

HYMNS TO THE SILENCE

INSIDE THE WORDS AND MUSIC OF

VAN MORRISON



PETER MILLS

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**Inside the Words and Music
of Van Morrison**

by Peter Mills



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'Music is spiritual; the music business isn't.'

Van Morrison



Acknowledgements

This book has taken a long time to write and in truth much longer than the few years since it was commissioned. In fact it has been bubbling up in my mind for over 20 years, ever since a friend mentioned during a pub lunch on the Isle of Portland in Dorset that I should write something, someday about the subject. It's taken a little longer than expected, young man, but here it is.

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So as we see many people have contributed directly or indirectly to the ideas, thoughts and interpretations within this book – all that is good about it is in no small way thanks to them. The book's faults, however, are all mine.

Peter Mills
January 2010

Author's Note

This book has a long story to tell, but I'll be brief. In October 2005 a version of this book was well on the way to being finished; that same month my father passed away after a protracted illness. In the time that followed I blamed the Morrison project for making me less attentive to his well-being than I might have been, and, consequently, I deleted the computer files and threw away the paper copies of the work. It was finished. Gone, gone, gone.

The next year was spent exclusively sorting out my father's estate and his belongings, which involved clearing the house I grew up in, and dealing with its sale. I barely gave anything else a single thought. Sorting through the clutter of a life, I found a heap of records in the radiogram – 78s, singles, LPs, flexi discs of basic Spanish I remember us listening to as we prepared for the grand adventure of two weeks in Ibiza in 1972, then an almost impossibly remote and exotic destination. Among the records, a George Formby LP I used to love – ukulele, 'When I'm Cleaning Windows'. A CBS compilation, improbably entitled *A Gift From SR Toothpaste*, given to retailers who stocked their products, featuring Simon and Garfunkel hard up against Tony Bennett and Ray Conniff. Jimmy Durante 78s: yellow MGM label, 'Fugitive From Esquire'. I remember looking at that title as a child and wondering what on earth it could mean. Some singles – 'Galveston' by Glen Campbell, duck-egg blue Ember label, an ex-jukebox single, slightly wonky due to the hole being punched out a little off-centre; Nilsson, 'Everybody's Talking', bright orange RCA, a song Dad loved so much we had it played at his funeral. I knew all these discs intimately. But then what are these? A pile of Josh White albums – *Empty Bed Blues*, *Good Morning Blues*. Blues, blues and then some more blues. Here, a stack of Ray Charles – *Modern Sounds In Country And Western*, *Live At Newport*. Singles too: 'In The Heat Of The Night', in its candystripe pale blue and white sleeve, on ABC-Dunhill. I knew he liked Ray but with the exception of the singles I'd

never seen these records, and didn't know he had them – where the hell had he been hiding this stuff? Here, some Little Richard. Little Richard! My Dad had some Little Richard records! Suddenly it struck me: all these records, even the Formby, were connected, directly or indirectly, to Van Morrison. Dad was never that interested in him, although he'd say 'Your mate was on the radio' now and then if he'd heard 'Bright Side Of The Road' or 'Precious Time' on the wireless during the day. So I began to think that maybe I should see this book through after all, and that there was a good reason to do so: my Dad might have quite liked to read it. So I sat back down to start all over again. That's the book you are holding.

Introduction

‘Have you ever heard *Astral Weeks* by Van Morrison? I think you might like it . . .’

Kevin Rowland in reply to a letter sent by the author,
March 1981

This book, we should say straight away, is not a biography. It looks at the music, words and performances of Van Morrison that are in the public domain, and those to which I have been witness. So why did I decide to write it? In comparison to some of his peers, there has been remarkably little written about the work of Van Morrison; where rooms could be filled with the volumes of writing on the Beatles and Bob Dylan, there have been, at most, 17 or so publications taking Morrison as their central subject. This is a mystery, in that Morrison’s musical reputation is in many ways the equal of Dylan or Lennon and McCartney. Indeed ever since Kevin Rowland put me on to the case in his kind reply to a fan letter way, way back, I have been waiting for someone to write the book I wanted to read about Van Morrison. In the end, it seemed that if I was ever going to read it, I probably better write it myself.

If this book has any virtue in comparison to the other books on the subject, it is chiefly that it is neither biography nor chronological trawl through the career, nor is it a picture book. Furthermore, with a couple of exceptions, the previous books are over ten years old, so it is able to reflect upon Morrison’s later style. Ritchie Yorke’s cherishable *Into the Music* (1975) had the substantial advantage of being written with the co-operation of its subject, and the present book seeks to offer a clear-eyed critique of Morrison from a bold and fresh perspective, yet one that firmly acknowledges Yorke’s insights. My book also seeks to resist iconoclasm, an approach perhaps embodied by Johnny Rogan’s typically audacious *Portrait of the Artist* (1984) and the updated version

published as *No Surrender* (2005). Likewise the book does not seek to duplicate the career overviews offered by excellent volumes such as Steve Turner's lavishly illustrated *It's Too Late to Stop Now* (1993), Brian Hinton's thoughtful *Celtic Crossroads* (1997), Patrick Humphries's handy primer (1997) and John Collis's punchy *Inarticulate Speech of the Heart* (1996). Clinton Heylin's biography *Can You Feel the Silence?* (2002) deals well and fully with a version of the life, and in that sense it is hard to imagine it being bettered, but that book by necessity only occasionally touches upon the critical territory the present volume seeks to map. Less widely known volumes have emerged too, such as the delightful *In the Age of Uncertainty* by Katrin Pietzonka (2002) and Pat Kelly's lyrical *More Than a Song to Sing* (1993). We are also promised Howard A. DeWitt's bold multi-volume work, the first part of which arrived in 2005, joining a brace of energetic, late twentieth-century books by Ken Brooks. The works which most closely overlap with the present volume are *Speaking in Tongues: The Songs of Van Morrison* (2005) by Martin Buzacott and Andrew Ford, and a long, insightful essay by Gerald Dawe, 'The Burning Ground', which was first published in 1998. Both display the mix of close musical scrutiny and wider cultural context to which this book aspires.

