



DONOVAN

P A R K E P U T E R B A U G H

NOT JUST POP LYRICS BUT MODERN POETRY

The view of the sixties is so generalized it's good to open up the spirituality of it and what the music was trying to represent. It was certainly not just getting stoned and hanging out, man. There was meaning and direction; there was substance to it.

—Donovan

Donovan was the Pied Piper of the counterculture. A sensitive Celtic folk-poet with an adventurous musical mind, he was a key figure on the British scene during its creative explosion in the mid-sixties. He wrote and recorded some of the decade's most memorable songs, including "Catch the Wind," "Sunshine Superman," "Hurdy Gurdy Man," and "Atlantis." He charted a dozen Top Forty hits in the U.S. and a nearly equal number in the U.K. His songs have been covered by some two hundred artists, notably Jefferson Airplane ("The Fat Angel"), Al Kooper, Mike Bloomfield, and Stephen Stills ("Season

of the Witch"), and the Allman Brothers Band (whose "Mountain Jam" was based on Donovan's "There Is a Mountain"). Beyond all that, he was a gentle spirit who sang unforgettably of peace, love, enlightenment, wild scenes, and magical visions.

Born Donovan Leitch in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1946, he moved at age 10 with his family to Hatfield, Hertfordshire, England. After turning 16, he pursued a romantic wanderlust, running off to roam alongside Beat and bohemian circles. He also studiously applied himself to the guitar, learning a sizable repertoire of folk and blues songs, with the requisite fingerings. A single appearance during a performance by some friends' R&B band resulted in an offer for Donovan to cut demos in London, which led to a publishing and management contract.

The precociously talented youth was only 18 when the U.K. label Pye released his first single, "Catch the Wind,"

in March 1965. It hit Number Four on the U.K. charts (as did its followup, "Colours"). After a string of appearances on London's teen TV show *Ready, Steady, Go!*, the young folksinger became a fixture on Britain's burgeoning rock scene. Before the year was half over, Donovan would appear at both the Newport Folk Festival (at Pete Seeger's behest) and at a massive concert at Wembley Empire Pool with the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and others.

Donovan's folksinger phase was documented on the albums *What's Bin Did and What's Bin Hid* (retitled *Catch the Wind* in the U.S.) and *Fairytale*. Both were solid, creative offerings. Still, Donovan was saddled with Bob Dylan comparisons by the media, though this superficial judgment was based largely on the fact that both were folksingers with youthful followings. To be sure, Donovan and Dylan had shared influences, Woody Guthrie and Ramblin' Jack Elliott key among them, but that did not make one a copy of the other. Donovan actually drew more deeply from nearby figures on the U.K. folk scene, notably Bert Jansch, Davey Graham, Martin Carthy, Alex Campbell, an American expatriate named Derroll Adams, and a colorful roustabout known as "Dirty Phil." Donovan mastered their styles, he has said, so he could devise his own.

In reality, Dylan respected Donovan (and vice versa). The pair traded songs and compliments during the former's first U.K. tour, their 1965 meeting only partially documented in D.A. Pennebaker's documentary *Don't Look Back*. (The headline in *Melody Maker* was "Dylan Digs Donovan.") Donovan assessed the trumped-up rivalry this way: "Pop music lyrics contained no message before the folk invasion of the charts. All the invaders felt a camaraderie, no matter what the press said to the contrary."

Soon after his initial chart successes, Donovan made an artistic breakthrough with a distinctly unique sound and style. The first stirrings could be heard in "Sunny Goodge Street," from 1965's *Fairytale* album. Musically, it had flutes, strings, and jazz drumming. Lyrically, Donovan evoked the bohemian milieu in which he circulated with a brisk, Beat poet delivery. It was a liberating performance, and it set a course for the outpouring that would make him an international star in the second half of the sixties. "That song had within it the embryo of everything I would do [thereafter]: project mystical lyrics, touch on mythological figures, and experiment," Donovan

said. "I wasn't trying to sound like anybody else. Basically, I was just experimenting all over the place."

In essence, Donovan would concoct a fusion of styles before the phrase "world music" was coined to describe such potpourris. He took a borderless approach, organically mingling folk, blues, jazz, classical, Latin, and Indian elements. It wasn't exactly rock or pop, but it worked in those worlds at a time when psychedelia overtook all with its broadly ecumenical outlook.

Listen to "Sunshine Superman," or any of Donovan's work from that period. *What is it?* Sitar, harpsichords, flutes



'MY PLACE WAS LONDON, AND I SANG ABOUT IT'

and horns, strings, tablas and other hand drums, electric and acoustic guitars—any combination of instruments might turn up in a given song. He joined forces with producer Mickie Most and arranger John Cameron, and this fruitful union yielded groundbreaking work. The session musicians on Donovan's records included Jimmy Page and John Paul Jones. "Hurdy Gurdy Man"—his heavy hit from 1968, on which both played—offered a foretaste of Led Zeppelin's depthless marriage of acoustic folk and electric rock.

