Robert Calvert - Ramblings at Dawn, 1982 Interview

Right, well I can only find one microphone at the moment so I’m afraid this is going to have to be in sort of half track mono. Sorry about that it’s a bit bad actually for someone who produces records for a living, but I hope you’ll be able to hear this all right. It should sound ll right if you play it back on a mono machine.

Right, what was I doing before working with Hawkwind and friends? I was living in Ramsgate and Broadstairs in Kent by the sea, having decided to move from Margate, which is down the road, and I spent a lot of time in the winter out of work as a lot of the lads did in that place. And we didn’t actually think that was much of a hardship in those days. It seemed to be … you know … being offered a job was probably the ultimate doom that we were all trying to avoid.

And of course we worked in the summer. I worked in Dreamland, the amusement park in Margate. I did a bit of work on deckchairs, bit of beach photography, that sort of thing. Nik Turner was selling funny hats at the time, on the front. And in the summer it was actually quite possible if you used your wits to make enough money to keep you going with your dole money through the winter.

And that was the time when you had plenty of time to sort of dream up ideas and things, and Nik, Dik Mik and myself used to end up about together and talk about the sort of band we would get together if we had half a chance. We used to come up to London quite a lot to see bands playing and that’s where I first met Dave Brock when he was busking in Portobello Road. We used to go up and we used to see him a few weekends, quite a few weekends during the winter. And the summer in fact, if you weren’t working the weekend.

So that’s the sort of thing I did. I did actually quite a long stretch of teaching English to foreign students in the local foreign students academy. And that was actually quite enjoyable. That was quite an enjoyable way to spend the summer cause it left a lot of free time and the money was quite good. Because you could do private lessons for what in those days was a lot of money for about two quid an hour or something like that.

And I did a lot of writing in my spare time. And I uh I used to when I came up to London I used to ??? to the friends office to contribute a few bits and pieces of writing that I’d done. Until I suppose I gradually found myself spending more time in London and less time going back on the train. There seemed to be less to go back for and more happening.

There was a lot happening around the Notting Hill area at the time. And I suppose I got actively involved with music through just spending a lot of time … I used to review certain gigs. I went out review gigs, hang around gigs. I did poetries. I’d done readings … I mean I’d always written poetry since I was about fifteen and I’d done sort of the odd reading in … first of all in folk clubs actually really a long time before this. Then I’d start doing some readings around rock gigs. I mean, particularly around the gigs that were being put on at the Seven Sisters club. The Sisters Club it was called. Which was sort of jointly organised by ??? and friends.

And that was the first gig with Hawkwind I actually played. I got invited … I mean I’d seen Nik. No actually … yeah that was the very first gig with Hawkwind at the Sisters Club. Yeah I got up on the stage with the band at their invitation and read a long poem to start the set of the show off with. It was called Co-pilots of Spaceship Earth. And it was sort of from something I had been working on for quite a long time. That was really the beginning of the Space Ritual. That was the sort of the germ of the Space Ritual.

It wasn’t through friends that I first met Hawkwind in fact. It was really through the fact that Nik was an old mate from Kent and Dik Mik, and when they went off to join Hawkwind I actually went off to form another … But I started to form another sort of band, which was quite a lunacy … quite a lot of lunacy involved in it. It was me and three French musicians. Two guitarists and a percussionist who didn’t speak very much English and I didn’t speak any French.

And we did a few gigs. The very … the first gig I did with them was actually at the Roundhouse. I think it was the night after Hawkwind played there and I met Nik Turner the next day, and we were sort of discussing what we were up to. Cause I hadn’t actually, to be quite honest, I hadn’t really taken that much notice of what Hawkwind was doing up until that point. They hadn’t been formed very long. But I just thought it was some good time rock and roll band. I didn’t like, I must say, I didn’t like the name. I thought Hawkwind sounded like a silly name.

