6 songs

CHPATER ONE

Thunder Road - Bruce Spingsteen

I can remember listening to this song and loving it in 1975; I can remember listening to this song and loving it almost as much quite recently, a few months ago. (And, yes, I was in a car, although I probably wasn't driving, and I certainly wasn't driving down any turnpike or highway or freeway, and the wind wasn't blowing through my hair, because I possess neither a convertible nor hair. It's not that version of Springsteen.) So I've loved this song for a quarter of a century now, and I've heard it more than anything else, with the possible exception of... Who am I kidding? There are no other contenders. See, what I was going to do there was soften the blow, slip in something black and... or cool possibly 'Let's Get It On', which I think is the best pop record ever made, and which would easily make it into my top 20 most-played songs list, but not at number 2. Number 2 - and I'm trying to be honest here - would probably be something like '(White Man) In Hammersmith Palais' by The Clash, but it would be way, way behind. Let's say I've played 'Thunder Road' 1,500 times (just over once a week for twenty-five years, which sounds about right, if one takes into account the repeat plays in the first couple of years); '(White Man)... would have clocked up something like 500 plays. In other words, there's no real competition.

It's weird to me how 'Thunder Road' has survived when so many other, arguably better songs - 'Maggie May', 'Hey Jude', 'God Save The Queen', 'Stir It Up', 'So Tired of Being Alone', 'You're A Big Girl Now' - have become less compelling as I've got older. It's not as if I can't see the flaws: 'Thunder Road' is overwrought, both lyrically (as Prefab Sprout pointed out, there's more to life than cars and girls, and surely the word 'redemption' is to be avoided like the plague when you're writing songs about redemption) and musically - after all, this four and three-quarter minutes provided Jim Steinman and Meatloaf with a whole career. It's also po-faced, in a way that Springsteen himself isn't, and if the doomed romanticism wasn't corny in 1975, then it certainly is now.

But sometimes, very occasionally, songs and books and films and pictures express who you are, perfectly. And they don't do this in words or images,

necessarily; the connection is a lot less direct and more complicated than that.

When I was first beginning to write seriously, I read Anne Tyler's Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant, and suddenly knew what I was, and what I wanted to be, for better or for worse. It's a process something like falling in love. You don't necessarily choose the best person, or the wisest, or the most beautiful; there's something else going on.

There was a part of me that would rather have fallen for Updike, or Kerouac, or DeLillo - for someone masculine, at least, maybe somebody a little more opaque, and certainly someone who uses more swear-words - and, though I have admired those writers, at various stages in my life, admiration is a very different thing from the kind of transference I'm talking about. I'm talking about understanding - or at least feeling like I understand - every artistic decision, every impulse, the soul of both the work and its creator. 'This is me,' I wanted to say when I read Tyler's rich, sad, lovely novel. 'I'm not a character, I'm nothing like the author, I haven't had the experiences she writes about. But even so, this is what I feel like, inside. This is what I would sound like, if ever I were to find a voice.' And I did find a voice, eventually, and it was mine, not hers; but nevertheless, so powerful was the process of identification that I still don't feel as though I've expressed myself as well, as completely, as Tyler did on my behalf then.

So, even though I'm not American, no longer young, hate cars, and can recognize why so many people find Springsteen bombastic and histrionic (but not why they find him macho or jingoistic or dumb - that kind of ignorant judgment has plagued Springsteen for a huge part of his career, and is made by smart people who are actually a lot dumber than he has ever been), 'Thunder Road' somehow manages to speak for me. This is partly - and perhaps shamingly - because a lot of Springsteen's songs from this period are about becoming famous, or at least achieving some kind of public validation through his art: what else are we supposed to think when the last line of the song is 'I'm pulling out of here to win', other than that he has won, simply by virtue of playing the song, night after night after night, to an ever-increasing crowd of people? (And what else are we supposed to think when in 'Rosalita' he sings, with a touching, funny and innocent glee, 'Cos the record company, Rosie, just gave me a big advance', other than that the record company has just given him a big advance?) It's never objectionable or obnoxious, this dream of fame, because it derives from a restless and uncontrollable artistic urge - he knows he has talent to burn, and the proper reward for this, he seems to suggest, would be the financial wherewithal to fulfil it - rather than an interest in celebrity for its own sake. Hosting a TV quiz show, or assassinating a president, wouldn't scratch the itch at all.

