The final verse of the Cello Song he sang that night was as follows:

So forget this cruel world

And whatever’s going on

I’ll accept my fate

While I sing this song.

But if one day you should see me from your cloud

Lend a hand and lift me from this place in the crowd.

We then discussed the source and inspiration for each other's music. Nick said he couldn't be sure what inspired him but he said he studied English literature and, especially, poetry. He said besides Keats, Tennyson and Blake, he really liked two French poets: Baudelaire and Rimbaud. He said that the lines of various poems he had become familiar with seem to come to mind but in a different form generally associated with a particular situation. I said I was familiar with Baudelaire and I found his fatalism somehow appealing. Nick indicated he agreed but did not elaborate. We then discussed the main English poet I was familiar with and that was William Blake. For a while we discussed Blake's songs of innocence and experience. I said some of the lines of two of Blake's poems, *London* and *The Earth's Answer*, reminded me of some of Nick's lines in the *Cello Song*. He did not seem surprised but just smiled.

While we were discussing various poets and their influence, we somehow began discussing LSD and how each other's music was affected by the use of psychedelic drugs. At some point I told Nick I had stop taking any drugs since I had become interested in Buddhism. Nick then revealed that he himself practiced Buddhist meditation. Nick seemed to warm to our conversation and, in particular, when I said I thought there was one particular trait that all the poets we had discussed earlier share. That is a sense of desolation and loneliness and that, ultimately, living in society the way others want you to live whether they are friends or strangers is unfulfilling, especially if you practice Buddhist meditation and are reflective in your thoughts. Then I decided to take a risk and say, "The songs you played

tonight had this feeling too.” He just smiled and said, “Well, I was thinking the same about the songs you played.” We both laughed and Nick, of course, prepared to roll another joint.

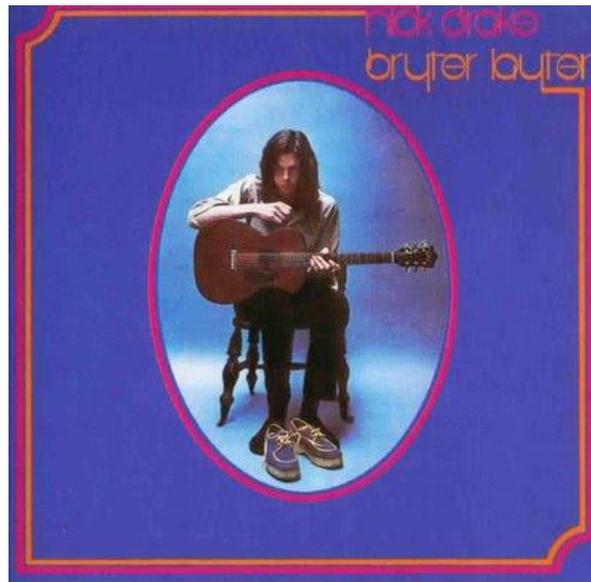
By now I had become even more interested in what motivated the kind of songs Nick sang and, at the time, I was trying to get him to give me some feedback on my own. So, I said I think my songs are somehow inspired by the isolation created by the cultural and psychological gap between the original inhabitants of Australia, the Aborigines, and the white settler families like my own. I then said that the words of two of the songs I played earlier were translated from Chinese Tang Dynasty poems. I said I liked Chinese poetry, for like classical Chinese painting it express our identification with nature as well as our alienation from it. I then asked Nick if had read a recently published book by Rachel Carson called *Silent Spring*. He said he had and an older book about a similar subject matter by David Thoreau called *Walden Pond*. We then moved on to discussing what most people would regard as entirely erroneous abstract subjects such as Stonehenge, Ley Lines, the Cottingley Fairies, classical Chinese poetry and of course, Buddhism.

Nick asked did I feel I Australian? I replied that maybe in some sense I felt I was, but I realized while growing up that the British Isles was the spiritual home of my ancestors. I said I have always felt that, despite being born in Australia, I didn't really belong there. I felt Australia belonged to the original inhabitants, the Aborigines. Nick asked me had I ever met any Aborigines and I said I had. In fact, I had driven around the outback recording some of their music and in particular a stockman called Doug Young who lived on a tribal reservation near a town called Goondawindi, not far from Broken Hill.

Our conversation then drifted toward guitars and tunings. One of the first things I noticed at *Les Cousins* was very few artists seemed to play songs using standard tunings. Most used open tunings where the guitar was tuned to a chord. Nick was no exception and he seemed to spend a lot of time on stage re-tuning his guitar while all the while saying nothing. This had the effect of the audience losing attention and, eventually, drifting away. I did not tell Nick this, however, as I could see he was extremely sensitive and, anyway, I felt I didn't know him well enough to make what was obviously a personal criticism of his performance on stage.

