

A VERY BRITISH ODYSSEY

by Peter Ross

This is is a love story from B-road Britain; from unsung towns and unsung lives. Roger Green, a 53 year old accountant, lives near Pontefract. Karen Carter is a fortysomething civil servant from Nottinghamshire. They have been together for the last couple of years, having met during a Half Man Half Biscuit concert at the Holmfirth Picturedrome. This bright cold Spring day, is a sort of anniversary; the group having returned to the pretty West Yorkshire village for one of the handful of shows they play each year. Bogart and Bergman in Casablanca would always have Paris; Roger and Karen will always have Holmfirth. “Half Man Half Biscuit,” she says, brooking no argument, “are just the best band in the world.”

This is a minority view to say the least, but those who espouse it do so with remarkable fervour. Half Man Half Biscuit, though ignored by most of Britain for most of their 30-odd year “career”, have developed a hardcore band of travelling supporters who buy every record, know all the words, dress up as characters from the songs, and attend every show. These Biscuiteers make even the most obsessive Dylan fans, the Bobcats of legend, look like mere dilettantes. Their devotion is more akin to that displayed by fans of lower league football clubs, struggling along ungritted roads to away games in dismal grounds, breath clouding in the Bovril air. There’s something very British about it, something mundanely magical or magically mundane. Man, they’ve got stories to tell.

Take Mick Bates. He’s 55 and lives in Leicester. Mick is in a wheelchair, following a stroke and brain haemorrhage he suffered twelve years ago. The music of Half Man Half Biscuit has been vital to his recovery. “I had lost the power to speak,” he explains. “That lasted about a month really seriously then it came back gradually. I was in the hospital six bloody month. To keep me going and train my voice again, I was reciting Half

Man Half Biscuit songs. That really helped me.”

He was the youngest man on the whole stroke ward. A nurse called Joanne, perhaps taking pity, would sit with him for hours on end as he worked his way through the back catalogue. One song, Look Dad No Tunes, proved a particular challenge; once he had cracked that, he knew he had his voice back. His hobby now is making scale models of long-demolished football stadia, and by way of thank you, built one of Tranmere Rovers for Nigel Blackwell, Half Man Half Biscuit’s enigmatic singer-songwriter. Blackwell declared himself “gobsmacked”.

Mick has a vivid memory of the first time he heard the group. It was not the Road to Damascus, it was the A604 near Kettering, but it might as well have been. This would have been the mid-1980s, when HMHB became, for a few glorious months, the biggest indie band in Britain, outselling even The Smiths. Anyway, there’s Mick pootling along in his Ford Escort van. “I was coming home from a race meeting at Snetterton, and Annie Nightingale come on the radio and played Dukla Prague Away Kit,” he recalls. “I about crashed when I heard it. I pulled over because I had a real crap radio and got the best reception I could by putting my hand outside and touching the aerial. I thought, ‘God almighty!’ and took the details down by scribbling in the dust on the dashboard.”

All I Want For Christmas Is A Dukla Prague Away Kit is one of the band’s totemic songs. See also: Joy Division Oven Gloves and The Trumpton Riots. The titles give the unfortunate impression that Half Man Half Biscuit are a comedy group. They are funny, no question, but they are lots of other things too – lovelorn, full of scorn, bookish, hookish, cock-a-snookish. The songwriting, according to the folk musician Eliza Carthy, is “bitter and very funny, which is very English: pathos disguised by wit and

emotional detachment. It's like a camera flying over the country, zooming in and out; like watching a film of England".

Occasionally a critic, swimming against the tide, sticks up a hand and proclaims Nigel Blackwell the greatest lyricist working today. This is not news to fans. The online Half Man Half Biscuit Lyrics Project ("192 Pop Songs Picked Over By Pedants") offers an ongoing crowdsourced analysis of the references within the 13 albums and four EPs. Thy Damnation Slumbereth Not, for instance, quotes from Thomas Hardy, Richard Wagner and the Child folk ballads. Irk The Purists, meanwhile, borrows melodies from the hymn Give Me Oil In My Lamp and Black Lace's Agadoo.

This music breeds obsessiveness in those who take it to their hearts. Consider Steve Harman and Nick Dawes. Pals from London, they have spent the last three and a half years cycling around Britain in an attempt to visit everywhere mentioned in Blackwell's songs. This project is called Half Man Half Bike Kit. They have, so far, managed 102 out of a total 234 destinations, and hope to have bagged the lot by 2020. They worry, though, that Blackwell may have got wind of what they are doing and started adding in far-flung places just to thwart them. The most recent album mentioned – among other locales – Plockton, Skye, Ullapool and Kirkcudbright, all lovely Scottish spots, none of which are easily gettable-to from London. "As well as going to some beautiful mountainous places, we have to go to some absolute shitholes," says Nick. "We went to Tredegar in South Wales and it was terrifying. Everyone stared at us until we left town. On another occasion, we got told off for taking photographs outside a kebab house in Swaffham."

