

Nick Drake

The English folk scene has always seemed obscure and mysterious from this side of the Atlantic Ocean. The traditional music of the British Isles began a renaissance in the 1950s and '60s with Ewan MacColl A.L. Lloyd, Ian Campbell and Martin Carthy. They paved the way for the singer/songwriter/guitarist, who, with a nod towards Bob Dylan, updated the traditional folk style and synthesized it with blues and jazz. The early '60s wave was led by Bert Jansch, John Renbourn, Davey Graham, Ralph McTell and Donovan, to be followed by Fairport Convention, John Martyn, Pentangle and the Incredible String Band.

Some of these people reached nationwide, even worldwide, success. Many remained in relative obscurity, rarely if ever playing in the States. They remained in the folk club and small concert scene in England. Their music was often intricate, introspective and unlike the "folk music" we were accustomed to. One of them was Nick Drake, who remains to this day an almost anonymous figure, even in his own country.



Keith Morris

By Frank Kornelussen

Nick Drake was born June 18, 1948 in Burma, where his father was working. The family moved to their British home at Tamworth-in-Arden when Nick was about six years old. Though always a quiet boy, Nick did well at his boarding school, especially in athletics (where he still holds records for his school). His mother, Molly, played piano and wrote songs. The urge for music rubbed off on Nick and he played clarinet and saxophone in his teens. By the age of 16 he had begun to play guitar, working at it with a friend. He listened and learned from Bob Dylan, John Renbourn and Bert Jansch. By the time he was 18 Nick had a fairly large repertoire of standard folk songs as well as some of his own, which steadily grew in number.

While living at home he made a lengthy tape for his parents of some 25-odd songs. Among them were "Saturday Sun," "Day Is Done," "Way to Blue" (later used for his first LP), "Princess of the Sands," "Joey" and "Mayfair". Also included were "Don't Think Twice," "Tomorrow Is a Long Time," "Let's Get Together," "500 Miles," a duet with his sister, Gabrielle, Bert Jansch's "Courting Blues" and a Renbourn-style country blues, "Black Mountain."

Nick began college in Cambridge around

1968, and it was there things began to happen for him. He became good friends with other musicians, learning from them and playing with them. Paul Wheeler, a songwriter and guitarist (his "Give Us a Ring" is on John Martyn's *Road to Ruin*), remembers Nick as "one of the lads," but with eclectic tastes. He met Nick through Robert Kirby, a talented musician who helped Nick with arrangements for his songs (Kirby was a recent member of Strawbs). Wheeler cites Jackson C. Frank, an American singer who lived in Britain, as an influence, and recalls Traffic and Randy Newman as two of Nick's favorites.

Though Nick was considered shy and quiet, Paul Wheeler didn't find him withdrawn. He enjoyed Nick's dry humor and was impressed when he first heard "Time Has Told Me." Another very close friend, Brian Wells, also claims Nick was happy at Cambridge, but Wheeler describes it as a "precious environment." Paul brought his friend John Martyn by once or twice, and he also was impressed with Nick, especially with "Riverman" which he calls "my fave" of Nick's.

In 1968 Ashley Hutchings, then bassist for Fairport Convention, heard Nick performing at a benefit in London's Roundhouse, asked Nick for his number and promptly told producer Joe Boyd how impressed he was with him. Boyd had

already established himself through Witch-season Productions, recording LPs by Fairport, John Martyn and the Incredible String Band (as well as being the latter's mentor/manager). He called Nick and asked for a tape, which Nick obliged. Joe described his initial impression of Drake's music as "melodically unusual and sophisticated." There was no doubt that Nick had to be nurtured and recorded.

Five Leaves Left was begun in mid-1968. Almost a full year's work went into it, and the LP was released in July, 1969. John Wood says Nick was "fairly shy" though he "had a very definite feeling how he wanted things to be." Three or four tracks were cut, and it was collectively decided to augment some songs with string arrangements. An arranger was brought in with disastrous results. Nick's mention of Kirby's abilities brought raised eyebrows from Boyd and Wood, but they gave in. Kirby worked on four songs, and declined working on "River Man" which was done by Harry Robinson.