In some ways books like this one are unnecessary: I could just say, 'Buy these records, they will help you live.' So I will: buy these records, they will help you live. But that's not enough – not for me, anyway, because after the emotion comes the deeper consideration of the art. That's how it works. Initially we have the primary emotional impact and response – 'I love this!' or 'I can't stand this!' or 'So what?' and then, in a secondary but also a more fully conscious way, we experience or move on to the more reasoned response: why do I love it, or loathe it, or why does it leave me cold when others react differently? So this book understands the secondary nature of most of its responses – music is concerned with feeling but in order to unpack, build upon and perhaps even learn from that feeling it is worth stepping back from the emotional (Walt Whitman's 'yawp', perhaps) and allow the analytical voice a say. I'd like to think this book yawps, too, in places, but what I want it to do is be the agent of that second stage, and to try to do that most difficult thing, analyse with words the ideas, feelings, and emotions which flow from the human obsession with music; the truth we feel stemming from sounds. I am interested in the connections between things, be they clear and direct or obscure and hitherto undetected. This book is certainly about Van Morrison and his very distinctive talents as writer, composer, performer and more, but it is not just about that. It is about the music, where it came from and where he took it, how he took tradition and innovated with it, and made it new – sometimes by going back to the ancient source. This book is about connections, and how things carry on.

This is also a very long book and in places it might seem an unnecessarily detailed one. However, it seems to me that it is the tiny detail – the aside in a live performance, the fluffed lyric left on the studio take, the single note which changes the temperature and atmosphere of an entire song – that gives us the key to the bigger themes, and to the impact and resonance of the songs, recordings and performances this book takes as its subject. Some themes are of course so deeply saturated and embedded into the work that they flow the whole way through the book, regardless of the topic at hand: the sense of place and immediate environment, and its obverse, exile; the nature of time; the power, gifts and torments of memory; the centrality of the here and now as a personal and performative imperative; the nature of spirit; the sense of musicality as a matter of feeling, first and foremost. These, among other themes, plot the co-ordinates for this voyage through the work.

The broad structure of the book divides our subject into three major areas: the first being the roots of his work in the music, places and ideas of America and Ireland with an assessment of how they have exerted an influence over his art. In the second we look at him as a writer, via studies of several of his best-known songs, and close scrutiny of key motifs within the work; we then consider him as a singer and a musician, following this with studies of how the realities of working onstage work with and against the practices of the recording studio. The third and final section addresses less worldly and more spiritual matters, first looking at the idea of exile and restlessness, and how the spirit of place is explored and revealed in his work. The book's finale looks at Morrison's periodic technique of through-composition, and examines four albums which seem to me to best illustrate this methodology, which is absolutely central to the works. The individual chapters tend to break down between contextual background, significant theory and close scrutiny of the music, on record and onstage, so that typically there is a theoretically based opening section followed by close analysis of relevant recordings. The book also makes use of original interviews conducted for this book alongside the very many public domain interviews Morrison has given over the decades.

As for the choice of songs upon which the book concentrates, this is I suppose subjective; there is an emphasis upon the recordings which seem to me to best illustrate and exemplify certain creative tendencies that are in my view central to the work overall. I don't try to discuss every song in the catalogue – a tall order, even for a book of this size – and my choices are not necessarily canonical, so that for example 'Linden Arden Stole The Highlights' and 'Song Of Being A Child' are as well examined as, say, 'Madame George' or 'Moondance'. So if your favourite isn't here, I apologize.

The book is divided up thematically, not chronologically. Consequently

you will find songs from the first Them album considered alongside material from 2008's *Keep It Simple*, for example. This is not to suggest that there is no difference between the music or the man making it in 1965 and 2008, but to try and seek out connections and continuities over time and circumstance. It is part of my contention that Morrison's work both bears and reveals these continuities even as it clearly, and by necessity, embraces rapid change. The paradox is that here we have music focused intently on the present moment, the 'now', yet a music which frequently draws its strength from the past, from the power of memory. I would characterise this dynamic as a balance between tradition and innovation. In the light of this thought, the book offers close focus on certain songs and albums that seem to best illustrate and illuminate these creative tendencies. Indeed the book opens with a consideration of Morrison as an embracer and utiliser of traditional forms and one who, via such intuitive familiarity with those forms, is able to innovate with and develop them.

Thus we begin with studies of his relationship with American musical forms that have provoked, guided and informed his artistic and creative development – jazz, blues, and country music. Of course, in some senses these terms are only fit for the genre-based marketing of music and the apparent boundaries are spurious. They are however useful for discussing streams of influence and how these have impacted upon his own work later, either in the obvious sense of the 'country albums' or the 'jazz albums', or in the wider and more discreet sense of the way in which these influences have informed his music and how Morrison draws upon these forms even when not necessarily employing their formal musical discourses – *Veedon Fleece*, for example, is arguably a jazz album with no jazz on it. This leads to a consideration of his own first musical genre, which functioned as a composite of these other forms, skiffle, taking time to examine his work with Lonnie Donegan and reflect upon this relatively unexamined area of distinctively British working-class music and how it took deeply American musics and made something unmistakably and indigenously British from them. This section concludes with studies of two key albums that appear to fully illustrate his creative dynamic with the idea of America.