I meet Nick and Steve in a country pub just outside Holmfirth. They have spent the day crossing the moors. They are both 41 and cheerfully self-aware. "I'm in PR, he works for a luxury yacht magazine," says Steve. "We are exactly the kind of people who would be satirised in a Half Man Half Biscuit song, and it would be well deserved."

The essential question, I suppose, is why are they doing this?

"That is the essential question," says Nick, "and essentially we don't have an answer."

"But," says Steve, "we're committed to it now. It feels like a very Biscuity thing to do, doesn't it?"

Nick nods. "There's a real English eccentricity about it. It sometimes feels like we are characters from one of Nigel's songs."

Nigel Blackwell is a whipper-thin, whip-smart man in his early fifties. He lives in Birkenhead. I meet him, briefly, after the soundcheck. A diffident, shaven-headed figure in a cardigan, he winced at the volume as the band ran through a few songs. He has never given many interviews, and is less inclined to give them as the years go by, so this is more in the way of a chat. He is puzzled, he explains, that so many people spend so much of their lives following his band from gig to gig. "Don't they get bored? Maybe it's because it's a good day out for them, and we're the not so good bit at the end." Still, such loyalty has its advantages. Blackwell feels physically sick before going performing, but when he walks out and sees familiar faces down the front, it calms him down.

"I don't like playing live," he explains. "I get nervous and I don't think we're that good, and only put up with having to do it so I can buy food and pay bills."

"I much prefer to simply write songs and put them out, but there's not enough money in just doing that for me these days so I have to psyche myself up and walk onto a stage to perform. It is not a good state of affairs for me to be honest but I'm stuck with it as I don't have the skills to do anything else. I'm not qualified in anything and I am shite around the house. I do not possess any tools whatsoever and sandpaper sets my teeth on edge. I buy one scratchcard a week and fill out a fixed-odds coupon at William Hill's every Saturday morning in the vain hope of landing the big one so that I can be in a situation where I don't have to arrange concerts."

"I am not a gig-goer myself, particularly, and the terminology and clichés surrounding that world fair makes me wince ... I always just want to get it all over with and go home as soon as possible. I do, however,

endeavour to do the best I can whilst on stage because people have paid hard earned money for a ticket and I wholly appreciate that.”

This sounds rather more like Eeyore-ish dysfunction than a mulish refusal to conform; can't not shan't. Half Man Half Biscuit are often portrayed as the ultimate refuseniks; a famous story from their early days has them refusing to appear on The Tube because it would have meant missing Tranmere Rovers at home to Scunthorpe United. Blackwell does not like to fly or sail, so they never play outside Britain, and he likes to get home to Birkenhead after each show (“Own bog, own bed”) which means that two gigs on the trot are a rarity and touring out of the question.

Despite this self-sabotage, the band is, reportedly, more popular than ever. It's just that their popularity is invisible. Their most recent album, *Urge For Offal*, topped The Guardian's readers poll of 2014, despite having not been reviewed in that newspaper.

Nevertheless, HMHB have not been as successful as they might have been, a frustration that Geoff Davies, who runs the Liverpool record label Probe Plus, has grown used to since he signed the band in 1985. Well, “signed” isn't quite right as he's never had a contract with them. The relationship appears to be tender, avuncular, enabling.

Geoff is tall, slender and dandyish in a flat cap, red shirt, green trousers and yellow jacket, a DIY BFG. He has a strong Scouse accent. I'd been looking forward to meeting him. When we spoke on the phone a couple of months previously, I asked whether he would be with the band in Holmfirth. “Yes,” he replied, “if I'm still alive.” This was only half a joke. He is coming up on 73 and has not been well. In May last year, his son, Stephen, died of motor neurone disease; at the next HMHB show, in Wakefield, Blackwell dedicated National Shite Day to his memory. Geoff, in 2015, missed the only two Biscuit shows he has missed since the 1990s. “I've been in this business 50 years,” he says, unpacking merchandise at the back of the venue, “and I worry about it more than ever.”

Retirement beckons. But Blackwell has said that if Geoff retires, he, too, will probably pack it in, saying, “I couldn't do it without you.” So Geoff worries that if he stops, they'll stop, and as he doesn't want to deprive the world of Half Man Half Biscuit, he carries on. One senses that Geoff finds some pleasure in his duty. “The feeling in the room when the band walk in is just great. I'm so pleased to be a part of it. I will miss it.”

There is a tremendous sense of community, family even, around Half Man Half Biscuit. The fans are a nomadic tribe. At the soundcheck, I meet Jay Coppock, who has travelled up from Maidstone and is leaping about and playing air guitar to *Bad Losers On Yahoo Chess*. It's his 50th birthday this year, he explains, between leaps, and so his wife isn't giving him hassle about travelling to so many shows. “It's payback,” he grins, “for me going to *Strictly Come Dancing Live*.”

