The Colours of the Night: review and thematic analysis

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"On the last hill that shows you all your travel/look back . . "

Labelling anything the 'last' has the effect of instantly freighting it with significance and expectation – fortunately for those in the music business who are currently on their third or fourth farewell tour at this point. This time through, Pete's introductory note that 'this album will almost certainly be the last to feature mainly new, or at least newish, songs from us' has the inescapable ring of truth. I have to say that the weight that the 'last' word brings with it is daunting enough for the reviewer, so I hate to think what it must be like for the artist. In the end though, not to be heard is worse than the risk of saying the wrong thing, and this spurs us into action. So here goes.

Thematically The Colours of the Night is the logical next step. Winter Spring's themes concerned what I described at the time as 'the concerns of later life – getting older, striving for a balanced life, appreciation of what makes life beautiful sharpened by the consciousness of the approach of death', which I observed at the time were seldom found in rock music; and that album explored these themes in a mixture of the elegiac and the comic voice.

The Colours of the Night returns to these themes with the added edge of brinkmanship. Being close to death affects us in a number of ways. In life we are in death, and in death we are in life – and being in life, see its beauty and its preciousness more acutely. We review our past experiences from the different perspective of the distance travelled. Most importantly, we know we have to say very clearly what we mean, because there will be no time for interpretation or sorting out misunderstandings.

This is the perspective which seems to inform The Colours of the Night, as some themes are explored in more depth: past, present and future: hope and experience. As in Winter Spring, the lyrics of the new songs are simple, direct and universal, and on the surface of things, leave little for the interpretive critic to do (with the exception of title track and its alternative setting The Last Ditch, discussed at the end of this article). However, in revisiting themes from the back catalogue, these provide insights into Clive's newer lyrical style and show how his style has developed, whilst the older tracks revisited gain additional resonance and meanings because of the distance travelled by both the artists and the listener since they were originally written and recorded.

Unlike Winter Spring, the love songs are a mixture of the joyous and the elegiac – but opting to start at the end with We Will Love Again loads the songs which follow it which are set in an ecstatic present with foreknowledge of the likely future. We Will Love Again revisits You Can't Expect To Be Remembered, this time without the roll-call of dead poets or the 'No, I'm **not** going to immortalise you in verse' feint. This time, the poet's skills don't need to be greater or fears less – job done, and using only one word longer than two syllables. The lyric transcends the personal by starting with the idea that it's the love itself which will be immortalised, and only later extending this to the beloved and the writer – a similar idea to that in Dreamboat where the love, symbolised by the schooner, takes on a life of its own independent of the lovers and sails on without them. We Will Love Again takes the idea further though, by investing the love itself with the continued life after death traditionally given to the beloved, and through the agency of the reader. The double 'then'

in the repeated refrain 'why then, then' is meant to stop us in our tracks to emphasise the logical link between the just-finished writing in the present about the remembered past ('What I have written here is what we were') and the future ('When what is written here is read') when love, beloved and writer will be restored to life through the act of reading. Absolute certainty in two 'then's: one to clinch the QED and one to say when.

The Way You Are With Me is set in an idyllic present which is soon to be past. Clive's sleeve note identifies the speaker as the Flying Dutchman. But if you go for that, he'll be back in seven years, not next full moon – but fortunately she won't even have to wait that long to deliver on her oath of fidelity unto death as she'll be heroically jumping off the cliff and lifting his curse of endless wandering as soon as he sets sail, so they're ascending into heaven together before the day's even over. (Phew – so it was just the 'unto death' bit that was important, not the long lifetime of fidelity. Who knew? If the Dutchman had, the opera could have been much shorter.) Much better to take the song as heard. Like so many partings, it takes place beside the sea over which the man is about to sail away – Dido and Aeneas, departing sailors in war-time, even the holiday romance you never got in touch with again but remembered always. "I won't be gone forever?" We know otherwise, because we know by now how idylls go. It's the gap between the youthful hope in the song and the lifetime's experience in the listener that makes the happiness here so sad.

With The Closer Someone Is, we are back in the present contemplating the past again. The lyric explores the tumult of contradictory feelings aroused when someone with a passing resemblance to an old flame brings the original back to mind, unextinguished – and does so with the clarity of preparing a glass slide for a microscope. The tumult/flame metaphors I'm using here are to point out the contrast between the vocabulary we usually use to talk about emotion and that of the song – the only strongly physical or emotional word you will find there is 'blinded' (although if you're using just the one, you might as well make it one that packs a punch that goes all the way back to Catullus and Sappho.) The inherent contradiction is made clear to see (how can it all flood back for someone similar when the whole point was that she/he was unique and irreplaceable?): far harder to resolve.

