

DIFFERENT EVERY TIME

THE AUTHORISED BIOGRAPHY OF

ROBERT WYATT

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INTRODUCTION

by Jonathan Coe

This fine biography will tell you all that you need to know about the story of Robert Wyatt. So, having been asked to write a few words of introduction, I think I'll just say something from a completely personal perspective.

A few minutes ago this page was blank. I was staring at it, not knowing what to write. Then I closed my eyes and waited to see what was the first thing that came into my head when I thought about Robert Wyatt.

It was an image of my desk. A small pine desk I bought in 1991. It stood in the corner of our bedroom in the little flat we rented for a few months just off the King's Road in Chelsea. On it sat a brand new Toshiba laptop, my pride and joy. I used to boast to friends that this laptop had a hard drive with a capacity of 20 MB – big enough to hold the entire novel I proposed to write on it.

And so I began to write the novel. I already had a title – *What a Carve Up!* – and a pretty solid idea of the plot and structure. It was an ambitious book, and the main ambition was to write something intensely political which didn't make readers feel that they were being harangued. To combine anger with warmth and humanity.

Could it be done? For a long time I wasn't sure. I sat at my desk every day and every evening, and wrote what I could, which wasn't much. And then, later that year, pretty much on the day it came out, I bought Robert Wyatt's album *Dondestan*. It was his first proper album since *Old Rottenhat*, some six years earlier, and suddenly, hearing that voice

again, entering that soundworld, being welcomed into that lyrical space where political engagement had always co-existed with generosity and humour, a realm of possibility was opened up to me. The inspiration I'd been searching for had been under my nose all the time.

It had been there on Robert's 1974 album *Rock Bottom*, when his extraordinary, wordless vocalising on the playout to *Sea Song* had provided the consoling soundtrack to many an adolescent romantic disappointment. It was there on *Nothing Can Stop Us*: on his sublime cover versions of *Strange Fruit* and *At Last I Am Free* (a less polished but much riskier version than the Chic original, stretching the melody until it becomes almost unbearably fragile and vulnerable). And it had been there, certainly, on *Old Rottenhat*, the album that had, for me, crystallised the emerging ruthlessness of the Thatcherite tendency better than any other, as well as foreshadowing the rise of New Labour ten years before Tony Blair tore up Clause 4 ('If we forget our roots and where we stand / The movement will disintegrate like castles built on sand').

The fact that Robert had managed to make one of his most committed and passionate albums in the mid-1980s is significant, it seems to me now. He began his career, as is well known, as the drummer and vocalist for The Soft Machine, one of the key bands in the early years of the so-called Canterbury Scene.

A distinguishing feature of the Canterbury bands – besides their instrumental virtuosity, English self-deprecation and Dadaist leanings – has been their consistent inability to reach out to a wide audience, to break out from the pages of specialist music magazines and into the mass media and the national consciousness. Too polite? Too obscurantist? Who knows. Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*, a Canterbury record to all intents and purposes (or to all in tents and porpoises, as Hatfield and the North could easily have titled one of their tracks), is one of the two obvious exceptions to this rule. The other is the oeuvre of Robert Wyatt.

In the British musical upheavals of the late 1970s, most of the artists who had emerged from that scene struggled to stay afloat. Their old records disappeared from the shops and no new ones arrived to take their place. But Robert seemed to thrive. With *Shipbuilding*, written for him by Elvis Costello and Clive Langer, he became better known than before. A good deal of artistic longevity and popularity comes down to luck, but in this case I don't think luck had anything to do with it: or with the fact that now, more than forty years after The Soft Machine

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unceremoniously dispensed with his services, his songs are more widely known, more widely covered and more widely loved than ever.

No, it surely has to be down to the breadth of his vision. After his Virgin albums of the 1970s, something changed: he brought in a wider and more eclectic range of influences, coming from the whole spectrum of world music, while still retaining his unique, instantly recognisable voice and instrumental mannerisms. He developed a new, more overtly politicised outlook, without losing any of his trademark humour or self-mockery. Suddenly, Robert's music was no longer introverted, but outward-looking, inclusive and universal. He began to speak (and sing) for a whole generation. Much as he would recoil from that notion, I'm sure.

I shudder to think what the last few decades would have been like without the continuous, alternative running commentary that has been provided by Robert's music and lyrics. (And when we talk about his lyrics we must also, of course, talk about Alfie's: for theirs is a true creative partnership.) He once said something to the effect that he had no objection to songs not making sense, because when songs do make sense, more often than not he doesn't like the sense that they make. As for his own songs, they can be oblique, certainly; sometimes eccentric. But, to me, they make a better kind of sense than most things that are going on in the world at the moment. More and more, Robert Wyatt sounds like the voice of sanity. Sane songs for insane times. No wonder that I, and countless others, have been inspired and uplifted by them for so long, and will remain forever grateful.