Chapter Two assesses the formative musical influences that constitute the 'Irishness' of Morrison's work. Here we have a puzzle: Van Morrison's music is, in terms of its surface details at least, not very 'Irish' in any generic sense. Yet there is a deep and understated 'Irishness' running throughout his work, even though compared to the work of, say, Christy Moore, or even his *Irish Heartbeat* collaborators the Chieftains it might not seem that way at first glance. Consequently, the chapter looks at how the Irishness of his work has been expressed in other less obvious ways, and also how we can understand

Morrison as an Irish writer. He claims to have read very little of Irish literature until others observed that there was a connection between his work and that of 'literary' figures and has subsequently recorded settings of Yeats and Patrick Kavanagh poems, collaborated with Paul Durcan and dropped quotes from Samuel Beckett into his live performances. We look at his connections with several Irish writers and the theme of literary comparison runs through the book as a whole. This is not to say that Morrison is 'like' Yeats, Beckett or Blake, but rather that somehow and sometimes he seems to be working the same seam as they did, just as he does with Leadbelly, Ray Charles or Mose Allison. We discern a mixture of conscious and unconscious influence, mixed with natural and unforced connection. This chapter also asks what is 'literary' or poetic about his work and what, if anything, is distinctively 'Irish' about these qualities? From which traditions does he come and to which does he belong? How has he redefined these traditions?

Building from this, we consider Morrison as a writer in Chapter Three. He has published a few shards of stand-alone text, such as the short story that adorns the sleeve of *A Sense Of Wonder*, redolent of Flann O'Brien and early Beckett, the tone poem on the sleeve of *Astral Weeks*, which is possibly an unsung verse of 'Ballerina', and its transcendent equivalent on the cover of *Astral Weeks Live*. Yet, as he mentioned to the audience at the University of Coleraine at a remarkable event in April 1988, when he writes a poem they usually end up turning into songs. The audience laughed, but it's true – Morrison is a musician and a songwriter so that is bound to happen. Hence we focus on him as a songwriter and think about how his work fits into the accepted methodologies of popular song via a focus on three of his best-known tunes and a group of his love songs.

Following on from this, in Chapter Four we examine a selection of the key motifs or phrases that seem to have flowed through and also guided his work. Some themes are not spotlighted but run throughout all the sections – time, place and memory, for example, course through each and every topic – while some of the key themes do indeed have their own slot, and so I apologise if we sometimes seem to approach a subject more than once, and others only in passing reference. Specifically explored in this book is the theme of the garden, his 'leaf songs', and the theme of healing, alongside scrutiny of specifically 'Morrisonian' vocabularies such as the 'golden autumn day' and the 'ancient highway', leading to a consideration of how he has used the images of the radio and, finally, silence itself.

The second section of the book balances studies of Morrison as creative artist, and the public obligations that the success of that art generates. We begin in Chapter Five by considering the purely creative side of this balance, examining

fundamental aspects of Morrison's work, looking at him purely as a singer via key case studies of a wide range of recordings, and also via Roland Barthes' idea of 'the grain of the voice'. Does he, like Bob Dylan, have 'different voices' (cf. Dylan's *Nashville Skyline* voice/'Rolling Thunder' voice) or is he unchanging in his delivery regardless of the musical context? Why does the role of the vocals in jazz differ in function to the job it has in blues, rock or pop? Alongside case studies and contextualising theory, the chapter will also ask direct questions: for example, is Morrison a 'good' jazz singer – does his delivery match his aspiration? Relating to these issues, we also look at Morrison as a musician and consider how tradition and innovation function in his work. We consider how he has attempted to fuse stylistic elements, and how he strives to 'make it new' alongside evocations of 'the beauty of the days gone by'. We consider him as player, bandleader and working musician, paying close attention to the idea of improvisation. We also look closely at two examples of where Morrison has reinterpreted the traditional songs 'Saint James Infirmary' and 'Wild Mountain Thyme' and made them new, one more time again.

We build on this creative dynamic by then looking at how Morrison makes this private work public. Much has been said about Morrison's performative persona but it has never been properly studied. Chapter Six deals with live performance, considering his stage work, via editorialised versions in officially issued live recordings, and the live shows that are, as it were, 'gone in the moment'. This chapter considers the 'liveness' of his performance technique. For example, does he consider his stage work to be an act of definition, re-creation or re-making every night? We look at his insistence on the importance of the concert stage via analysis of his work as a live performer, and scrutinise some key examples from the live recordings that have been issued commercially, on album, single and DVD.

Studying Morrison's style as live performer is balanced by a study of how he endeavours to capture the 'liveness' of moments otherwise heard only in passing on stage in concert performance, 'live in the studio'. He has always aspired to the Sinatra model ('Hey kids, dig the first takes', he sang on 'Hard Nose The Highway'), but the chapter examines in-depth how he takes principles of performance in to the studio. His albums are very 'well made', not full of fluffs or stylised rough edges *à la* Neil Young, so how does this performative element feed into the 'product'?

The final section of the book (Chapters Seven and Eight) gathers in what Morrison once called the more esoteric stuff, looking first at how the lure of eternal movement flows through his work, starting with his youthful interest in Kerouac, and seeing how these ideas move through the themes of exile and restlessness that can be discerned right through the catalogue. This identifies

with the wild loneliness of the blues, the musical expression of a covert community of sole and singular people, always in motion, yet somehow connected. This passes on to a very important theme in his work, his sensitivity to the spirit of place. We can read this through songs from 'Cyprus Avenue' right through to perhaps his greatest 'spirit of place' recording, 'Coney Island'.

The book reaches its conclusion via an in-depth study of what I have termed 'through-composition', which is a working through of a distinct and fully recognisable musical mood that can only be found on one particular album. Through-composition as used here represents a kind of creative mining of a seam where the resultant album seems to exemplify this mood, which can only be found on that group of songs. I have written here about *Astral Weeks*, *Veedon Fleece*, *Into The Music* and *Common One*. This is not to suggest that his other recordings have less to recommend them, but it seems to me that in terms of the technique of through-composition and all that it means, these four albums are Morrison's most complete recordings.

The last two chapters bring together the key themes of the book into a consideration of whether the apparent contradictions and tensions identified in the body of work achieve or move towards resolution and wholeness. The spiritual element inherent throughout the book is considered more directly and we consider how the material conflicts of body and soul are reflected in the work. A short postscript examines the return to the landscapes of *Astral Weeks* in the 2008/9 concerts in which Morrison played the album in full, bringing a kind of closure to his relationship with those songs, and those songs' relationship to the rest of his repertoire.