Nothing Can Touch Us Now is narrated in the present but its theme is timeless: the desire to run away together and hide. The language is modern, but the themes of fleeing the rest of humanity into the safety of the natural world, of light in the darkness and a 'commonwealth of two' with shared knowledge not available to the rest of the world hark back to Robert Herrick's appeal to Julia and countless other runaways. Again, the gap between hope and experience makes the very hopefulness potentially tragic. We hope nothing **can** touch them, but know it doesn't often work out that way.

In I Know The Way, the narrator reflects on his knowledge of how a relationship is likely to develop into the near and then the distant future on the basis of how it has gone in the past, both recently (tonight) and presumably further back. (I say presumably because if everybody extrapolated this much from how a first date seems to have gone, not many people would get as far as the second one and humanity would be doomed.) The question is: where will this knowledge take him? The final line gives the answer: Back tomorrow. Despite what experience is saying very clearly, hope continues to go on doing what hope does, which is holding on regardless.

Me To Thank concludes the album with a sad *mea culpa* for a past relationship and present misery. It speaks for itself, and I will flag up only the reference to 'I should have spoken to you clearly' – again, the need for clear communication when time is short.

Now to the lighter-hearted songs. Slow Down For Me highlights one of the key difficulties of talking to young people: they seem not to hear a word you're saying and it's hard to keep up with them as they're apparently walking to a different beat. Since the invention of the Sony Walkman in the 1980s, this problem has been literal rather than metaphorical. The passage of time has intensified the problem, as today they don't seem to see you either since they're texting at the same time. The lyric captures the problem of trying to communicate with a being who is in a world of their own whilst moving through yours much faster than you can.

Time To Burn again traces the arc from the past to the present, revisiting Louis MacNeice's observation "So they were married – to be the more together/And found they were never again so much together" by examining the deadly serious questions that arise from the life history of a marriage in an upbeat way. Why have we got a house packed with stuff when neither of us is ever actually in it, let along both of us at the same time? How did we manage to have time for everything else but each other? It also holds out a hope for the future: that after all it might still be possible to slip out of your skin, leave the divorce lawyers and the next generation to it, and go and be those people you were who simply liked to spend time in one another's company, without the accumulated detritus of the years in between. Running away together and hiding for the over-50s. (We could call it carbon dating.) Better keep quiet about it, or whole workplaces could empty.

So to the 'revisited' tracks. Good art is for all time, and the same or different artists or the same or different readers will be able to return to it many times and find more or different meanings there. This has certainly worked well for all of the three tracks revisited.

The Beautiful Changes has acquired depth over time for an audience who were themselves amongst 'the loveliest creatures' when they first heard it, and now see the next generation pairing off and struggling to make the grade, sometimes cracking up before they're even out of our sight. And thanks to a 2015 documentary, we now know that NASA's next big project is to have an astronaut (or rather a landing craft containing four of them) falling towards Mars within the next few years. Even better, the landing craft designer explained that the laws of physics would make it necessary to use a conventional rocket design which would reach the planet's surface by falling sideways, presumably through the night. You wait forty years for one reference to come true . . .

Thanks to Google, we now have immediate access to the knowledge that the Cottonmouth is the only viper capable of swimming as well as slithering – but more importantly for our purposes, that it uses its mouth as a threat display to ward off potential aggressors by showing the strikingly white inside, hence the name. Like its smaller relatives in the UK, the North American Cottonmouth prefers to hide rather than have a fight but will inflict a deadly bite if a predator insists on picking it up. Unfortunately for the Cottonmouth, North America is also inhabited by some humans who like to test their religious faith by doing just that, hence the Cottonmouth's poor reputation and subsequent persecution. Enough said. Has our perspective on the lyric changed since we first heard it? Thanks to Twitter, we now know that people are equally fond of ganging up on others found guilty of being too clever by half, and that downright simplicity and sincerity have their

limitations as a force for good. Notably, even St Matthew advised the early Christians to be wise as serpents as well as innocent as doves.

You Better Face It, Boy needs no further commentary than Pete and Clive's sleeve notes: only to note how astonishingly prescient a lyric it was for the young man of 27 who wrote it, and that this is perhaps the most extreme example of how the passage of time adds to and alters the meaning. What started out as a thought experiment by a young man about what being at the end of his career might feel like could now be mistaken for a reflection about present reality but for one thing: the song is about the loss not of life, but of artistic ability and popular acclaim – and that can happen to a performer at any age. (I know, because that's when they start threatening to sue the hapless individual doing their marketing.)

