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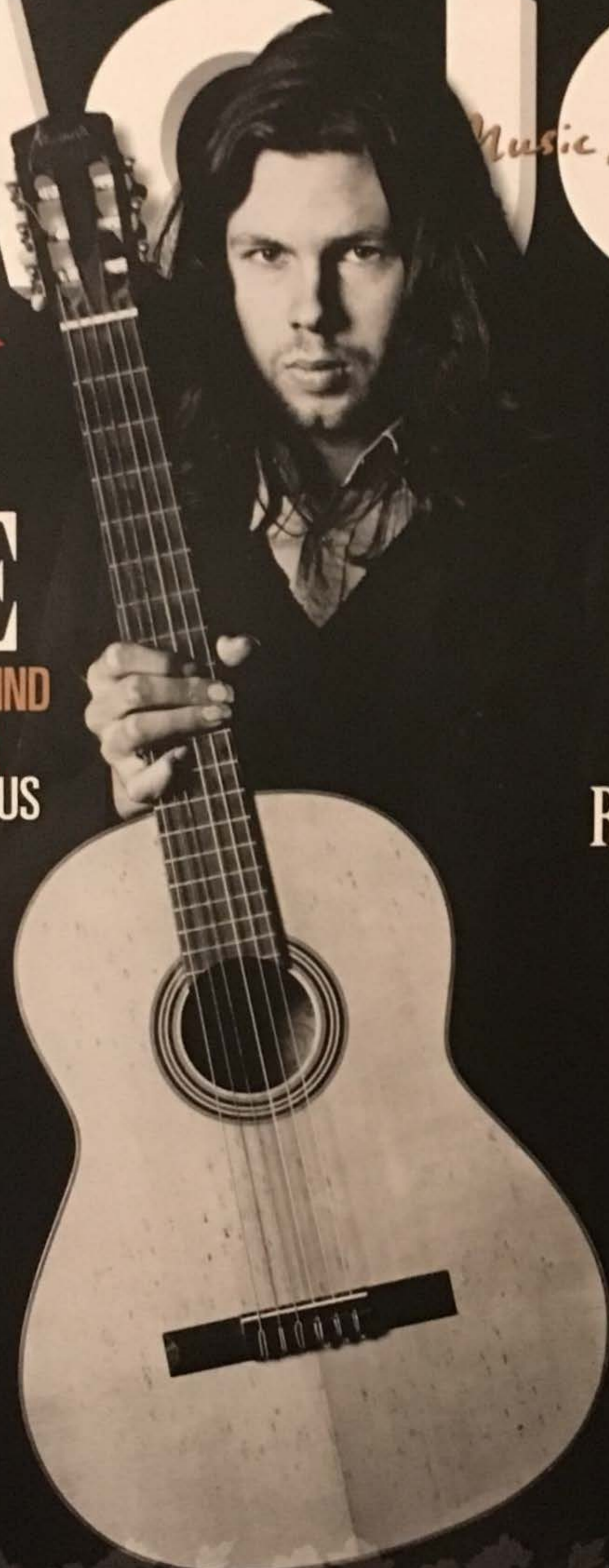
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River Man

(from *Five Leaves Left*, Island, 1969)

River Man defies any but the most speculative conclusions about its meaning, just as its circling melody and chord pattern likewise defy conclusion. Lasting four minutes and 23 seconds on disc, it could go on forever, like Heraclitus's river, always changing, always the same.


Debuted when the guitars were unsheathed in Cambridge college rooms in early 1968, the song's specialness was obvious even within Drake's early clutch of originals. For a start, it was in 5/4 time, a waltz with a jazzy swing like The Dave Brubeck Quartet's 1959 tune Take Five, a huge hit when released on 45 in 1961. Secondly, though starting conventionally in C major, it then shifts to C minor when the vocal enters, then back to major, these seesawing chords clustered with additional notes to create ambiguity, even mystery, never resolved. Further destabilising conventional expectations, Drake croons long, warm phrases across the key changes, liquefying both the harmonic transitions and sense of regular time, so evoking that meditative half-hypnosis as a river flows by. So fluid is the interplay between guitar and voice that many listeners wrongly assume the vocal was overdubbed onto the instrumental track rather than simultaneously performed in real time.

Then there is the third element: the string arrangement, no afterthought but built into the original composition, as demonstrated in a version captured on music student Robert Kirby's Ferrograph tape-recorder where Drake works guitar notes into the fabric to stand in for a string section. Though Kirby successfully arranged four other songs on what would be Drake's debut album, *River Man* defeated him. "Dave Brubeck's Take Five aside, that was the only time in my life

I'd heard a piece of music consistently in 5/4," he told me shortly before he died in 2009. "I could not for the life of me work out how to write a piece of music that didn't stagger along like a spider missing a leg, how you crossed over and ignored the bar lines. But Harry's string arrangement is scarcely in 5/4; it goes along like a limpid river all the way, moving regularly and crossing over all the beats and the 5/4 with it."