Five Leaves Left was received with admiration by critics but didn't sell very well. In late 1969 Nick made his first important public appearance at the Festival Hall concert which welcomed Fairport Convention back to the public eye. Joe Boyd remembers it as "a fateful occurrence—he played fantastic—he was brilliant, he was nervous. It was a magical kind of thing, the audience was mesmerized." Nick himself was surprised and bewildered.

For a first LP, *Five Leaves Left* is an astounding album. Nick's strange, jazzy sound was superbly juxtaposed against his rhythmic and melodic music. His lyrics were distant yet strangely to the point, described by one reviewer as "exquisite 3 AM introversions." "River Man" is the epitome of Nick's style, bossa-nova full of beauty and uncertainty:

*Going to see the riverman
Going to tell him all I can
About the ban on feeling free.*

*If he tells me all he knows
About the way his river flows
I don't suppose
It's meant for me.*

Sometime after the LP's release Nick quit college and moved to a bedsitter room in Hampstead, nearby close friends John and Beverly Martyn. He had decided to forsake his English studies and become a professional musician. It was there he wrote most of the songs for his second LP,

Bryter Layter.

Paul Wheeler called Bryter Layter a "city LP"; that city is London. Nick remained there, seeing John and Beverly most often and dropping in on friends like Keith Morris (who took most of the photographs on Drake's albums). But Nick was alone. John Martyn says "he was the most withdrawn person I've ever met." London seemed to deepen Nick's feelings of loneliness, yet it sharpened his music.

Bryter Layter was released in January, 1971; again, almost a year's work went into it. Joe Boyd got Nick to respond in the studio, using "house" musicians Richard Thompson, Dave Pegg, Dave Mattacks, Ray Warleigh, Paul Harris, and even John Cale. Cale loved Nick, according to Boyd, although Nick was "a bit bewildered by him." Both Boyd and Wood consider Bryter Layter the finest LP they or Witchseason ever produced. Boyd comments, "The music was so good"; Wood says it is the only LP he did which he wouldn't alter at all.

The songs were intensely personal images and amazingly elusive. At times, as in "Poor Boy," Nick pokes fun at his own faults. In "Hazy Jane I" he sings to an unknown girl:

*Do you curse where you come from?
Do you swear in the night?
Would it mean much to you
If I treat you right?*

Perhaps it is "Northern Sky" which most epitomizes Nick, lyrically and musically. John Cale's arrangement complements Nick's desires and feelings:

*I never felt magic crazy as this.
I never saw moons, knew the meaning
of the sea.
I never held the motion in the palm
of my hands
Or felt sweet breezes in the top of a tree.
But now you're here;
brighten my northern sky.*

London became too much for Nick, and he moved back to his parents' home soon after the LP's release. He was deeply depressed and troubled; physically ill as well, and spent some time in hospital. Still he felt he had more music in him and he had songs ready for another LP. Though still weak and depressed, he carried out his plans. Joe Boyd had sold Witchseason and was no longer around to guide and help things along. John Wood says, "Nick rang me out of the blue and said he wanted to make a record." Nick took a flat in Muswell Hill, and stayed there while he worked on Pink Moon. He refused to tell anyone where he was, and it was only by accident they eventually did find out.

Pink Moon was exactly what Nick wanted; Wood describes it as "stark and honest. The other two LPs were a little too pretty or sweetened up for Nick." These songs said more about him. The LP was indeed stark. It was, however, well done and contained some of Nick's finest songs, only his voice, guitar and piano being used. It was recorded in three days with a minimum of overdubs.

The album seems to bear out Nick's

mother's idea of his being a true Gemini, two people living in two worlds (his music and his home life). One song expresses supreme joy, another sad and bitter longings. Some songs, like "Know," do both: "Place to Be" and "From the Morning" are hopeful love songs to life; "Parasite" is a caustic self-putdown. The title track expresses a strange doomsday:

*Saw it written and I saw it say
Pink moon is on its way.
None of you will stand so tall
Pink moon gonna get ye all.*

Keith Morris, Nick's friend, says the LP was a "cry to be heard."