And, of course - don't let anyone tell you otherwise - if you have dreams of becoming a writer, then there are murky, mucky visions of fame attached to these dreams too; 'Thunder Road' was my answer to every rejection letter I received, and every doubt expressed by friends or relatives. They lived in towns for losers, I told myself, and I, like Bruce, was pulling out of there to win. (These towns, incidentally, were Cambridge - full of loser doctors and lawyers and academics - and London - full of loser successes of every description - but never mind. This was the material I had to work with, and work with it I did.)

It helped a great deal that, as time went by, and there was no sign of me pulling out of anywhere to do anything very much, and certainly not with the speed implied in the song, 'Thunder Road' made reference to age, thus accommodating this lack of forward momentum. 'So you're scared and you're thinking that maybe we ain't that young any more', Bruce sang, and that line worked for me even when I had begun to doubt whether there was any magic in the night: I continued thinking I wasn't that young any more for a long, long time - decades, in fact - and even today I choose to interpret it as a wistful observation of middle age, rather than the sharp fear that comes on in late youth.

It also helped that, sometime in the early to mid-eighties, I came across another version of the song, a bootleg studio recording of Springsteen alone with an acoustic guitar (it's on War And Roses, the Born To Run outtakes bootleg); he reimagines 'Thunder Road' as a haunting, exhausted hymn to the past, to lost love and missed opportunities and self-delusion and bad luck and failure, and that worked pretty well for me, too. In fact, when I try to hear that last line of the song in my head, it's the acoustic version that comes first. It's slow, and mournful, and utterly convincing: an artist who can persuade you of the truth of what he is singing with either version is an artist who is capable of an awful lot.

There are other bootleg versions that I play and love. One of the great things about the song as it appears on Born To Run is that those first few bars, on wheezy harmonica and achingly pretty piano, actually sound like they refer to something that has already happened before the beginning of the record, something momentous and sad but not destructive of all hope; as Thunder Road' is the first track on side one of Born To Run, the album begins, in effect, with its own closing credits. In performance at the end of the seventies, during the Darkness on the Edge of Town tour, Springsteen maximized this effect by seguing into 'Thunder Road' out of one of his bleakest, most desperate songs, 'Racing In The Street', and the harmonica that marks the transformation of one song into the other feels like a sudden and glorious hint of spring after a long, withering winter. On the bootlegs of those seventies shows, Thunder Road' can finally provide the salvation that its position on Born To Run denied it.

Maybe the reason Thunder Road' has sustained for me is that, despite its energy and volume and fast cars and hair, it somehow manages to sound elegiac, and the older I get the more I can hear that. When it comes down to it, I suppose that I too believe that life is momentous and sad but not destructive of all hope, and maybe that makes me a self-dramatizing depressive, or maybe it makes me a happy idiot, but either way 'Thunder Road' knows how I feel and who I am, and that, in the end, is one of the consolations of art.

Postscript

A few years ago, I started to sell a lot of books, at first only in the UK, and then later in other countries too, and to my intense bewilderment found that I had somehow become part of the literary and cultural mainstream. It wasn't something I had expected, or was prepared for. Although I could see no reason why anyone would feel excluded from my work - it wasn't like it was difficult, or experimental - my books still seemed to me to be quirky and small- scale. But suddenly all sorts of people, people I didn't know or like or respect, had opinions about me and my work, which overnight seemed to go from being fresh and original to cliched and ubiquitous, without a word of it having changed. And I was shown this horrible reflection of myself and what I did, a funfair hall-of-mirrors reflection, all squished-up and distorted - me, but not me. It wasn't like I was given a particularly hard time, and certainly other people, some of whom I know, have experienced much worse. But even so, it becomes in those circumstances very hard to hang on to the idea of what you want to do.

And yet Springsteen somehow managed to find a way through. His name is still taken in vain frequently (a year or so ago I read a newspaper piece attacking Tony Blair for his love of Bruce, an indication, apparently, of the Prime Minister's incorrigible philistinism), and for some, the hall-of-mirrors reflection is the only Springsteen they can see. He went from being rock 'n' roll future to a lumpy, flag-waving, stadium-rocking meathead in the space of a few months, again with nothing much having changed, beyond the level of his popularity. Anyway, his strength of purpose, and the way he has survived the assault on his sense of self, seem to me exemplary; sometimes it's hard to remember that a lot of people liking what you do doesn't necessarily mean that what you do is of no value whatsoever. Indeed, sometimes it might even suggest the opposite.