Arranger Harry Robinson was a stage, screen and studio all-rounder recommended by Sound Techniques engineer John Wood as a musical mimic who could accommodate Drake's desire for strings evoking the English composer **Frederick Delius**. Producer Joe Boyd was surprised at how well the neophyte Drake explained and demonstrated what he wanted for the string parts, and Robinson responded with a score for a 12-strong section heavy on violas for warmth and weight. To get the best sound, the whole track was recorded live in the studio, Drake playing and singing while surrounded by the orchestra with Robinson conducting, just as Frank Sinatra and Nelson Riddle had done it a decade before.

So emotionally involving is the musical framing and so airily detached its vocal delivery that the song front and centre often only gradually enters the listener's consciousness. Once in focus, it is an enigmatic riddle, an English folk Last Year At Marienbad where plot and character hover in dreamily portentous indecision, vital meaning withheld. Referencing "Betty", Wordsworth's ballad The Idiot Boy is often cited as one strand of lyrical DNA, Drake's favourite poet Blake as another; also Buddhist mysticism, even a veiled revelation of childhood abuse. Drake left no clues beyond the song itself. The cycle of seasons, passage of time and mysteries of nature seem key, neither good nor bad but, all of a piece with the music's melancholy beauty, simply inevitable, too deep to fathom.



"IT'S AN ENIGMATIC RIDDLE, AN ENGLISH FOLK LAST YEAR AT MARIENBAD WHERE PLOT AND CHARACTER HOVER IN INDECISION."

Cello Song

(from *Five Leaves Left*, Island, 1969)

Strings of desire: purgatorial love song ascends to next level.

Recorded with Danny Thompson on double bass and Rocki Dzikzornu on percussion, Cello Song's raga-like drive almost makes it seem like the Nick Drake track that could elicit some 1969-style dancing. Yet Clare Lowther's watchful, wary cello suddenly clouds the sprightly green-shoots guitar, while Drake's hushed, neat vocals seem disinclined to make any sudden movement from their crossed-legged hunch. For all the dynamism of bass, percussion and spring-fresh guitar, this is a song lost in beautiful inertia, a youthful state of grace where something – anything – might happen to you at any moment. The "strange face" Drake addresses – one of many looming disconcertingly from his songs – could be a mirror image or a friend, but either way, this is a song that expresses the poignant optimism of someone waiting to be rescued from a "cruel world", whether by his own talent or another's love: "I'll just sit and wait and sing my song." VS

The Thoughts Of Mary Jane

(from *Five Leaves Left*, Island, 1969)

Chansons d'fumeur.

He was habitually pigeonholed as a folk singer – as anyone with an acoustic guitar invariably was – but Drake's deeply affecting voice and

his open-minded approach to arrangements meant he might have conceivably gone in any musical direction imaginable. Visions of Georges Brassens certainly hit Joe Boyd when he first heard this song, and Drake had spent enough time in Provence to be influenced by the French *chanson* tradition, while also absorbing many other styles – **Delius**, Miles Davis, Django Reinhardt, Bert Jansch North African music and – judging by his rhythmic approach – very probably bossa nova too. This luxuriant pastoral arrangement adds to the notion of someone capable of far greater diversity. Drake was a heavy smoker, and with a title alluding to weed you imagine it can only be a dreamy drug song, but delve inside and you find something less tangible – a real person. In this case, possibly American songwriter Robin Frederick, who befriended him in Provence. CI

Fruit Tree

(from *Five Leaves Left*, Island, 1969)

To be or not to be, that is the question.

Most critics take Fruit Tree at face value: a meditation on posthumous fame, inspired by the singer's love of William Blake and the Romantics (Keats, Byron, Shelley etc). As such, the song is read by many as prophetic, anticipating Drake's own early death. Profound, but hardly complex. Yet there's mystery at Fruit Tree's heart. Written in a lyrical style that resembles both the aphorism and koan, Fruit Tree is a set of seemingly simple yet contra-

dictory statements – "darkness can give the brightest light" – as much riddle as prophecy. Musically, it's a song forever on the edge of discord, Robert Kirby's strings always close to disintegration, as if the song itself is wrestling with the question of carrying on. Fittingly, Fruit Tree was the last song Drake performed live, at Ewell Technical College, Surrey, on June 25, 1970, the singer only getting halfway through before exiting the stage, never to return. AM

Saturday Sun

(from *Five Leaves Left*, Island, 1969)

Darkness visible on a wet weekend.

Saturday Sun begins as a disarming R&B roll, Drake's soft, lullaby delivery touched by the bright rays of Tristram Fry's vibraphone and gently brushed drums. Yet the cruelty, for Drake and for the listener, is in the song's blissful recreation of a halcyon moment already past. With the barely heard "but" in the second line ("But Saturday's sun came without warning"), Saturday Sun becomes a song of memory and regret, of pleasure irretrievable, that, like McCartney's Yesterday, inhabits the eternal prison of the day after. Or does it? In the song's final line Drake sings, "So Sunday sat in the Saturday sun/And wept for a day gone by," suggesting that, even when the deliverance of Saturday's sun comes again, the narrator's dark half still inhabits an eternal hopeless Sunday. Rarely has the relentless grey drizzle of depression been expressed so exquisitely. AM