The months after Pink Moon's release (in February, 1972) brought Nick into a period of deepening depression. His mother said he appeared to be desperately unhappy. Around April Nick suffered a breakdown and was voluntarily hospitalized for about five weeks. He claimed he had no music left in him, though his parents heard him working over songs in his music room. Still, he stated he had given up performing and recording, thinking only of perhaps writing songs for others. Nick was never really able to cope with the life of a professional musician; he wanted recognition



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but not the trappings and put-ons of being in the public eye. He was never comfortable with recording companies, going so far as keeping his studio sessions secret and only sending Island the completed tapes of *Pink Moon*.

With the help of his parents, friends and prescribed medication, Nick got along after his release from hospital. In early 1973 he contacted John Wood, saying he wanted to record again. Joe Boyd was back in England and came by to produce the sessions. Wood described them as "rough going"; Nick said he felt like a zombie, that he couldn't feel anything. He also refused to record his voice at the same time as his guitar, overdubbing some rough vocals almost a year later. Nick produced four songs from these last sessions. Though the vocals are a little shaky the guitar work is superb. The songs are nearly complete and very good, definite proof that he did have music left in him. Once again the songs show the two sides of Nick Drake, sunlight and shadow. In "Voice from the Mountain" he sings:

*Tell me, my friend, my friend,
tell me of love.
A tune from the hillside,
a tune full of light.
A flute full of morning,
a chime in the night.
I know the game, I know the score.
I know my name,
but this tune is more.*

"Ride on the Wheel" is also an optimistic view of life. "Black Eyed Dog," though, shows the darkness Nick dwelled in; the title is a medieval symbol of death. The guitar figure is modal and sparse, and he sings, "Black-eyed dog he called at my door / Black-eyed dog he called for more / Black-eyed dog he knew my name." One should hesitate to read too much into this; desperation is a feeling common to many people. The final number, "Hanging on a Star", is a simple song of rejection, a sort of cry for help.

Writing in *Zig Zag* magazine in June, 1974, Connor McKnight called on Nick to try again, stating that he and his music were still loved and respected. Drake's parents remember that in his own quiet way Nick was moved by it. He silently showed it to them, and in the weeks after began to work on songs again. They had thought, "Nick's back on the note." Perhaps it was this article and a pep talk from Joe Boyd which prompted Nick to work on those final tracks. Nevertheless he was starting to come out of his shell just a bit.

John Martyn wrote a song for Nick, the title song of his LP *Solid Air*:

*You've been getting too deep;
you've been living on solid air.
You've been missing your sleep
and you've been moving through
solid air.*

John seems to have known Nick as well as one could. Nick is sometimes considered to be very down and low-keyed in his songs, but John says it is not true: "He was quite conscious of the image portrayed in his songs. He was not a

manic depressive who picked up a guitar; he was a singer-guitarist in every sense. He was unique in his own way. I loved him very much; it was a privilege and honor to know the man." John Wood seconded these feelings saying, "I was proud to have worked with him."