CHAPTER TWO

I'm Like a Bird - Nelly Furtado

Oh, of course I can understand people dismissing pop music. I know that a lot of it, nearly all of it, is trashy, unimaginative, poorly written, slickly

produced, inane, repetitive and juvenile (although at least four of these adjectives could be used to describe the incessant attacks on pop that you can still find in posh magazines and newspapers); I know too, believe me, that Cole Porter was 'better' than Madonna or Travis, that most pop songs are aimed cynically at a target audience three decades younger than I am, that in any case the golden age was thirty-five years ago and there has been very little of value since. It's just that there's this song I heard on the radio, and I bought the CD, and now I have to hear it ten or fifteen times a day...

That's the thing that puzzles me about those who feel that contemporary pop (and I use the word to encompass soul, reggae, country, rock - anything and everything that might be regarded as trashy) is beneath them, or behind them, or beyond them - some preposition denoting distance, anyway: does this mean that you never hear, or at least never enjoy, new songs, that everything you whistle or hum was written years, decades, centuries ago? Do you really deny yourselves the pleasure of mastering a tune (a pleasure, incidentally, that your generation is perhaps the first in the history of mankind to forgo) because you are afraid it might make you look as if you don't know who Harold Bloom is? Wow, I'll bet you're fun at parties.

The song that has been driving me pleasurably potty recently is 'I'm Like a Bird' by Nelly Furtado. Only history will judge whether Ms Furtado turns out to be any kind of artist, and though I have my suspicions that she will not change the way we look at the world, I can't say that I'm very bothered: I will always be grateful to her for creating in me the narcotic need to hear her song again and again. It is, after all, a harmless need, easily satisfied, and there are few enough of those in the world. I don't even want to make a case for this song, as opposed to any other - although I happen to think that it's a very good pop song, with a dreamy languor and a bruised optimism that immediately distinguishes it from its anemic and stunted peers. The point is that a few months ago it didn't exist, at least as far as we are concerned, and now here it is, and that, in itself, is a small miracle.

Dave Eggers has a theory that we play songs over and over, those of us who do, because we have to 'solve' them, and it's true that in our early relationship with, and courtship of, a new song, there is a stage which is akin to a sort of emotional puzzlement. There's a little bit in 'I'm Like a Bird', for example, about halfway through, where the voice is double-tracked on a phrase, and the effect - especially on someone who is not a musician, someone who loves and appreciates music but is baffled and seduced by even the simplest musical tricks - is rich and fresh and addictive.

Sure, it will seem thin and stale soon enough. Before very long I will have

'solved' 'I'm Like a Bird', and I won't want to hear it very much anymore - a three-minute pop song can only withhold its mysteries for so long, after all. So, yes, it's disposable, as if that makes any difference to anyone's perceptions of the value of pop music. But then, shouldn't we be sick of 'Moonlight' Sonata by now? Or Christina's World? Or The Importance of Being Earnest? They're empty! Nothing left! We sucked 'em dry! That's what gets me: the very people who are snotty about the disposability of pop will go over and over again to see Lady Bracknell say 'A handbag?' in a funny voice. They don't think that joke's exhausted itself? Maybe disposability is a sign of pop music's maturity, a recognition of its own limitations, rather than the converse. And anyway, I was sitting in a doctor's waiting-room the other day, and four little Afro- Caribbean girls, patiently sitting out their mother's appointment, suddenly launched into Nelly Furtado's song. They were word perfect, and they had a couple of dance moves, and they sang with enormous appetite and glee, and I liked it that we had something in common, temporarily; I felt as though we all lived in the same world, and that doesn't happen so often.

A couple of times a year I make myself a tape to play in the car, a tape full of all the new songs I've loved over the previous few months, and every time I finish one I can't believe that there'll be another. Yet there always is, and I can't wait for the next one; you need only a few hundred more things like that, and you've got a life worth living.