It wasn’t until we were standing in the restaurant, coffee bar, of the Roundhouse that Nik said when I asked him what sort of music Hawkwind was playing he said “space rock”, which is a term I hadn’t actually heard before. But it seemed sort of like the magic key to a movement that was about, that was afoot, at the time that I felt myself to be kind of … It was sort of like Ezra Pound and you know the Imagists sort of discussing a new movement in poetry and to me it sounded like something brand new, which it was.

And it wasn’t long after that I found myself performing more gigs after the Sisters gig, more gigs with the band, and I’d already planned the idea of doing the Space Ritual. Not necessarily with Hawkwind. I’d … it was something I’d wanted to do, to get some musician together to help me do, for quite a long time. I think even probably before even Hawkwind was formed it was something that I used to sort of dream up and write bits of while I was working in my Mum’s shop actually, in the odd few hours when she had to pop out. I used to take over her newsagents tobacconists shop and that was actually where I heard the news that Jimi Hendrix died, as it happens. So that fixes us in time I suppose, so … but I won’t go into all that.

As to when I actually joined the band it’s very hard to say. I’m not very good at … I don’t keep a diary and I don’t really attach a lot of significance to dates. I never have done. I was … I’ve always attached more significance to place actually rather than time. It’s funny I suppose you could say rather than to time. No I think where things happened is and how things happened is far more important than exactly when they happened, which is just sort of arbitrary measurement. And you can’t, I mean, it’s something you can’t time. It’s something you can’t visualise either unless you’re, unless you visualise it in numbers, and I don’t think in numerical terms or in abstract terms at all really. I can only really think in concrete images and time doesn’t give you any concrete image, unless you think of a clock face, which of course is nothing to do with time.

The success of Silver Machine obviously meant quite a difference to the band’s capacity to earn money, which meant rather more to rather more to our record company than I think it did to us. At the time it happened, at least, I mean it was something that … I mean we were actually asked if we would mind if they put Silver Machine out as a single. It was just one of the songs in the Space Ritual and when I … I’d never thought of it as a single. I’d never thought of making hit singles at all. I thought singles were really something that was a sort of industry altogether from the one that we were in. And when it was suggested and everybody agreed that it was a good idea to do it I didn’t … I was so naïve in those days that I couldn’t really see any way that if you made a single it wasn’t a hit. I thought, you know, I assumed that you know if you got into the process of making singles then you were in the business of making hit singles and that was it. You know a single was a hit single. So it didn’t surprise me that it got to the top of the charts at all.

I think I would have been very surprised if it hadn’t in fact. Not because I thought it was fantastic, or anything like that, or better than any other single, it was just purely and simply because I thought that’s what singles did. I subsequently found out that not typicals to most of them (???) but that’s how naïve I was then.

I can’t remember why I wasn’t involved in the recording of the Doremi album cause I think a couple of my songs were on it. It may just have well have been at that time I think I was purely sort of as it were resident poet in the band, and we hadn’t at that time got into any thoughts of recording poetry and music. I mean it was something that actually did go down very well with live audiences. It all seemed to be I mean I don’t think there was any other bands, at last not in England, that was doing anything quite like this. I mean playing long stretches of free form experimental electronic music with spoken poetry being read to it in the way that earlier poets read their work to jazz. But it seemed at the time were doing it to be a sort of inevitable extension of the whole experimental feeling there was in sort of in the days of the underground if you like.

And I think we were saving that, we were saving the recording of that for the Space Ritual, which was to be the follow up album. In fact the Doremi album seemed to, as far as I remember, seemed to have sort of sprung on me. I wasn’t expecting it to be recorded. I think it was pressure of the record company. They needed an album quickly and they got … and it was done quickly actually.

My involvement was still quite loose with the band in those days. I mean, I wasn’t a musician by any means at all. So I wasn’t really considered to be a sort of one of the sort of elite members of the group in that I didn’t play anything, I didn’t sing, and contribute anything that could be commercial. And it wasn’t until, I mean, obviously poetry and music wasn’t seen as at all commercial by the record company. But it wasn’t until the astonishing success of the Space Ritual, which I think must be, must have been, in any terms the very most successful compilation of poetry and music that’s ever been sold on a record. In fact it is … it’s still in the history of the band the Space Ritual is the biggest selling album the band’s produced so far. And it’s something to think about that poetry and music can actually sort of … It was a double album and it was in the charts I think at number nine for weeks on end.