In the period of this book's composition I've been asked many times why I'm not writing a biography – so, why not a biography? First, the previously published volumes on the subject are so thorough that the job seems to be already done. Secondly, my interest is in the work, rather than the life, although of course one is entirely aware that there is a connection between the two. Most pertinently, it seems to me that Van Morrison speaks most eloquently of his experience of the world via his songs and performances, meaning that, in practice, biography in the traditional sense is beside the point. Now Morrison may well be unwilling or simply uninterested in scrutinising his art in the way that, say, Bob Dylan seems to do in his book *Chronicles*, but Morrison's work is full of revelation about his experience of life and the power memory has over his imagination – in very direct and often anti-mythopoeic language – in a way that Dylan's occasionally opaque and perfumed poetics sometimes are not.

Morrison's work has swung between a position of detachment and a more open set of connections, sometimes giving us remarkably candid sketches of Belfast and the world in which he grew up, sometimes mystical and allusive,

sometimes bright and direct. This reaches from the churchyard of the semi-improvised lyrics of 'Mystic Eyes', via the trees of 'Cyprus Avenue', on through the spot-of-time of 'Coney Island' to the deep meditations of 'On Hyndford Street' and the Yeatsian contemplations of 'Pagan Streams', or the bright sketches of Belfast childhood and adolescence such as 'Cleaning Windows', and the tender (and almost completely overlooked) reminiscence of his father, 'Choppin' Wood'. So calls for Van Morrison to write autobiographically in the style of Dylan's *Chronicles* are somewhat misplaced, even belated as the songs have recorded and processed aspects of his experience almost since day one. But we need to follow the art, not the artist; the uniqueness of his vision is rooted in experiences that are common ones. He has freely admitted in song and in conversation that he doesn't feel the need to know exactly what he is doing in the moment of creativity, or what the 'meaning' of such work might be, and this book isn't out to force such meaning upon the music. As he once sang, 'Enlightenment, don't know what it is.' Thus he is on a journey of discovery, down the road, and each fresh moment of performance has the potential to unlock another aspect not only of the song but of the experience that feeds and informs any given performance of it. As Morrison said in an interview for the BBC in 2006, 'I don't want to just sing a song . . . anyone can do that . . . something else has got to happen.' He also noted that the moments of achievement or of breakthrough are fleeting glimpses (or we might say 'beautiful visions', revealed then clouded over once more): 'it's momentary release . . . the minute it stops, it's gone.' It is this kind of detail which should give us pause to consider Morrison's work; it is also the ambition of this book to reflect upon that work in such a spirit. Let's take a look.

Chapter One

Imagining America: Jazz, Blues, Country and the Mythologies of the West

‘When I was growing up in Belfast all I was listening to was American music. Irish music was going on all around me, but that was nowhere. I was looking for something different.’

Van Morrison, 1982

The fact is, as Van Morrison notes above, that if we are talking about twentieth-century popular music, we are for the most part talking about music that is at least in part American. Connections are complex of course – much American music has its roots in that of its migrant populations, and innovations on American forms take place on a global scale – but if we are considering the sound of the pop industry that exploded post-war then we are imagining America.

The interest in America and its uncharted spaces is a youthful, vigorous interest, and one which therefore by definition appeals to the young. Morrison was beguiled by the work of Jack Kerouac, and his work represented both a remapping and rediscovery of what seemed familiar, a revolutionary emotional cartography – a new way of seeing the familiar, of revealing a secret identity of place. This clearly harmonises with Morrison’s own evocations of the Northern Irish landscape. For good or ill, America exists as an emotional idea, both within its own people and the wider world. It is also of course one the most heavily mythologized places on earth, and this is in part due to its dominance

of the culture industries: American films, music, books and ideas reach further and more deeply than the similar output of any other nation. This mythology has played a strong role in Morrison's art, as this chapter will explore, but this is not to suggest that this is in any way unusual. Arguably all popular culture, as we understand it, indexes the influence of American popular culture on the development of cultures drawn into its slipstream.¹

There are sound historical reasons for the ubiquity of American influence. In the case of Britain, the BBC depended upon imported American records during the Second World War, there being fewer records issued in the UK due to lack of the raw materials, while the presence of the US soldiery in the UK was another big influence. In the period from the early 40s to the early 60s the flow was from the US to the UK; then in the so-called 'British Invasion' the music was sold back to America, with a UK twist. The British music business absorbed US business practices too – see the plethora of 'British Elvises', such as Cliff Richard, Tommy Steele and Billy Fury.² The shift precipitated by the Beatles reversed this flow and provided conspicuous evidence of Anglo-American hegemony in the cultural production, momentum and development of popular music.

Van Morrison was well placed next to Belfast's thriving port to catch the new music, as were the young musicians in Liverpool – port cities throughout the UK emerged as centres of Britain's growing popular music scene. British radio opened up post-war, via the AFN ('American Forces Network') from which Morrison name checks the show 'Stars of Jazz' on 'In The Days Before Rock and Roll', and Radio Luxembourg, similarly cited on the same song and also in the sublime 'On Hyndford Street'. So early British pop was almost entirely in thrall to the US version and sources. Yet the British innovated around the resources of that music, and the collision of Lonnie Donegan and Leadbelly yielded skiffle, a kind of high-spirited musical dandelion, growing up against the odds through the seemingly impassable post-war austerity, and pummelled out on the debris of domestic life – tea chests for drums, broom-handle bass, cheese-grater string cheap guitars. It was pure acoustic music, born out of its immediate circumstances. As Stevie Winwood told Mike Figgis, 'It was purely *British* music.'³ Morrison was never a full-on teddy boy but skiffle's take on Leadbelly and the rest provided the breakthrough moment for him. This was openly acknowledged on *The Skiffle Sessions*, but is also present in the studied minimalism of 2002's *Down The Road*.