CHAPTER THREE

Samba Pa Ti - Santana

'Samba Pa Ti' is an instrumental, rather than a song, but for a crucial period in my mid-teens, when I first came across it, it spoke to me as eloquently as anything that contained lyrics: I was convinced that it described sex. More specifically, 'Samba Pa Ti' was what I was going to hear when I lost my virginity - if not on the stereo, then in my head. It starts off slow and mysterious and beautiful, and then it gets more urgent, and then - well, then it fades out. (The track lasts four minutes and forty-seven seconds, incidentally; but before I am accused of showing off, I had anticipated that we'd be doing other things - kissing, getting undressed, possibly waiting for a bus home from the cinema - during the slow bit, so I was confident that I could make it through to the fade.)

I hadn't, at that time, heard anything that would serve as a better soundtrack; indeed, I'm not entirely sure that I've heard anything to beat it since. All sorts of pieces of music are constantly being described as 'sexy', but that doesn't necessarily mean that you'd want them to accompany love-making. Most

of them, in fact, are sexual substitutes, rather than sexual accompaniments - music for people who aren't getting any (or won't be until they get home) rather than people who are. Would it be possible to fuck to the tune of 'Let's Get It On' without laughing? (Not that there's anything wrong with laughing during sex, but laughter was not, I suspect, the sound that Marvin intended to provoke. If you want to laugh, then why not enhance your amorous pleasure with 'I Have a Pony', by Steven Wright, or 'Disco Duck', by Rick Dees?) And even if you did manage to get through it without a giggling fit, could you man-age the same during 'If I Should Die Tonight', the third track on the album? Granted, you may have finished by then, but there's every chance that you won't have turned the music off, which means that you'll be lying there with your girlfriend, or boyfriend, or someone you don't know very well, while Marvin is telling you that the sex you have just had is unlikely to be bettered during the remainder of your lifetimes - indeed, that you may as well shuffle off this mortal coil now, so anticlimactic is any subsequent experience likely to be. This is an intolerable burden to place on any couple, and certainly inhibits the usual post-coital activities (sleep, the hunt for socks or the TV remote, exchanges of false email addresses, etc.).

Prince's 'Do Me, Baby', from the Controversy album, is one of the most sexually explicit, and genuinely erotic, records ever made, but it's every bit as problematic as 'Let's Get It On'. For a start, there's a bit after the climax (crashing piano chords, moans, sighs, and so on) when he goes all weird, and starts saying he's 'soooo cold', which might well prove to be something of a distraction unless you too have an inappropriately under togged duvet. And though the next song on the album, 'Private Joy', is hardly what you want to hear at an intimate moment, at least it brings the first side of Controversy to a close if you have the album on vinyl; if you have the CD, however, you may find yourself in the unhappy position of trying to give and receive carnal pleasure while Prince sings 'Ronnie Talk To Russia' - a sentiment that no longer even contains the virtue, arguable in a sexual context anyway, of urgency. What, one wonders, was he thinking of when he sequenced the tracks? Presumably something along the lines of, 'Give them five minutes to get their breath back, and then they'll be wanting to think about impending Armageddon.'

Inevitably, I did not lose my virginity to 'Samba Pa Ti'. Instead, my unfortunate girlfriend and I were listening to the second side of Rod Stewart's Smiler, my favourite record at the time; side two, I notice now, features 'Hard Road', 'I've Grown Accustomed To Her Face' and 'Dixie Toot'. In a perfect world, obviously, that wouldn't have happened.