Some come from even further afield. Gregg Zocchi, a 48 year old wine merchant from New Jersey, flew to Britain, via Barcelona, four years ago; in the morning, he scattered some of the ashes of his brother, Glenn, a big Beatles fan, in Abbey Road, and then took a train to Oxford to see Half Man Half Biscuit. It was, he recalls, “a strange pilgrimage” – the most rewarding thing he's ever done in his life beyond getting married and becoming a parent.

Thorsten Köppe, a 47 year old software developer, thinks he may be Germany's only Half Man Half Biscuit fan. The band, remember, never go abroad, so Thorsten has journeyed from Hamburg to Holmfirth for his third ever show. “They are special,” he says, when asked what makes this band worth the time and money. “I don't get a quarter of the things they address in their lyrics, but I can still get the gist. I like their way of extreme understating. They've been flying under the radar for 30 years.”

Thorsten is an anglophile, but his anglophilia is of a particular sort. Not for him the red, white and blue of Carnaby Street and the Last Night Of The Proms. The England he loves is the England of grey skies and bleak moors and social awkwardness. He watches *Happy Valley*, drives an old white Triumph, and is married

to a woman who is half-English, which gives him ample reason to holiday in Northampton. Thorsten doesn't believe that German culture has the proper balance of humour and angst to ever produce an equivalent of Half Man Half Biscuit. So no Halb Mensch Halb Plätzchen then?

"Nee, leider nicht," he laughs. "Or thank goodness."

Showtime approaches. The Picturedrome, an old cinema, has a capacity of around 650 and is sold out. All day, Holmfirth, a quaint town in a steep valley where they filmed *Last Of The Summer Wine*, has been buzzing with Biscuiteers, and now here they are, pouring through the doors, like a swift half down a parched throat.

The regulars take their cherished spots down the front. There's John, there's Liz, there's Tony. John Burscough is a retired GP, known in these circles as The King Of Hi-Vis after the HMHB song of that name. He is wearing a searingly yellow tabard over a black satin tour jacket with detachable sleeves (the title of another song) over a T-shirt bearing a photo of Midge Ure and the accusatory legend "Milk Thief" (a reference to the refrain of yet another track). John is here with his "ladyfriend" Elizabeth Stockdale, a retired nurse, whose role is to wait until the band play Joy Division *Oven Gloves* and then produce from her bag a pair of said gloves printed with a moody photograph of that band, the effect ruined only slightly by the stains from Sunday lunch. These she puts on and waves around with giddy abandon.

"Ah, it's great to be in a gang at the age of 58," says John.

"He comes from a family of dresser-uppers," Elizabeth smiles, as if that explains everything, which possibly it does.

Tony Roberts, meanwhile, well what can one say? He is 67. He looks like a wizard, or a member of Wizzard, and he hails from Birmingham way. HMHB are the best live band he's ever seen. The Beatles ran them close, as did Cliff And The Shadows, and Springsteen might have done, "but he went on a bit". Tony goes to all the shows. "My life," he declares, "is football, morris dancing and Half Man Half Biscuit."

He has an important role, Tony, at these gigs – to stand to the right of Roger Green and protect his note-taking arm from being barged by moshers. Roger is remarkable for his fidelity. The has missed only a handful of HMHB shows since the turn of the century, and has a 100 per cent attendance record going back to 2008. He plans his holidays around them and says he would miss a close friend's funeral or wedding in order to attend, as "mates would understand". More, he writes online reviews of all the shows, for which he is not paid, and has, to date, penned precisely 101 of these epics. It is some years now since he swore his oath of fealty. "I could see other mates were getting married and having kids, and here I was just in this solo world," he says. "So I made a deal with meself not to miss any Biscuit gigs."

In fact, he has found love among the Biscuiteers. He and Karen Carter met at the Holmfirth show in 2014. She had adored them since she was a teenager, in the mid-1980s, and heard them on John Peel, but never saw them live until after her divorce. "I was in a relationship with someone who didn't like them, and didn't like me putting them on, and would never have come to a gig," she says. "So when I found myself single, I thought, 'Stuff it, I'll do what I want now. Not what someone else wants me to do.'" And she took herself off, on her own, to a show in Leamington Spa.

Unable to see the Biscuits during her marriage, she had enjoyed them by proxy through Roger's reviews. "I read them and thought, 'God, it sounds brilliant.'" So part of the reason why I started coming was because of Roger, never thinking I would meet him, never mind thinking I would end up going out with him."

"Or staying in with him," says Tony with a waggle of his eyebrows.

A lovely story, but sadly there's not a moment to hear more. The house lights are fading, Gershwin's *Rhapsody In Blue* is striking up, and the band are coming on. Time for a last word from Roger Green. He cannot explain his obsession; all he knows is that this is how he wants to live his life. "If there's a better night out to be had," he laughs, "tell me about it and I'll do that instead."