Morrison's father, George, Snr, as the biographies tell us, spent time in the US in the 1950s. This is movingly recounted in the 2002 song, 'Choppin' Wood'. Morrison remembered this sojourn, and also the power of objects charmed by their American source: 'he went to Detroit to sort of check things out. Later he was supposed to bring the rest of the family over but it didn't work out that

way. He did send me some American clothes, but the other kids were jealous of them.⁴ The biggest influence, however, were the records sent by his father, and those that circulated in Belfast; jazz, blues, country records, all saturated with the spirit of America, the sound of a far-off new world dream, where even songs of poverty, hard work and harder luck seemed magical. The discs weren't the only sources – there was radio, and an unusually musical neighbourhood within East Belfast – but they were the most accessible, and, as anyone reading this knows, offered the fascinations of potential endless replay. When Morrison repeated his father's journey in 1966, going way up to the New York City, it was not to look for work, but to deliver some to his new mentor Bert Berns. This chapter, then, looks at the three major American forms that Morrison absorbed and how that has influenced his own work. Everything starts with the blues.

SINGING THE BLUES, OR, TALKING TO HUDDIE LEDBETTER

'Blues isn't to do with black or white; blues is about the truth, and blues *is* the truth.'

Van Morrison to Mike Figgis in *Red, White and Blues*

'The blues' is understood either as a musical genre that we might seek within the browsers of the record store, real or virtual, or as a quality which can enter into music of various kinds, delivering a kind of cultural penumbra to a lyric, a vocal, a musical arrangement, instrumental timbre or performance. As Steven G. Smith noted, its meaning spreads beyond the musical, into a broader cultural category, being a descriptive signifier employed in a similar manner to, say, 'Romantic' or 'Gothic'.⁵ Yet if 'having the blues' is a cultural shorthand for feeling down (and it is strange but true that I find simply thinking of a melancholy mood as 'the blues' somehow makes it better) then 'singing the blues' is surely something else – suggestive of resistance and endurance. This oppositional model is not simply the historically certified sense of 'black man against white enslaver' but also a wider reflection upon the broader human condition, a common experience of the brief details of human life set against the physical and emotional realities of the material world.

The musical patterns of the blues feel direct, simple even, and in their surface details are relatively easy to reproduce – it's a form relatively easily inhabited and democratically configured for wide reinterpretation – and the truncated patterns of ornamentation and sophistication offer a form which, with apparent paradox, opens up a rich matrix of expression. Furthermore, it is

both connected to, yet free to distance itself from, tradition. Gospel, the sacred parallel line to the blues' profane link to material realities, is attentive to the promise of the next world while the blues is rooted in the realities of this one. So the archetypal blues opening line of legend and commonplace parody, 'Woke up this morning', is in fact a representational device signifying the growing point of tradition just as it does of experience – it's about now, the current moment, and how the inhabitation of the musical moment is expressive of the human one. Big Joe Turner sings in 'Oke-She-Moke-She-Pop', 'When I get the blues . . .' and then proposes as solution 'I get on the phone and tell my baby I'm coming home' – there are exit strategies implied in the blues, resolutions to the current plight. Even the desolation of Robert Johnson's situation in 'Crossroads' – 'Sun's going down, nightfall gonna catch me here' – carries within it the possibility of movement, of transit, of somehow beating the odds and the natural order of things (represented here by the fading light) which seems to be indicative of being somehow set against nature; as though life were a game of survival. As? Is. The blues acknowledge this and proceed upon that assumption.⁶

Often Van Morrison's music will carry a 'blues influence', rather than be blues in the purist sense; this kind of ghosted influence produces what we might call a hybrid effect. Actual Robert Johnson-style lonesome blues in Van Morrison is rare – more usual is the country blues which characterises his 2006 album *Pay The Devil*, as well the undervalued collaboration with Linda Gail Lewis, *You Win Again*, from 2000, or the big-band swing blues that characterised his live performances from 2001 up to mid-2006. In fact, that distinction between studio and live performance is key; to some extent the essence of blues, despite its apparent simplicities, is beyond the ken of mediating technologies. It makes most of its sense in the moment of performance; the essence of the blues is its 'liveness'.

Now Morrison as a studio artist is more 'live' than most and thus carries the spirit if not always the letter of the blues into almost everything he records, as he does that of jazz, but his shots at blues numbers often complicate their relationships (and thus his) with their source – consider for example, Morrison's mid-70s versions of 'John Henry' and 'Western Plain', two Leadbelly numbers. Leadbelly, or as he is correctly named in 'Astral Weeks', Huddie Ledbetter, was the prison inmate who was famously 'discovered' and freed to sing by John and Alan Lomax, the great American musicologists and collectors. There have been a number of revisionist histories surrounding the Lomaxes' work published in recent years, all well-written and cogently argued, but it is nevertheless them we have to thank for the 'sound photographs' of the great American Library of Congress collection of field recordings from the 30s on and, more broadly, the shapes of our understanding of the blues as an indigenous American form. Their enduring achievement and contribution is clear.⁷

Leadbetter was seen to some extent as the embodiment of the body and soul of the blues; in the absence of Robert Johnson, he had to bear this physical burden in a way that the ghost of Johnson did not. Johnson's story is effectively a modern American creation myth, picked up by, among others, Greil Marcus and the Coen brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* – the Crossroads, the pact with the devil, the early death, the unmarked grave, all tied in with 'the birth of the blues'. What we really mean is something more prosaic: these voices (Patton, Johnson, Hurt, Leadbelly) were the ones around when recording first captured music in a way that was previously impossible. The link between the significance of these players and the time at which they worked is key; the birth of the blues it may have been but it was effectively facilitated by the record player. After all, that's how the young Van Morrison and his peer group heard this music, while surrounded by the 'live' and local cultural discourses of Irish folk song and church music. As Morrison has often observed, his friends thought the blues was 'like Chinese music or something',⁸ confirming its apparent exoticism and bewildering unlikeness to anything else they'd become used to hearing. In some senses the blues taught Morrison to hear and listen differently, just as *Astral Weeks* would later teach its listeners to do.