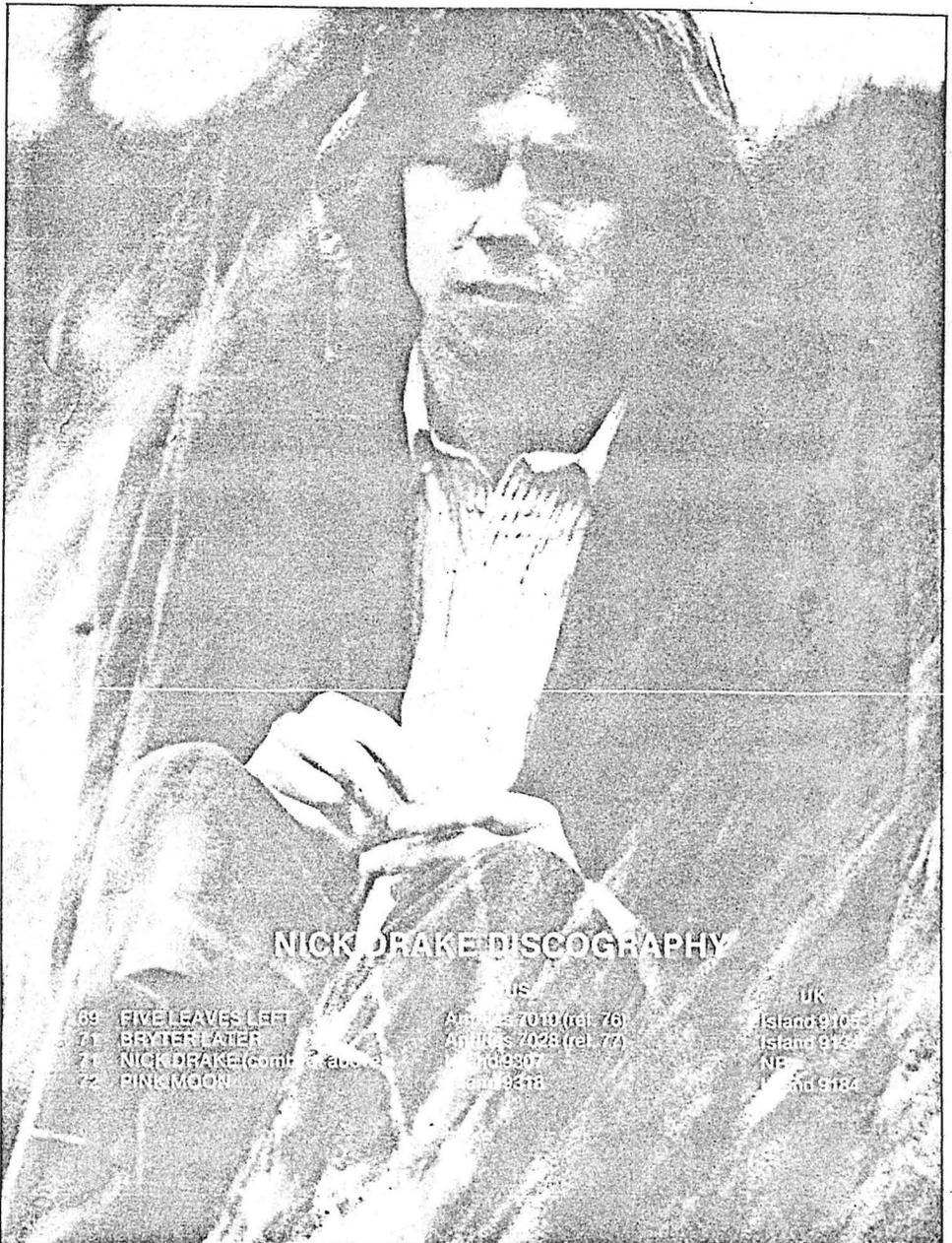
Still, Nick's gradual process of withdrawal had taken its toll. Though his spirits were better, he was moody and uncertain. His mother says he struggled very hard against his "illness." In October, 1974 Nick went off to Paris with an acquaintance. There he met some people who took to him and put him up for several weeks. Nick loved Paris, loved the Seine, and returned home with plans to move there. He talked about writing again, played guitar—even studied French using a record course.

Nick Drake died in the morning hours of November 25, 1974. He had been prescribed a drug, *Tryptasol*, for his depressions. Tragically, neither he nor his parents were warned that even a slight overdose could affect the heart. He had

been happy, though his mother thinks he suffered through a bad night, and that it was purely accidental and out of desperation that he took the pills. The coroner called it suicide; his parents and friends are certain it was anything but.

Nick once said, "In moments of stress, one forgets so easily the lies, the truth and the pain." His death was a tragic waste. There will probably be no monuments for Nick Drake, but he doesn't really need them. He left them for us. His music, embodied in his three albums, stands as a testament to his soul, talent and beauty.

"Riverman," © 1969 Warlock Music.
"Hazy Jane I," © 1970 Warlock Music.
"Northern Sky," © 1972 Warlock Music.
"Pink Moon," © 1972 Warlock Music.
"Voice from the Mountain," unpublished, used by permission of Mr. and Mrs. Rodney Drake.
"Black Eyed Dog," same as above.
"Solid Air," written by John Martyn, © 1973 Warlock Music.



NICK DRAKE DISCOGRAPHY

	US	UK
69 FIVE LEAVES LEFT	Atlantic 7019 (rel. 76)	Island 9105
71 BRYTER LATER	Atlantic 7028 (rel. 77)	Island 9123
72 NICK DRAKE (comp. & arr.)	Atlantic 8307	NE
73 PINK MOON	Atlantic 8318	Island 9184