SIDE

ONE

THE DRUMMER BIPED

1

THIS IS THE FIRST VERSE

George and Honor,
London and Kent

‘My earliest memory’, says Robert Wyatt, sitting in a wheelchair that still displays an *Access All Areas* sticker from a rare live performance with jazz double bassist Charlie Haden, ‘is looking out the window, and thinking: “I can now look out of this window. I am four, it is my fourth birthday, and I am going to remember this.” I decided to remember it and I do.’ Six decades on, Robert chuckles into a beard bushier than that of Fidel Castro, if not quite in the league of Karl Marx. A baby grand piano dominates the room, surrounded by trumpet, cornet and assorted percussion instruments. One wall is given over to vinyl, another to a vibrant, if faded, Tunisian rug, a third to books: on music, leftist politics and Pataphysics, the belle époque pseudoscience that paved the way for surrealism, Dadaism and the Theatre of the Absurd. The home studio is in the English market town of Louth, where Robert has lived for close to twenty-five years with Alfie – wife, manager, co-lyricist, and the visual artist responsible for all his solo album covers.

The view filed away by the four-year-old birthday boy, however, was not of Lincolnshire, but rather the South London suburb of West



› 'Blond, pretty and very biddable' – Robert with his mother, Honor.

1. THIS IS THE FIRST VERSE

Dulwich. Robert had actually been born in Bristol, on 28 January 1945, his mother, Honor, a journalist and broadcaster, having followed the BBC to the city during the war. But VE Day arrived when Robert was just three months old and Honor returned with the BBC to London, working first in the Schools Department and then on the new *Woman's Hour* radio programme. Robert and Honor shared a house in Dulwich with another family, the Palmers, and with Robert's half-siblings Julian and Prudence: the two children from Honor's short-lived marriage to the journalist Gordon Glover. 'Robert was a very bright little boy,' recalls Julian, today a successful actor who has appeared with the Royal Shakespeare Company and in a number of blockbusters, from James Bond and *Star Wars* to *Harry Potter* and *Game of Thrones*. 'Not just intelligent. He was a light boy. He *lit*: that sort of light. I wouldn't say the whole room lit up when he came into it, but one was always pleased when he came in. Grown-ups liked him very much.'

Just before his second birthday, the sparkling young boy contracted mastoiditis. Now relatively rare, at least in its acute form, the infection of the bone behind the ear was then a severe condition, and brought Robert so close to death that the hospital advised urgent baptism. Although surgery and kaolin poultices ultimately saw him through, he still suggests, semi-seriously, that the operation might have damaged the left hemisphere of his brain, supposedly responsible for logic, detail and rational thought. 'I do live in a dreamworld,' Robert says, 'and I never haven't done. I wake up just long enough in the daytime to eat lots of food and then try to go back to sleep.'

For the first six years of his life, Robert had an adoring mother and an entirely absent father. George Ellidge was still married to his first wife, Mary Burtonwood. According to Julian, however, it was Honor with whom George was in love. 'My mother used to say that she loved me because I was the firstborn, she loved Prue because she was a girl, and she loved Robert because he was a lovechild. She was a wonderful mother to us, and we all felt we were special in one way. But Robert really was the favourite.' Robert 'was the most enchanting little boy,' recalls his half-sister Prue Anderton. He was blond, he was extremely pretty, and very, very biddable. My mother would say: "Oh darling, go up to the post office for me, would you go and get me some cigarettes?" And he would. He was just so good.'

George and Honor had met in Mallorca in the early 1930s, as part of a circle of literary expats orbiting the poet Robert Graves. At that time still married to Gordon Glover, Honor wrote for *Epilogue*, a literary

magazine edited by the poet Laura Riding with Graves as associate editor. George's wife Mary, meanwhile, was working as Graves's secretary, and they possibly had an affair.

During the war, in which George served in Italy and North Africa, George and Honor themselves began an affair. But when the war ended, George returned to Mary, living with her on a houseboat on the Thames at Oxford, where he studied Psychology. The marriage, however, was not to last and after the houseboat sank they decided to separate. Mary went to teach in Hastings, while George moved to Nottingham before, in 1951, securing a job in Watford, which meant he could at last join Honor, Robert, Julian and Prue in Dulwich. He moved in – and Robert acquired two further half-siblings, Julia and Mark Ellidge, older than Robert by ten and six years respectively. Robert also gained an extra surname: having been Robert Wyatt at infant school, he now became Robert Wyatt Ellidge, still the name in his passport.