Listening to Lonnie Donegan's good-natured replications of Leadbelly's spoken word intros we are reminded of how the traditional flow from the margins to the mainstream can both celebrate and modify the original sources, but we also need to acknowledge that this form of essentialism can restrict and stifle as much as protect. Morrison rarely misses the opportunity to remind interviewers that the likes of Leadbelly and John Lee Hooker were also as likely to sing country or mainstream pop tunes for pleasure as they were to stick to their 'authentic blues'. For example, he told *Billboard* that '[Hank Williams] is very important because he influenced not only country people, he influenced a lot of black artists too, which is what a lot of people don't realize',⁹ and while publicising *Pay The Devil* he was just as likely to talk about Ray Charles's approach to country music as to laud Williams or Webb Pierce. In this Morrison is completely non-essentialist in his approach to musical styles and who has the 'right' to perform them, while like everyone else, benefiting from the Lomax approach to capturing a notional authenticity via their 'sound photographs'.

Illustrating this are those two Leadbelly covers included on *The Philosopher's Stone*, 'Western Plain' and 'John Henry', the former a cowboy song, the latter a folk ballad telling how a black railway worker, John Henry, tried to 'outwork' a steam hammer in order to prove men were better than machines, and died in the process. They were cut in 1975, went unissued until 1998, and are among the hardest rocking recordings in his catalogue. It is also instructive that Morrison turned to Leadbelly – and to two very tough and hard-handed arrangements of

these songs – at a time when he was re-evaluating his whole relationship with music-making and his own place within the industry. There is something both radical and rooted in these songs for Morrison, which allowed him to both shake off his torpor and also force a way forward – just *listen* to the Sisyphian shriek at the climax of ‘John Henry’ (4.57–5.01). That strength and openness and resolve seems to come to him through the songs and perhaps even the idea of Leadbelly himself; the power and apparent exoticism of the music travelled, via the recording (or ‘sound photograph’), between Texas and Belfast.¹⁰

Both tracks are from the blues songbook but sound nothing like ‘the blues’. His vocal performance on ‘John Henry’ is unrestrained and at the coda frequently extreme, making powerful use of his harmonica which somehow corresponds to the frequently repeated line ‘It ain’t nothing but my hammer sucking wind’, the suck and blow of the harmonica mirroring and evoking the motion of the body at work and also an allusion to the motion of the steam hammer. ‘Western Plain’ was also recorded in this fierce style, but has also been played live very differently; at the ‘In Conversation’ event in Coleraine in 1988 it was played with Derek Bell and Clive Culbertson, right there among tunes like ‘In The Garden’ and ‘Raglan Road’. So the blues can *sound* like anything – it is in performance that they become ‘truth’. The ‘right’ of the white man to sing these songs is a long-debated argument, and while not quite redundant it is usually circular. As Morrison said during the *So Hard To Beat* TV show in 2007, ‘I wanted to make my *own* blues, my *own* soul music, to do something of my own with it. That’s where I was coming from’ [my italics].¹¹

Barker and Taylor write in their excellent book *Faking It*:

Blues is said to be a very personal music. There’s certainly some truth to this view – blues songs of the first half of the 20th century were generally more personal than other songs, and early autobiographical songs were almost always blues or blues related. Yet it would be a mistake to view the blues as primarily either a confessional mode or a kind of collective autobiography of black Americans, two views that seem prevalent today.¹²

Morrison seems to understand this very well. When Jeremy Marre asked as to whether his interest in the blues was borne out of empathy with the condition of American blacks he replied, ‘No, not really . . . if it was anything it was out of empathy with my own culture, white working class culture’.¹³ So he wanted to take the tradition, and innovate within and beyond it. The blues offers a framework of expression, be it cries of lamentation or survival, to everybody and so the blues is both heard and felt worldwide. It is also the frequent subject of theoreticised musicological links seeking to uncover the root of the music. In

recent years we have heard intriguing arguments connecting it to other musical forms, including the so-called 'Desert Blues' of Mali and Central Western Africa, and the gorgeous, swooningly melancholic Portuguese folk music, Fado, which Morrison sagely cited to a surprised Michelle Rocca in a 1995 promotional interview.¹⁴ In truth, the probable common root is the human heart.

Thus when we listen to Morrison on his 1987 version of the negro spiritual 'Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child', it is not stage-show affectation or simply 'performance'; there is a true connection between the experiences and a kind of natural wisdom in his relaying of it, while never pretending that this is somehow duplicating the details of the source. We also discern the connection between singing and strength, and how singing oneself out of oneself works, as being locked up in the 'sometimes' of the title phrase: sometimes this is how he feels, and by deduction sometimes it isn't. The song and the act of singing it provide both singer and listener with the opportunity to remind themselves that these songs were not necessarily born to be sold, to be 'listened' to for pleasure or 'consumed' by others; other imperatives came to bear upon their coming into being.

The song sports a lush arrangement on *Poetic Champions Compose*, courtesy of Morrison, but with woodwind and strings scored by Fiachra Trench. It features a harp (or a synthesised approximation of one) and conveys a lulling, rocking rhythm, almost evoking the strange and sweet clarities of the final moments before sleep; a sort of lullaby, which, connected to the lyrical pretext ('Sometimes I feel like a motherless child') provides an index of both absences and presences. Morrison augments the traditional lyric by adding the lines:

Motherless children have a hard time
 Motherless children have-a such a hard time
 Motherless children have such a really hard time
 A long way from home¹⁵

This brings into play notions of experience and observation; sometimes he feels this way, and why it is difficult when his mood harmonises with this emotional state is both grounded and partially redeemed by the ability *to say what it is like*: to conquer the ineffability of sadness by singing it out. Yet the song also captures a sense of loneliness and of singularity ('Sometimes I feel like a motherless child'), and this form of isolation, not wholly redeemed by the articulation of it but tempered through the act of singing of it, is key to the blues. It is the private experience which becomes the public declaration and via which the internal discourse is externalised, and the common experience is acknowledged in the listener. Contrast, for example, Jackson C. Frank's recording of his song

