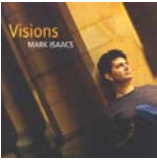


The essay in the liner notes of Mark Isaacs' Visions CD (2005)

Dear Mark



I was thinking the other day, after listening to your CD 'Visions'. What if this shows there really is a way to skim the lyrics off a beautiful song and somehow make the song more beautiful? When the melodies themselves are kinda like poems; when the piano,

bass and drums are played like a poet would write poetry; when I can manage to keep heart and mind open as I listen. *Maybe the beauty of something lies exactly in accepting the things it is not*, beside those that it is. But it's too late at night for Zen.

I don't speak for anyone. But what you give us surprises me. The lyrics are there, embedded. The sense of them resonates. And it is through the space they shaped and left behind that these songs connect and reconnect me to parts of my own life. *These were never anthems for me, but they are integrated with sensation and memory.* Without the voice to distract me, I am reminded in a deeper place, somehow. Nobody's business but my own, but I'll share a little, since you ask.

What about being nine years old. Right there in the bright, forward-looking sense you manage to evoke in 'Leaving on a Jet Plane' is how it feels to be turning nine, in Bairnsdale in East Gippsland in January 1973. It's the middle of summer and just a week or two shy of going back to school. My birthday cake is a fruit cake from a tin, with a candle on it and my first birthday present of the day is a tumbleweed we collected from the side of the road driving through the desert. We've been driving all day for a couple of days to get here. We stop for milkshakes at a café in Bairnsdale that has dark red vinyl studded booths and little jukeboxes in each booth. We are on the way to the caves at Buchan—my real birthday present—where *I will learn about stalactites and stalagmites from a man with a torch on his head.* In the café, I am allowed to choose a song. I flick through the pages in the jukebox, pressing the little red button. Flick, flick, flick. And then I find it and I choose it. 'Leaving on a Jet Plane', my favourite song in 1973. Why do songs touch us? Who knows. *Listen to track six, and you have all that.* Tumbleweed, stalactite, chocolate milkshake, red vinyl seats and a birthday cake in a can.

How did you know all this?

'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face' and how my father loved my mother. This song is one of the ways I remember the way he loved her. The tenderness in that song used to floor me, as a teenager. How

Remember what I asked you? "Mark, why these songs? And where are the words? What were you thinking?" I realised later that I shouldn't have asked. *I should have shut up and just listened.* We all have to make our own answers when it comes to music.

You had already had your turn, sitting at the piano hanging out with Ben on the bass and James on the drums and having your 'musical experience'. Now it's my turn. *I get to have my own visions, born of qualia, history, sensibility and who knows what else.* Why spoil the mystery...let's leave it at that. Thanks for the sensory input.

James Taylor's 'Fire and Rain' is everywhere this week. I turn on the radio and it plays. In a lift, music shops, bookshops, in a passing car. And here it is too, on your CD, without the lyrics but with something deeper going on—again the sense that a buried meaning is revealed when you take away the easy signposts of words. *This is a grown-up song, and I sang it too early when I sang it last.* Since the last time, baby, I've seen more fire and more goddamned rain that I can poke a stick at. I hear grown-up strength and resilience in the almost-military drum rolls and the clear precise notes that come from the piano. And in the middle of that week, with 'Fire and Rain' all around me, a precious friend passes away in Omaha, Nebraska. A wonderful artist; a beautiful person. And I always thought I would see him again. Last time we spoke by phone he said his body was aching and his time was at hand. Where do such parallels come from? That I should be hearing the constrained vibrancy of joy, grief and remembrance that you, James and Ben manage to convey, while tears fall on my keyboard. *Once more synchronicity and music collaborate with synapses to associate a beautiful song with a beautiful memory.*

Then, in the gentleness and sometimes wistful playfulness of 'Both Sides Now' I hear something that is like an arm around my shoulders, a sibling who understands and does not try to make my journey for me, but who stands beside me, nodding, as I bravely make it on my own. There's a looking-back wisdom about the lyrics, and you've captured it here in the way it's played. This arrangement is the red curtain at the

did you know how it felt to hear this song at fourteen? How is it possible that you have captured my very personal sense that this song is a little bit like Gustav Klimt's painting 'The Kiss'? *Was that your doing, or mine, or the music?* A combination?