Wyatt insists he felt no resentment towards his father for those six years of absence, and also takes issue with the general depiction of the post-war era as drab and dreary. 'According to historians now, it was a terrible time, but I had an *idyllic* childhood. We made a thermos flask, a couple of Marmite sandwiches, and we would go and sit on a bombsite with a pencil and paper, drawing. We had loads of bonfires in people's back gardens. Digging holes, pretending you're in the trenches. Playing games where you see how far you can get down the street just by running along the roofs, without ever going onto the ground. It was such fun.'

Julian describes George, Robert's father, as 'an absolutely wonderful man... the perfect bloke to grow up with.' When neighbours complained that, by not having curtains, the family were letting down the tone of their street, Julian responded by placing in the window a message of his own: 'Mind your own bloody business.' George thoroughly approved. 'An Ellidge', as Robert's dad was heard to declare, 'is rebellious against all rules that he has not made himself.'

Robert seems to have inherited his dad's sense of humour, as well as his iconoclasm. 'George and Robert had these silly jokes about sausages,' recalls Prue, shaking her head at the memory. 'They thought the word "sausage" was just the funniest word in the world. Every time the word "sausage" was mentioned, their shoulders shook. One day George came back from work with a bag in which he had what would be the equivalent of about four pounds of pink cotton sausages. He'd got somebody at the workshop to make them. Oh, they fell about, it was the funniest thing. Or George might say, "What mark did you get

1. THIS IS THE FIRST VERSE



› Robert with his parents, sketching at a bombsite.

in your English?” And Robert would say: “Sausages over sausages.” It was just ridiculous.’

Robert’s sense of humour, in particular his love of word games, also derived from Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. This pair of Victorian writers – surrealists before their time – helped to inspire Robert’s love of fun, puns and nonsense, crucial ingredients in counter-balancing, in Wyatt’s adult make-up, what could otherwise be seen as his slightly po-faced politics. To Robert, however, there is not necessarily a distinction. He lists *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* – along with bubble and squeak, the Spanish city of Granada, the saxophonist Gilad Atzmon and the *Morning Star* newspaper – as one of the five things that make his world a better place. ‘People will probably say, “Oh that’s his infantilism showing”,’ he explains, ‘but I think it’s one of the greatest political satires written. There’s an aspect that becomes more meaningful as you grow older, the whole “off with your head” culture. Very scary.’

Alfie today describes her husband as puerile ‘in the non-pejorative sense’, and Robert does seem to be one of those lucky adults able to recall precisely how it felt to be a child. The boy’s face is still visible behind that grey beard, just as the boy is audible in that frail and fragile voice. Another crucial influence from childhood was A. A. Milne, creator of *Winnie the Pooh*. Robert has described the humble, honey-loving teddy bear as his earliest role model, and to this day he will still sign off an email with Pooh’s ‘tiddly-pom’. Pooh, like the characters that populate the work of Lear and Carroll, is also a deeply English creation, at least in his original form. Wyatt would later describe its Disneyfication as America’s worst crime – ‘with the possible exception of the carpet-bombing of Laos’.



The Wyatts and the Ellidges came from very different social backgrounds. Robert’s maternal roots are a series of distinguished architects. James Wyatt, known for his Neoclassical and Gothic Revival work, is the most renowned, but he was far from alone. Among the buildings that bear the Wyatt mark, as restorers if not original designers, are Windsor Castle, Crystal Palace, Salisbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. Historian John Martin Robinson, in his book on the family, called the Wyatts ‘the pre-eminent English example of an architectural dynasty’.

The Wyatt architectural dynasty had ended by the twentieth century, but they remained prominent in other fields. R. E. S. Wyatt was an England cricket captain. Horace Wyatt, Robert’s maternal grandfather, was a founding member of the RAC, as well as a writer, noted for his 1917 wartime reworking of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* as *Malice in Kulturland*: ‘Twas dertag and the slithy Huns / Did sturm and sturigel through the sludge’. ‘I really liked him,’ recalls Robert, of his very own Lewis Carroll. ‘I thought he was great. He taught me about ballet. He said, “pas de deux” means “father of twins”. And all these really silly things. I can see that it’s not just from my dad that I get some stuff; I can trace some of it to Horace. Apart from being a tragic mistake, life is a mad joke. Well, to him it was.’

Robert had less in common with the most prominent Wyatt of recent times. Journalist and politician Woodrow Wyatt, the father of journalist Petronella Wyatt, was Honor’s second cousin. Originally a Labour MP, he lurched to the right in the 1970s, becoming closely associated with Margaret Thatcher and Rupert Murdoch, writing the ‘voice of reason’