‘Blues Run The Game’, and the version by Simon and Garfunkel. The loneliness described in the narrative is compounded by the haunted solitude of Frank’s voice, whereas in the duo’s version, the unforced unity of the voices in harmony somehow draws some of the chill from the lyric; the isolation is broken by the companionship of the two voices.¹⁶

Morrison’s take on the old spiritual was not recorded in a field, or on a porch swing – as Gershwin reimagined it to be, in *Porgy and Bess* – but in the hi-tech comfort of Wool Hall Studios, close by gorgeous and historic Bath. What then does this do to the performance? At the time he recorded this album, Morrison was perhaps at the deepest point of his interest in the metaphysical power of music – music as a healing force. The album contains ‘Did Ye Get Healed?’ and healing had been a touchstone term for him on record and in performance since 1979’s ‘And The Healing Has Begun’, which led up to 1996’s ‘The Healing Game’ (not unrelated to ‘the crying game’), where Morrison declares himself to be ‘in the healing game’. This refers to being in the business of investigating and seeking methods of healing – that is, ways and methodologies directed towards fixing, mending, and actively addressing the broken; making things better through process. His performance of ‘Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child’ can be read as part of that working towards discovery, as part of the spirit of enquiry which moves through so much of Morrison’s material (be it overtly or covertly), but also as the thing itself – the theory and the practice in a unified whole. It’s not ‘about’ healing, it *is* healing. That sense of wholeness is very important.

Samuel Floyd wrote about this song:

The first extended troping of the *tune* of “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” was George Gershwin’s repetition of it in *Porgy and Bess* . . . Rhythmically, in other words, “Summertime” is a kind of augmentation of the “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” melody . . . Harmonically, the two tunes follow basically the same harmonic scheme.¹⁷

George Gershwin, according to Floyd, ‘conscientiously attended numerous Black church services’¹⁸ in his researches towards composing *Porgy and Bess* and in doing so in some ways performed a function for the mainstream that the Lomaxes would also do, introducing the ‘blue notes’ of Black American spiritual music into the mainstream of American popular song, as well as ‘authenticating’ (in the widest sense) his own composition. So Gershwin mediated between the mainstream and the marginal – the music crosses over. Morrison has sung ‘Summertime’ in concert only once and that was at Montreux in 1997, as part of a medley, in which it was preceded by ‘Help Me’ and followed by

– yes – ‘Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child’. The route from the diehard r’n’b of Sonny Boy Williamson to the lonesome spiritual plaint of the traditional song, via Gershwin’s adaptation of it, is manifest evidence of the connections between these musical discourses and Morrison’s intuitive grasp of these links.

Them’s take on the blues was indicative of both their own youthful interest in the music and also the processes to which pop music and the musicians who make it are subject once they enter the culture industry. It retains traces of the primal wildness, which draws an audience to it, while it has had some of the edges knocked off in order to make it a good commercial product that can find its niche in the market place. The relentlessness of the ‘Gloria’ riff is a blues device without question yet the acceleration of the beat, the blameless catchiness of the unmistakably pop melody and chorus hook placed it fully in the beat scene of the time. After all, it started life as the B-side of the theme tune of one of the defining pop shows of the era, *Ready Steady Go!* So there’s no doubt that Them brought blues to the pop table in a way that say the Beatles did not – Morrison has noted that for him ‘The Beatles were peripheral’,¹⁹ and that Them’s work had nothing to do with pop, and that he always saw a yawning gap between the music that moved him, and the music he wished to make, and prevailing conventions of ‘pop music’. ‘Baby Please Don’t Go’, that theme for *Ready Steady Go!*, was an interesting choice for such a job. It is certainly darker and bluesier than much of what was going on; perhaps the licensing arrangements were favourable, or perhaps the older age range of the show’s producers meant they knew the original, and thus welcomed the signs of continuity. Whatever the reason, it gave Them a good push.

So Them got the blues into pop not simply by doing covers but by bringing the influences into their own style and also by incorporating the spirit as well the letter of the blues. This is clear in a late recording, the sly walking blues of ‘The Story Of Them’, but ‘Mystic Eyes’ is the key recording for this – the first track on the first album, and a fairly pleasing and definite annunciation. It is a Maritime Hotel-style improvisation, with Morrison delivering a short but remarkably powerful word sketch, in its near-Gothic High Romanticism seemingly distant from the rude sound world the music has conjured up, and then we are invited to reconsider whether these two worlds could be the same, or find a correspondence within each other – the almost Yeatsian image of the girl by the graveyard, the depth of mystery in her eyes, moving swiftly, a ‘wild thing’ in the most natural sense. The lore has it (like ‘Slim Slow Slider’) that this number was originally edited down from a very long improvisation and that the vocal came very late in the piece. What possibly caused the engineer to despair that he would never get these boys to settle down and play a two-minute pop song is in fact the thing that turns out to be transformative about this track. It is the

blues, but it is also metaphysical – as in all Morrison’s best work, it combines the body and the soul, the mind-body problem moving towards a very natural resolution.²⁰

Blues in some senses challenges the notions of well-made music. In these terms it is repetitious, harmonically limited, often lyrically impoverished, and definitely going against the notion of the polished and well-made musical work. In truth, claims to virtue in the blues seem to be located strongly in this democratising structure; anyone can sing the blues, the openness of the structural mode permitting any kind of input. As Ray Charles says on Morrison’s cherished *Live At Newport*, ‘Everybody understands the blues!’²¹ They can be understood and used by everybody and anybody. Yet somehow in tandem with this democratic nature, the blues can function like a secret transcript – a hidden language or frame of reference which is lost on the wider audience once the music becomes over-exposed. To illustrate, a book that Morrison has spoken about in approving terms in public more than once is Paul Oliver’s *Blues Fell This Morning: Meaning in the Blues*. It contains some excellent images of advertising for ‘race records’ in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, all of which seemingly wilfully miss the thrust of a song like ‘Sugar In My Bowl’ or ‘Pigmeat Blues’. Morrison pointed this out at a live show in 2006 during his cover of ‘Custard Pie’, where via a spoken ad lib he pointed out, with a twinkle in his eye, ‘I don’t think they’re talking about a pie.’²²