CAN YOU PLEASE CRAWL OUT YOUR WINDOW? BOB DYLAN

CHAPTER FOUR

Rain - The Beatles

By expressing no preference between a Rod Stewart version of a Bob Dylan song and the Dylan original, I have, I know, exposed myself: I'm not a big Dylan fan. I've got Blonde On Blonde and Highway 61 Revisited, obviously. And Bringing It All Back Home and Blood On the Tracks. Anyone who likes music owns those four. And I'm interested enough to have bought The Bootleg Series Volumes 7-3, and that live album we now know wasn't recorded at the Royal Albert Hall. The reviews of Time Out Of Mind and Love And Theft convinced me to shell out for these two, as well, although I can't say I listen to them very often. I once asked for Biograph as a birthday present, so with that and The Bootleg Series I've got two Dylan boxed sets. I also, now I look, seem to own copies of World Gone Wrong, The Basement Tapes and Good As I Been To You, although this, I suspect, is due more to my respect for Greil Marcus, who has written so persuasively and brilliantly about Dylan's folk and blues roots, than to my Dylanphilia. And I have somehow picked up along the way Street Legal, Desire, and John Wesley Harding. Oh, and I bought Oh Mercy because it contains the lovely 'Most of the Time', which is on the High Fidelity soundtrack. There are, therefore, around twenty separate Bob Dylan CDs on my shelf; in fact I own more recordings by Dylan than by any other artist. Some people - my mother, say, who may not own twenty CDs in total - would say that I am a Dylan fanatic, but I know Dylan fanatics, and they would not recognize me as one of them. (I have a friend who stays logged on to the Dylan website Expecting Rain most of the day at work - as if the website were CNN and Dylan's career were the Middle East - and who owns 130 Dylan albums, including a fourteen-CD box of every single thing Dylan recorded during 1965 apart from - get this - Highway 67 Revisited, the only thing he recorded during 1965 that sane people would want to own. He's pretty keen.) I can't quote whole songs - just the odd line here and there. I do not regard Dylan as any more important, or any more talented, than Elvis Presley, or Marvin Gaye, or Bob Marley, or several other major artists.

I have no opinion as to whether he was a poet, and especially not as to whether he was a better poet than another poet, I don't own any bootlegs, I have no desire to see him play live again (I saw him twice, and that was more than enough), I have no theories about any single song... I just like some of the tunes, and that, I have been led to believe, is Not Good Enough.

There is a very clever English artist called Emma Kay who has done a

series of artworks which consist entirely of her (verbal) memories of Shakespeare plays. If I were to do the same for the life of Bob Dylan, it would consist of the following list:

Zimmerman

Hibbing, Minnesota

New York coffee houses

Joan Baez (But what about her? I'm not sure.)

The Band, formerly The Hawks. Electricity. 'Judas!'

Motorbike crash. Never as good afterwards. (Is that true? I fear I may be getting the crash confused with Elvis's spell in the army.)

Sara (Sara who? Don't know). Divorce.

Eye-liner Christianity Farm Aid Lots of tours

This, it seems to me, is way too much knowledge. (Why on earth am I able to name his home town? And why should I recall that he fell off his bloody motorbike?) I will not attempt a similar list pertaining to the life of William Shakespeare, because it would be far too shaming, but suffice to say that it would not extend much beyond Stratford-upon-Avon, Anne Hathaway and her cottage, the Globe and the Dark Lady. Jane Austen: Bath; unmarried; once went to my sister's house, apparently, although some time before my sister moved there. (That must be right, mustn't it, dates-wise?) Obviously I have no one but myself to blame for my ignorance of our major literary figures. I'm not responsible for my intimacy with the Life of Bob, however. That's the fault of all sorts of other people: friends, music writers, university professors, editors at my publishing house. He's hard to avoid - mostly because his status as a major poet allows one to like him without inducing the feelings of intellectual insecurity that usually accompany devotion to a pop star. I suppose I re-sent that. In my book, you're either in or you're out, and if you're in, then get in properly, and find as big a place in your heart for the stupid stuff - 'Mmmm Bop' and 'Judy Is a Punk' - as for the stuff that you can pass off as poetry. Obviously I wouldn't ask you to find as big a place in your head for 'Mmmm Bop', but then, that's partly the trouble: the best music connects to the soul, not the brain, and I worry that all this Dylan-devotion is somehow anti-music - that it tells us the heart doesn't count, and only the head matters.

Elsewhere in this book you will find fanciful comparisons be-tween literature and music, specifically novels and songs, but you sure can exhaust a great song much more quickly than you can clean out a great novel, and - partly, I suspect, because I am not interested in Dylan as poet - I've exhausted Bob, or at least the bits of Bob that I'm interested in. I wish I hadn't; there's a density and a gravity to a Dylan song that you can't find anywhere else. But even more than I