I’m not really sure if any of this is coming out. The needle’s flickering away over there on the right hand travel there. I hope that it’s all recording all right.

My reasons behind the writing of Captain Lockheed are really quite hard to remember now cause it was something that again that I planned quite a number of years before I actually did it. Something I had really wanted to do. I’d always been interested in aeroplane technology, aerospace technology, and the Starfighter tragedy or whatever you want to call it - the Starfighter programme - phenomena - was always something that fascinated me. I was I mean sort of you know gigantic arms dealing monolithic industry causing all that chaos and I mean it was something that I couldn’t really come to grips with in any other way. So I had to write something about it. I mean I had thought, and I still do have in my mind … I’d like to do a novel about that era and the German air force of that time.

And not very much actually has been written about the Starfighter thing at all. And this is something that when I tried to get hold of research material to work on the album I found it very difficult to find anything that had been written about it. I had to look for bits and pieces and mentions in footnotes in work you know in books on the history of aviation. I mean it was … no one book has been devoted to the subject. I noticed also that subsequent to the album there's been a sort of an expose of Lockheed's work in … not in Germany as yet, but in Holland particularly. You know there was a scandal involving the government and Lockheed at that time.

But that sort of thing obviously goes on in arms sales. I mean arms dealing is probably the very epitome of modern commercial practice I would say. Worse than the oil business. There's another subject too wide and deep to go into in this interview.

The reason I had so many Hawkwind members guesting on the album, since you ask, is simply because they were there I suppose. I mean they were the only musicians that I knew. And they certainly, I mean, the music was you know Hawkwind style music was very appropriate. I would like to have had more of Dave on the album actually but he was in Devon and found it you know that you know his time off that he wanted to be at home with his family. So I just you know made what I could with those members of the band that were in London and were available at the time. I mean it was one of those things in those days I mean this was the way albums were made. I mean money was never a consideration, at least not for us at that time. You booked a studio and you rang people up and asked them if they would like to come down and record. If they were available they did and if they weren't you got someone else. And it was all very loose and lots of money was wasted in the studio in this way of working, which is a way one doesn't work today, in these much harsher times. I mean it's much more economic and much more economic considerations come into it.

Urban Guerrilla wasn't written about anyone in particular, but it was another case of something that was written a long time before it actually saw the light of day in the form of a recording. It actually came from just bowling down one of these side streets in Notting Hill. I noticed the term "urban guerrilla" had been sprayed up on a wall, well actually on a corrugated iron piece of sheeting that was tacked up to cover some blemish in the local architecture. And in this sort of great black, dribbling spray paint was this term "urban guerrilla", which obviously somebody had sprayed there simply because the term held a lot of heroic and exciting ideal sort of mythological modern, you know, kind of, feeling for whoever wrote it.

It was term that I had heard mentioned but I'd never really thought about until I saw it proclaimed in this way. And it wasn't that long after that I found a paperback book that was a sort of a study of guerrilla tactics that was called "Urban Guerrilla". And it, the cover of the book actually featured a corrugated iron wall with the word "urban guerrilla" sprayed in it. And the two things … when I saw that … the two things sort of … you know … my feelings about the whole thing I read the book, which was actually written by a soldier called Calvert as it so happens. He was … I think he's a military advisor to the British army. Colonel Calvert. Somebody or other Calvert. Who … anyway that just one of those small coincidences that really don't mean a lot to anyone unless … you know … obviously it meant something to me from my point of view. But it wouldn't to anyone else. But there you are, the subjectivity of coincidence.