Nick showed one of the tunings he mostly used and I wrote down how to create this tuning for myself as I realized that different tunings might summon up different song imageries. I told Nick I felt a bit restricted just using standard tuning but that I knew no one in Australia that used any other tuning except my original guitar teacher, Don Andrews, who taught Spanish classical guitar. I noticed the guitar Nick was playing was a Guild.² At that time, I had never seen a Guild in Australia only photos of one advertised in the American folk music journal *Sing Out*. I had two guitars: a Gibson Dove, which was, essentially, a country and western guitar and a Gibson Kalamazoo made in the early 1930s during the Great Depression.

² Adam Perlmutter, Great Acoustics: Guild M-20 – the 'Nick Drake guitar' or not?, *Acoustic Guitar*, 25 February 2019. Available URL: <https://acousticguitar.com/great-acoustics-guild-m-20-the-nick-drake-guitar-or-not/>. There is a deal of controversy over the guitars Nick Drake used for performances and recording. He is also known to have used a Martin D26, a Levin and a Yamaha.



The cover of Nick Drake's second album *Bryter Layter* shows him seated with a Guild M-20 in his lap. This guitar was initially owned by Eric Clapton, who passed it on to his friend, the Australian artist Martin Sharp who then passed it on to the British poster artist and photographer Nigel Weymouth, who in turn took the album cover photograph.

I started to realize it was getting quite late and I didn't want to miss the last train home. The thought of leaving made me ask Nick which underground line he lived close to and he replied, "The Northern Line." So, I told him I lived on the Bakerloo Line and I better leave, as I didn't want to miss the last train. Nick decided he would leave too, so we both left and headed for Tottenham Court Road tube station. From there, I caught the train to Charing Cross and changed to the Bakerloo Line.

I went and played at *Les Cousins* regularly after that first night and virtually every time I was there, Nick was there. I also saw Nick at *Bunjies*, another folk café, not far from *Les Cousins* on the other side of Charing Cross road. Whenever we met, we always got together and chattered but I had no access to a phone as I was living with friends at the time and I was hardly ever home anyway. So, we

couldn't arrange to meet, except when we saw each other at *Les Cousins*, *Bunjies* or the *Troubadour* in Earls Court.

One strange fact that comes back to me now is that I never saw Nick come or leave with anyone but myself. I did see him occasionally talk to John Martyn and briefly to some other people. He did mention other people he knew but it seems that most of them did not live in London. In other words, Nick was almost certainly a loner. Although I have read more recently that Nick played at gigs arranged by a manager, I got the impression he played many more unarranged gigs than those he is credited with, for when I saw him, he seemed in a similar position to me. That is, he just turned up and volunteered to play if there was a chance of getting on.

While at the same time as I was seeing Nick and playing at a number of folk clubs over the next six to nine months, I was gradually developing a relationship with a Dutch girl and eventually followed her to Holland. After a couple of years, I came back to London and opened what was then called a 'Head' shop in Portobello Road called *Sunflower*. I sold mostly what were then classed as 'alternative' books by authors such as Jack Kerouac, Herman Hesse, Tom Wolf, Knut Hansen as well as translated copies of a number of Chinese classics such as the *I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu* and Carl Jung's, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. I also sold Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, *The Old Straight Track* by Alfred Watkins, Gerald Atkins' *Stonehenge Decoded* and James Lovelock's, *Gia Hypothesis*. As well as books I sold vinyl records, incense, chillums and shoulder bags I made myself from flax canvas. Not long after I opened the shop, Nick turned up looking pale and dishevelled and said he had just visited an old record producer friend of his, Joe Boyd, who apparently lived nearby. As my

shop was full at the time and I had to attend to a number of customers, I couldn't give Nick my full attention. Nick eventually wandered off and I never saw him again. He died just over a year later.³

Many people in the music industry say Nick committed suicide but I think he probably just overdosed as he was taking many drugs of different kinds when I knew him.⁴ Since Nick's death in November 1974 his music seems to have become increasingly relevant. He is undoubtedly far more popular now than when he was alive. In fact, Nick's music seems to resonate more with the new generation of i-phone savvy Millennials than those of my generation. Nick left no clues what any of his songs meant or were supposed to mean. His songs seem now interwoven with the cycle of nature and the passage of time in such a way that the mysteries of nature seem neither good and are in fact, unfathomable.

³ Nick Drake passed away at his family home in Tamworth in Arden on 25 November 1974 from an accidental drug overdose, though the doctor also suggested possible suicide.

⁴ Michael Organ, *The Death of Nick Drake - Suicide, Accidental Prescription Drug Overdose, or Heroin Casualty?* [webpage], 6 February 2011. Available URL:

<https://documents.uow.edu.au/~morgan/drake4.htm>.