You know how hard it is to write about music. I thought that if I fell asleep listening to it, something might happen overnight to bubble the words I need to the surface. So I put the CD on and I go to bed in the next room to drift in and out of the place we go to at night before sleep saves us. The first notes of 'Sounds of Silence' stab me awake. A heartbeat and they jab again. A handful of notes contain and explain this relentless year I'm living, and you use them to start a song? Who gave you permission to start a song like that? I lie perfectly still, with sudden adrenalin-fed night vision and the hearing of a bandicoot, acute. I've forgotten the words, as I lie on my side, paralysed in pre-sleep. Jagged edges, glassy sides. I've been where those dark notes come from. *The scrape of metal on cymbal at the end finishes me.* Hello darkness, my old friend.

Up and out of bed, I cross the room to turn the thing off. By the time I get there 'Moon River' is playing. *I drift into nineteen, with my toe in the river of life, so sure of my strength.* In sleepy half awakesness, I hear the tawny waters of the Tambo River in the music—the river of my nineteen year old potential. The Tambo flows like life from the high alpine meadows down to Swan Reach. It tinkles over pebbled beds; it widens and flows ponderously dark and chilled between high stone walls. Dappled sun, fragrant dogwoods and the secret hollows and discoveries of life. My fragmented, youthful awareness saw the river as a way out of where I was, and a way into what life could become. Another dimension is at work—a song has been associated with vision from a film, and then reassigned to my own home movie. The tune is a river and *your rendering of it has passion, melancholy and excitement jostling and tumbling in an off-hand way that is tinged with ennui such that only a nineteen year old can fake.* Heart jumps to mouth in excitement at how this song remembers what it meant to dip a toe into the water and feel its pull and know that you were up for it, whatever it was.

And then, there's something laughing at me from 'Fool on the Hill'. Something skipping merrily through the high hillside grassy spaces. It's almost laugh-out-loud with happiness. This song wears a cap with tassels and bells, and grins at me like some Pied Piper of Hamelin. But slowly, something else happens. The voices start. They urge and press; they make little unexpected choices, repetitions. *Somebody is playing with patterns here, but it's not entirely sane.* I hear the tune, and it's a happy one, but something else is going on...there's a dark side, isn't there, to the fool on the hill. I hear the voices start again, notes jostling in patterns that only just make sense. Just a few bars, but they're enough to remind me of the manic nonsensical repeated phrases of a bipolar loved one out of control. Don't read too much into any of this, Mark. You asked me to write something about your recording and *my ears hear through their own filters.*

entrance to the old Side On Café in Annandale; the feeling of coming home as I brush the heavy velvet aside and walk into the dim-lit concrete-floored room, table 19 near the coffee machine standing ready for me and my notebook, with the house red poured into a glass and placed there by whoever behind the bar sees me first. *It will always be life's illusions that I recall.*

The CD cycles and this time it is 'Visions' that reaches out to me, with its not-present lyrics embedded. I feel the song sway slowly through a raft of gentle wonder. I am in the shade of an old grey box tree with my eyes closed and I can feel the cool kisses on my cheeks of pale yellow blossoms, snipped off at the base by lorikeets high up in the hot branches who love to eat the tender stems below the green gumnut cap. The birds chatter to themselves and the showers of light nectar-scented flowers fall on me. This song is a quietly perfumed yet intense journey into...what? What a year it has been, and *what a serendipitous thing that you should send me this CD to listen to right now,* at the end of it. This song says to me, with some smiling guileless notes that flow together in a rippling sunshine rightness; that this too shall pass. That this world holds great beauty; that 'Today's not yesterday / And all things have an ending'. And the notes fade out to a small smile that tugs inexorably at my heartstrings and reminds me why music matters; the way it can take us to those visions in our minds.

I know you asked others to listen to this offering of yours, Mark. They heard what they heard, and I don't pretend that what I write for you here is anything other than subjective. No-one else will hear exactly these things in these tunes—but I know when a thing has weight because it asks big questions and leaves me afterwards to answer them. And there are universals here, stories beyond the constraints of storytelling. At the end of 2005, this CD asks me, through its music and my associations: *"What if absence is not loss? What if that-which-is-absent hovers above and around and shines on that-which-remains. What if?"*

Miriam