Which is another subject. But I wrote it, I really wrote it, because I wanted to express that sort of feeling that I'd seen expressed in the spray paint, and also my own feelings about it. And I'm alarmed to see now that, well I was alarmed actually shortly after that to see how much or how many other people had obviously that it was … that an urban guerrilla was something to be. I mean it's not something that I feel that I would like to be myself at all other than in the realms of fantasy, but … you know, in a manner of speaking, it's something that has heavily caught on since those days. I mean when I saw that written it wasn't something that existed in this country at least. It was a sort of remote thing to do with Mediterranean countries and Mexican revolutions really.

It didn't surprise me that it was banned be the BBC at all. In fact I expected it to cause a lot of controversy. It made the front pages of the newspapers, but I particularly remember a headline in the, on the front page of the Evening Standard, when it was withdrawn from the market.

I'm just going to check … oh it's not too bad on this machine, I don't know what it's like on yours, but it's audible anyway.

So, I mean, it wasn't written to deliberately cause controversy but I knew it would and I didn't expect it to be … I mean I was really heavily taken to task. I had to give interviews, which were quite embarrassing really because … it … you know, the statements I made in the song, which were obviously … weren't … a refutation of guerrilla tactics by any means at all. But I really, you know, what I meant by the lyric was … you know, I meant it as a metaphor for an attitude rather than an incitement for young people to go and get themselves guns.

I suppose it got me a file opened by the Special Branch, or at least by the Home Office, in some department by the Home Office, as I think Nik Turner actually has got one on him for sure. I mean he has had his premises raided in an arms, bomb, search. That was a few years ago now. You know, I think you can't get away with something like that. I mean … the fact is the record is now a collector, I mean, quite a few … because of the success of Silver Machine obviously I mean thousands of the things were printed … pressed … and you can still buy them now. And second hand copies changing hands at quite a high rate, you know, quite a lot of money.

Captain Lockheed was quite a success for an album. I mean, are you asking was it successful in commercial terms - I think you might be. Well let's take that first. Yes, it sold. It sold well and it still does. I mean, it's still selling in America and as an import, not in alarmingly large quantities but I mean for an album that old - was it 73, which makes it eight years, getting on for nine years old - I think that's quite a long sales life really. Whether it was successful in artistic terms is something that I'm really not the person to ask because I never think anything I do is successful in those terms. I mean, I always listen to things I've done or read things I've written or had published and wish that I get them back again and work on them more. I still work on stuff that's already … But, I mean, I've got revisions for songs that have already been recorded and sold and gone now. I still, sort of, from time to time, revise away at them. I'm a great reviser.

But Lockheed was recorded as I said before in that sort of spirit, that loose, spontaneous spirit, which I think it needed to have. And I think some it's more … some of the album … there's a lot on the album actually. I mean, there's a lot of facts on it, and some of them are obviously more successful than others. It's a pity that I didn't really have the maturity of approach that I've sort of grown up with now - to have spent more time actually planning it in advance. And it was quite heavily planned but not as much as I would do now. But, you know, planned carefully and worked over more rather than arrived at by extemporaneous means.

You say that some of my vocals on the album sounds very like Peter Hammill, which is something no-one's actually said to me before. And I find that a rather flattering remark. I think, I mean, I think Peter Hammill is probably one of the … one of the finest vocalists, vocal stylists as they call them in America, that we've got in England. Or that we've had in rock anyway. And if I sound anything at all like him, or if I did in those days, I mean that was not a conscious effort at all. And I had, I was aware of him, and I didn't really appreciate him as much as I do now. But I was … and I'd heard, you know, I'd heard the Van der Graaf albums but I didn't set out to imitate his voice in any way at all.

I worked in a way which was far less self-conscious than I do now, which may have been in some ways better and in some ways not so good. But I was certainly not trying to sound like anyone, but just to sort of sound, I mean, I was more or less trying to sound appropriate for the songs I was doing. Which is still something I try and do now. Actually I think that's why my voice varies in style from song to song, or t least to my ears it does. Maybe to someone else it doesn't. But I … I mean what I try to do is to perform a song in a way that to my way of thinking that it needs to be performed.

30:21