Donovan's big year was 1966, owing to "Sunshine Superman" and "Mellow Yellow," which hit Number One and Number Two, respectively, in America. In the U.K. he found himself tied up in contractual red tape for

much of that year, delaying those records' release in his homeland. But his star was rising in the States, and he was among the vanguard British acts—along with the Beatles and Cream—making waves on these shores at a time when popular music was embarking on some strangely alluring new tangents.

The words Donovan delivered in a Scottish burr were whimsically surreal; not just pop lyrics but modern poetry, with Lewis Carroll and W.B. Yeats as inspirational touchstones. There were character studies (“Jennifer Juniper,” about one-time girlfriend Jenny Boyd, and “Legend of a Girl Child Linda,” an ode to his muse and eventual wife); pastoral visions (“The River Song,” “Three King Fishers”); illusions and riddles (the Zen-like “There Is a Mountain”); and paeans to universal love (“Wear Your Love Like Heaven”).

He could be witty and urbane, too. “Mellow Yellow” slyly sketched the social whirl of Swinging London, with whiffs of sensuality and pot smoke wafting about amid a celebratory procession of New Orleans-style horns. He also wrote knowingly of the world he inhabited in “Sunny South Kensington” and “Hampstead Incident.” As he noted, “Poets have a sense of place. My place was London, and I sang about it.”

Donovan was so highly visible in early 1966 that he became the first pop star busted by the infamous Sgt. Pilcher, the head of Scotland Yard’s Drug Squad, who subsequently went after the Beatles and the Stones. When John Lennon later got word a bust was coming down, he called Donovan and his roommate, Gypsy Dave, for help in advance of the squad’s home invasion. Donovan’s conviction led to a visa denial that kept him from performing at the Monterey International Pop Festival in 1967. In a gesture of solidarity, his name was added to the festival’s board of governors.

Donovan’s songs were sometimes inspired by his wanderings. Before he was ever signed and recorded, he’d hoboed and busked his way around the U.K. with Gypsy



OPPOSITE PAGE

In folk troubadour days, 1965.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP
Sunshine sitar man, 1966;
live at Isle of Wight, 1970;
starring in the film “The Pied
Piper,” 1972.



Dave, learning about people and places, the natural world, and how to survive on one's wits. As his popularity grew, he saw the world as a touring musician and ever-curious traveler. Hold your ear to the conch shell of his songs, and various far-flung locales can be heard: the coast of Mexico ("Sand and Foam"); remote islands in Greece ("Writer in the Sun") and Scotland ("Isle of Islay"); and the turned-on bustle of Los Angeles' Sunset Strip ("The Trip"). The open road beckons in many songs, and Donovan tellingly named his 1970 album *Open Road*. Donovan even conjured the mythical lost continent of Atlantis in a song with that name.

pacifistic message. Among popular musicians, Donovan was ahead of the curve in opposing the Vietnam War in particular and armed conflict in general. One of his earliest releases was a four-track EP of antiwar songs, including his definitive take on Buffy Sainte-Marie's "Universal Soldier."

Themes of understanding, compassion, and love run throughout Donovan's work, from his earliest



Though he was a fanciful apostle of youth culture, Donovan eventually looked beyond the generation gap, endeavoring to bridge the divide with a conceptual double album. Appearing in 1968, *A Gift From a Flower to a Garden* offered one disc of songs for parents and another for children. It came in a box—a lavish touch theretofore reserved for classical releases—and featured a folder with a sheaf of song lyrics. In the cover photograph, Donovan holds a flower while standing in a field; on the back, he sits cross-legged with the Maharishi.

By this point, Donovan had begun moving beyond hallucinogens and embracing meditation as a more natural form of relaxation and enlightenment. Never one to shrink from a belief, he included this message among his musings on the sleeve notes of *A Gift From a Flower to a Garden*: "I call upon every youth to stop the use of all Drugs and heed the Quest to seek the Sun." He quaintly signed his note: "Thy humble minstrel, Donovan."

Truly, Donovan was the poster child for flower power. Though some blue meanies found his peace-and-love advocacy sappy and naïve, it took real courage to challenge the power structure—governments, armies, police forces, political parties and their abrasive mouthpieces—with a

THIS PAGE With Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, members of the Beatles, Mia Farrow, and others, 1968

recordings to albums of more contemporary vintage, such as 1996's *Sutras* (produced by Rick Rubin for his American label) to 2004's *Beat Cafe*. Interestingly, the first-ever *Rolling Stone* long-form interview was with Donovan and appeared in the magazine's premiere issue, published in November 1967. The conversation was so extensive that the fledgling periodical ran it in two parts. Donovan made a statement in those pages that still summarizes how he's approached music for nearly five decades: "There's only one thing in the end, and that's singing truth in a pleasant way." And tonight, forty-five years later, we welcome this gifted troubadour into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

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