regret mining the seam for all it's worth (or all it's worth to me), I regret never having heard any of the songs at the right age, in the right year. What must it have been like, to listen to 'Like A Rolling Stone' in 1966, aged nineteen or twenty? I heard 'White Riot' and 'Anarchy In The UK' in 1976, aged nineteen, but the enormous power those records had then has mostly been lost now. Much of the shock came from their volume and speed and brevity, and records consequently became louder and faster and shorter; listening to them a quarter of a century later is like watching old film of Jesse Owens running. You can see that he won his races, but all sense of pace has been wiped away by Maurice Greene. 'Like A Rolling Stone', however, still sounds perfect. It just doesn't sound fresh anymore. In Victorian London they used to burn phosphorus at seances in an attempt to see ghosts, and I suspect that the pop-music equivalent is our obsession with B-sides and alternative versions and unreleased material. If you can hear Dylan and The Beatles being unmistakably themselves at their peak - but unmistakably themselves in a way we haven't heard a thousand, a million times before - then suddenly you get a small but thrilling flash of their spirit, and it's as close as we'll ever get, those of us born in the wrong time, to knowing what it must have been like to have those great records burst out of the radio at you when you weren't expecting them, or anything like them. 'Can You Please Crawl Out Your Window?' is, I accept, a minor Dylan track, one of his snarly (and less than poetic) put-downs, but it is from my favourite period (electric, with that crisp, clean organ sound), and I haven't heard it a million times before, so it sneaks its way on to car tapes now. And 'Rain' is a great Beatles song from a great year in their career, the year that Oasis have been trying to live in for the last ten years, and it's wonderful to listen to a Lennon/McCartney song that hasn't quite had all the pulp sucked from it. I'll get sick of both these songs in the end, of course - they just don't last long enough to keep their mystery and magic forever. But they'll do for now.

CHAPTER FIVE
A Minor Incident - Badly Drawn Boy

'You must be excited about the film coming out,' a friendly and well-meaning acquaintance remarked at the end of 2001, a few months before the movie version of About A Boy was released. (Those weren't her actual words. Her actual words were, 'You must be excited about About A Boy coming out.' I changed them because, prose stylist that I am, I wanted to avoid that double 'about'. I'm sick of it. My advice to young writers: never begin a title with a preposition, because you will find that it is impossible to utter or to write any

sentence pertaining to your creation without sounding as if you have an especially pitiable stutter. 'He wanted to talk to me about About A Boy.' 'What about About A Boy?' The thing about About A Boy...' 'Are you excited about About A Boy?' And so on. I wonder if Steinbeck and his publishers got sick of it? 'What do you think of Of Mice and Men?' 'I've just finished the first half of Of Mice and Men.' 'What's the publication date of Of Mice and Men?'... Still, it seemed like a good idea at the time.)

I smiled politely, but the supposition mystified me. Why on earth would I get excited? There had been interesting, sometimes even enjoyable bits along the way - selling the rights to the book for an unfeasibly large sum of money, for example, meeting the people responsible for the film version, seeing the end product, which I liked a lot. I'd be very suspicious, however, of any writer who was actually excited by any of this process, which can be on occasion distasteful (About A Boy ate up a director and got spat out by another film company even before it was made) and stupefying prolonged; indeed, the time before, during and after a film's release is positively unpleasant. You get reviewed all over again; you discover that half your friends never read the book in the first place; the bits of the film people like the most turn out to be nothing to do with you.

But the first time I heard the soundtrack to the film really was exciting, in the proper, tingly sense of the word. Seeing one's words converted into Hollywood cash is gratifying in all sorts of ways, but it really cannot compare to the experience of hearing them converted into music: for someone who has to write books because he cannot write songs, the idea that a book might somehow produce a song is embarrassingly thrilling.

Like a lot of people, I spent a large chunk of 2000 listening to and loving Badly Drawn Boy's The Hour of the Bewilder beast album. It's one of the very few English records of recent years I've had any time for; it's thoughtful, quirky without being inept (despite my earlier presumption that the name of the artist was somehow indicative of the ramshackle nature of the music, a presumption that stopped me from listening to him for a while), it's melodic, it borrows lightly and judiciously from all sorts of folky, rocky things I like (Damon Gough is an early-Springsteen devotee), it doesn't show off, it is un-English in the sense that it wouldn't be much use to Ibiza clubbers or boozed-up football hooligans, it has soul. It also sounds cinematic, with its little snatches of orchestration (it begins with a brass-band instrumental that would not have sounded out of place in a gentle sixties comedy) and its range of moods. It seemed to me that Damon could write a wonderful film score, and I would have suggested him for About A Boy had I not known that writers have less chance of influencing film adaptations of their books than they do of changing the weather. And then, the

first time we met, Chris and Paul Weitz, the co-directors, told me that they had already asked Damon to provide all the music for the film. This struck me as being troublingly neat - could it really be possible that the music in my head was the same as the music in theirs? - but anyway, here I am, in my office, listening to a whole lot of new Badly Drawn Boy songs and music cues that very few people in the world have heard yet, and feeling lucky.