Finally, to the title song The Colours of the Night and Last Ditch. Here once again Clive (reluctantly, he says) returns to the theme of war or rather, The War, since our experience of it is continuous and universal. Previously Clive conveyed this idea through imagery which evoked specific individual experience in specific historical conflicts, as in No Dice and The Last Hill That Shows You All The Valley. This time he takes a completely different approach which highlights the key difference between his initial and current lyrical styles.

Instead of narrating specific experiences (which might or might not have been meaningful for the listener) to evoke a universal response, Clive constructs a lyric which is universal and which invites individual specific interpretations.

To see how and why this works, look at the choice of words and the metre. The vocabulary is simple, using only one or two syllables. It is also ancient: with only two exceptions, there is not a single word there which a Middle English speaker would not have known or been able to make an educated guess at. Many of the words used are from the older Anglo-Saxon vocabulary : the Germanic-rooted words we tend to use for the things closest to the heart: physical, family relationships and the natural world (blood, wind, rain, scythe, grain). The metre too, with each of the first lines of the verses broken into two shorter phrases, is also familiar from Anglo-Saxon verse.

The result is a lyric whose speaker could be a soldier in any conflict from the Battle of Maldon to the present day, and as it is a song rather than a poem, our perspective on who, when and where the speaker is shifts from one verse to another. Each new specific element is open to interpretation in this way. For example, walls and ditches have played their part in defences from pre-Roman times to the present day. "The wall that we were sent to guard" suggests a fortification which could be Hadrian's Wall, a medieval fortress or any building deemed to be strategically important. The Last Ditch could be a front-line trench in the First World War, part of the defences of Maiden Castle, or metaphorical. The witches' brew might be what Anglo-Saxon warriors drank to help them towards the battle-frenzy, or simply the terrible food in the trenches. The metaphor of being cut down like grain before the scythe has been a meaningful one to soldiers ever since agriculture began, and will continue to be for as long as it goes on. "The brand of Cain" is a reminder that war has been present since the beginnings of humanity, and "the hymn of hate" that wars over religion date back equally far.

There is only one exception: "The crimson lake, the China white", which are artists' pigments whose names mirror their exotic origins and which did not enter the language until much later. Their use

in the second verse signals an important change – the speaker, at that point at least, is not simply a combatant but a war artist whose role is to record the conflict, or an artist who happens to be involved in the war. Either way, his job is to tell us that there is still beauty amidst the horror. "Behold" he says, as if unveiling the spectacle for us, "the colours of the night."

How we see the colours will depend partly on where we have located the war in time. The most obvious reading is that they are red and white flares or shell-bursts above the battlefield, envisaged as an explosive splattering of colour on a canvas like Whistler's paintings of fireworks. But 'colours' might also refer to flags, which can also make a crackling noise in a high wind, and would seem to fade away as those carrying them marched into the distance, which would give an earlier setting. (Red and white are the two most commonly used colours in national flags, because every culture has attached value to blood and to light.)

Finally, as Clive has said, Pete's two different settings mean that it is not one song but two. The Colours of the Night is a stoical reflection; Last Ditch is a march and a rallying call. Both versions result in different emphases and in doing so, call a different meaning from the words. I particularly like the way Pete's setting concludes The Colours of the Night by introducing a gradual rallying drum-beat, guiding us towards to the mood of Last Ditch; and the way the insertion of the minor piano chords at the end of Last Ditch seem to take us back again.

But there's more. The artist's eye view shows us another perspective on the lyric: it may be a metaphor. The war may be life, and the struggle it describes the struggle for life or through it: the night may be death. In this reading, the cruel scars are those inflicted by life; the witches' brew whatever we take to get us through it; death either the risk of staying where we are or the goal we reach after our natural span.

In this reading, the Colours of the Night have a host of metaphorical meanings. They could be the fireworks glimpsed in the limited sky of your back garden during a sleepless night. Their primal contrast of red and white can be seen as blood and bone, red and white blood cells fighting for supremacy, the crimson petal and the white, sacred and profane love. Or what seems to emerge as the key thematic conflict through this album: great white Hope versus bloodied Experience. Is it sheer stupidity to keep hanging on for the triumph of hope over experience? *Dum spiro, spero.* Like the song in its two different settings, they are two sides of the same thing: endurance.

If death is the night, then even the night has its colours, brought into sharper focus than ever. If life is a war, we need our war artists to send us despatches from the front line to show us there is beauty there too. If The Colours of the Night does prove to be the last post from Pete and Clive, then it certainly fits the bill.