I began writing About A Boy in 1996, the year my son Danny was finally diagnosed as autistic. There were lots of things to think (or panic, or despair, or lose sleep) about, and money was only one of them, but I suddenly went from feeling reasonably wealthy - I was in my fourth year of earning a decent whack from writing, and for the first time in my life I had some savings - to financially vulnerable: I was going to have to find enough to make sure that my son was secure, not just for the duration of my life, but for the duration of his, and that extra thirty or forty years was hard to contemplate, in more or less any direction. And then, no sooner had these worries begun to take hold and chafe a little bit than this Hollywood money arrived. Until the movie was made, this was the only connection I had forged between the book and Danny. The character of Marcus was nothing to do with him (Marcus is twelve, and brightly voluble, if odd; Danny was three, and five years later is still unable to speak), and I don't think that Danny would recognize the parenting that Marcus experiences. It's possible that, if I had been child-less, I would have been attracted to a different kind of story, but that's the only way that About A Boy is about Danny.

'A Minor Incident', a sweet, heartfelt, acoustic strummer with a wheezy Dylanesque harmonica solo, refers directly to a major incident in the book and the movie: Marcus comes home from a day out to discover his mother, Fiona, lying comatose on the sofa after an attempt to kill herself, her vomit on the floor beside her. The song is her suicide note to her son. I wrote one for her too, but it wasn't in the form of a song lyric, and Damon's words capture Fiona's dippy, depressive insouciance perfectly. But here's the thing: once I'd listened to 'A Minor Incident' a couple of times, it started to make me think of Danny in ways that I hadn't done when I was writing the book. 'You always were the one to make us stand out in a crowd I Though every once in a while your head was in a cloud I There's nothing you could never do to ever let me down', sings Damon as Fiona, and the lines brought me up short. Autistic children are by their nature the dreamiest of kids, and Danny's ways of making us stand out in a crowd can include attempts to steal strangers' crisps and to get undressed on the top of a number 19 bus. But that peculiar negative in the last line... How did Badly Drawn Boy know that it's the things that Danny will never do (talk, read, play football, all sorts of stuff) that make those who love him feel the most fiercely

proud and protective of him? And, suddenly, five years on, I find a mournful undertow of identification in the lyric to the song, because the money from the sale of the film rights has forced me to contemplate my own mortality; like Fiona, I'm thinking of a time when I won't be around for Danny - for different reasons, but the end result is the same.

So there we go. That's where the excitement lies: in the magical coincidences and transferences of creativity. I write a book that isn't about my kid, and then someone writes a beautiful song based on an episode in my book that turns out to mean something much more personal to me than my book ever did. And I won't say that this sort of thing is worth more than all the Hollywood money in the world, because I'm a pragmatist, and that Hollywood money has given Danny a trust fund which will hopefully see him through those terrifying thirty or forty years. But it's worth an awful lot, something money can't buy, and it makes me want to keep writing and collaborating, in the hope that something I write will strike this kind of dazzling, serendipitous spark off someone again.

CHAPTER SIX

Caravan - Van Morrison

The magnificent version of 'Caravan' on It's Too Late to Stop Now (Van Morrison's most enjoyable album, unarguably, so don't even think about arguing) sounds to me like it could be played over the closing credits of the best film you've ever seen; and if something sounds like that to you, then surely by extension it means that it could also be played at your own funeral. I don't think this is over-dramatizing the importance of one's own life. Not all films have to be like Lawrence of Arabia or Apocalypse Now, and you'd have to have been pretty unlucky, at least in our part of the world (and if you walked into a bookshop and bought this book, you live in the part I'm talking about), not to have experienced a few moments of joy or pure hope or clenched-fist triumph or simple contentment amongst all the drudgery and heartbreak and pain. To me, 'Caravan' recognizes and synthesizes all of it, and the fact that what it produces from the whole extraordinary mess is something that sounds cheerful doesn't mean that the song is trite.

'Caravan' isn't a song about life or death, as far as I can tell: it's a song about merry gypsies and campfires and turning up your radio and stuff. But in its long, vamped passage right before the cli-max, when the sax weaves gently in and out of the cute, witty, neochamber strings, while the piano sprinkles bluesy high notes over the top, Morrison's band seems to isolate a moment somewhere between life and its aftermath, a big, baroque entrance hall of a place where you

can stop and think about everything that has gone before. (Gosh. A sudden panic: can you hear any of that, those of you who already own the album or who are interested enough in this description to check it out? Possibly not. But - panic over - this book isn't predicated on you and me sharing the ability to hear exactly the same things; in other words, it isn't music criticism. All I'm hoping here is that you have equivalents that you spend a lot of time listening to music and seeing faces in its fire.) And, though it won't be me doing the thinking, as far as we know, is it arrogant to expect a little reflection from friends and family? It's my funeral, after all. And they don't have to think only about me; they can think about all sorts of things, as long as they're worthy of the occasion and the music, and don't involve foodstuffs, emails, footwear, etc.

The only thing that worries me about having 'Caravan' played at my funeral is that string section. Will people think I'm making some concession to classical music when they hear it? Will they say to themselves, 'What a shame he lost the courage of his convictions right at the end there, just like everybody else'? I wouldn't want them to think that. Unless something unimaginable happens to me over the next couple of decades, I will have gone through an entire life listening more or less only to popular music in one or other of its forms. (I have a few classical CDs, and sometimes I play them, too; but I never respond to Mozart or Haydn as music, merely as something that makes the room smell temporarily different, like a scented candle, and I don't like treating art in that way, with disrespect.) And I'm unrepentant, too. 'I'd see him banged up for having anything to do with the inanity that is pop, full stop,' said a famously sour writer and newspaper columnist recently, while attempting to defend a well-known music-business mogul who had just been imprisoned, but you've heard this stuff before.

I have no idea whether his use of the word 'pop' is the same as mine, whether he thinks that all of it, Dylan and Marvin Gaye and Neil Young, is inane. I suspect he does. It's not a complaint I've ever understood, because music, like colour, or a cloud, is neither intelligent nor unintelligent - it just is. The chord, the simplest building-block for even the tri test, silliest chart song, is a beautiful, perfect, mysterious thing, and when an ill-read, uneducated, uncultured, emotionally illiterate boor puts a couple of them together, he has every chance of creating something wonderful and powerful. I don't want to read inane books, but books are built from words, our only instruments of thought; all I ask of music is that it sounds good. Despite its crudity and simplicity, 'Twist and Shout' sounds good - in fact, any attempt to sophisticate it would make it sound much worse - and I fundamentally, profoundly disagree with anyone who equates musical complication and intelligence with superiority. It doesn't work like that, which is maybe why these people despise pop music, because it's one

of the very few things that doesn't. (They often hate sports, too.) I don't dislike classical music because of its cultivation - I'm not an inverted snob. I dislike it (or at least, I'm unaffected by it) because it sounds churchy, and because, to my ears at least, it can't deal with the smaller feelings that constitute a day and a week and a life, and because there are no backing vocals or basslines or guitar solos, and because a lot of people who profess to like it actually don't really like any music (or any culture) at all, and because I grew up listening to something else, and because it does not possess the ability to make me feel, and because I don't need my music to sound any 'better' than it does already - a great, farting, squelching, quick-witted sax solo does the job for me. So 'Caravan' will be played at my funeral.

The problem with the extended passage that I mentioned earlier, the bit that I hope will make the mourners think and reflect is that... Well, OK, here's the thing: it's the bit where Van Morrison introduces the band. 'Terry Adams on cello... Nancy Ellis on viola... Bill Elwin on trumpet... David Hayes on bass...' Is that too weird? Can people really file out of my funeral listening to a list of names of people they (and I) don't know? I've started to think of this passage as a sort of metaphorical dramatis personae now: granted, I don't know David Hayes or Nancy Ellis, but, you know... I probably knew someone like them. That's the best I can come up with, and it'll have to do, because I'm not changing my mind, so there.

- THE END -