Morrison reflected upon how he first encountered this music:

‘I started out long before Alexis Korner and that movement. It came from the same source but I was already doing it. The first time I ever heard an electric band it was actually Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. That was way back. It was called Back Country Blues then but in fact it was urban blues and that was the first Chicago style thing I ever heard. The first thing I ever rehearsed with Them was one of their songs called “Custard Pie”. Muddy Waters and Little Walter were on the Pye R’n’B series but it was only the singles. The woman in the shop would tell you what had come in – things like Harmonica Fats. But it was Little Walter who was the master. He was electric but very controlled electric.’²³

His connection with the blues is wholly bound up with his own life and how he remembers the days before rock and roll. So if the form can belong to everybody, how is it that the music feels and continues to feel so personal? How does one leave one’s fingerprints on the blues? Perhaps by bringing one’s own distinctive circumstances and touch to the technique, the melodic sensibility, the vocal timbre and the lyrics – in fact, the same criteria broadly speaking that are used to evaluate and critique any other musical form. Yet the openness of

the form permits accommodation of mood – so that the young Morrison might give credence to his carnal or his philosophical mood within similar musical contexts – and in the case of ‘Mystic Eyes’, both. It also provides the image, at least, of being in control of a situation, and of being able to appraise it, and observe it from without.

This is the purpose of what we might call the ‘fame blues’, the songs about his experience of the music industry and of ‘being’ Van Morrison and which have divided his listeners. These songs, which reached a kind of critical mass on 2003’s *What’s Wrong With This Picture?*, have their root way back in the 31 ‘anti-songs’ he recorded to fulfil his contractual obligations to Bang, and on through material like ‘The Great Deception’, ‘Drumshanbo Hustle’ and ‘Showbusiness’, as well as unissued tunes like the ferocious ‘I’m Not Working For You’ from 1975, all unusually candid despatches from the frontline where art meets commerce. More recent fame blues such as ‘Talk Is Cheap’, ‘Goldfish Bowl’ and ‘Too Many Myths’ may be hard to love for his wider audience but he has an absolute right to sing them. They are evidence of Morrison’s understanding of the purposes of the blues and his ability to make them connect truthfully with his own experience. Perhaps tellingly, his most successful fame blues is also his most allusive – ‘This Weight’ from 1997 could apply equally to love, grief, the weariness of the body, to life itself. That’s the blues.

Yet the blues also stands for restlessness and curiosity, moving forward and surviving. So if Morrison reinvents the lyrical modes of the blues to talk about his own life what is really happening is that he is making the ancient form anew and it is that sense of going on, and the spirit of enquiry that has run through his work since the beginning, flowing from the great delta of the blues.

CLOSE ENOUGH FOR JAZZ

Blues, however, is not alone. The other great tributary that has informed the main body of American popular music in the twentieth century is, of course, jazz. I asked Ben Sidran how he saw the fit between Van Morrison and jazz: ‘Jazz is not a kind of music, it is an approach, and it applies to how one goes about finding their voice, relating to a tradition, stepping into the unknown and swinging. Clearly, Van is connected to all of these principles.’²⁴

Histories of jazz emphasise the development of an American form, and, of course that is not incorrect – jazz is arguably America’s greatest musical gift to the world. Van Morrison’s take on jazz is manifold: it is musical, conceptual, philosophical. If we listen to his most overtly ‘jazz’ albums we notice that the first, *How Long Has This Been Going On?*, is most closely allied to the British jazz of the 50s and very early 60s. This is in terms of his collaborators – Chris

Barber, Lonnie Donegan, Ronnie Scott – but also the album's repertoire. The other record, *Tell Me Something*, is a very American affair, being an album of Mose Allison's songs. The use of recognisably 'jazz' music in his repertoire is also spread across individual songs, most obviously 'Moondance'.

As the title track of his second album for Warners, 'Moondance' was the leading point of his effort to make a record that would actually make him some money. Contrasting the stylistic content of *Astral Weeks* with that of *Moondance*, we can see how different the methodology was – short, inclusive and open songs as opposed to the richly personal worlds of *Astral Weeks*' key songs. The album's first track 'And It Stoned Me' opens directly with his voice and the title track is probably the first standard of his post-'Brown Eyed Girl' career, one which any number of singers could take a shot at. Indeed 'Moondance' has become a karaoke favourite, such is its quiet penetration into the repertoire of standards. The point is that by 1970 the free jazz of *Astral Weeks* had been disciplined into a smart, sharp and direct popular song.²⁵

Its jazz-pop finger click is irresistible, and Morrison's claim that he could envisage Sinatra singing it, cited below, is not such a vain thought – the chatty vocal, the swaggering horn chart (marked by pleasing puffs of Jack Schroer's unmistakable sound) and the clean arrangement would have sat very nicely on one of Sinatra's 70s albums for Reprise. The title is a neat inversion of a familiar term; the cinemas at the time were playing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, while *Sundance* was the title tune of an album by the Modern Jazz Quartet (featuring *Astral Weeks* drummer Connie Kay) and issued by Atlantic in 1964.²⁶ It also came less than a year after the first moon landings of July 1969, with the accompanying 'Earthrise' images showing us the planet for the first time. Morrison may well have been mindful of all this, but the term is also his own – a smart, uncomplicated flip of the expected. The romance of the night is not undiscovered by songwriters, of course, and the way the song fits in with an extant tradition of investing the outer darkness with an inner illumination is almost as old as the history of song itself. This in some ways perhaps explains the ease with which it has entered the mainstream. He was undoubtedly pleased with the results, telling Ritchie Yorke:

'With "Moondance" I wrote the melody first. I played the melody on a soprano sax and I knew I had a song so I wrote lyrics to go with the melody. That's the way I wrote that one. I don't really have any words to particularly describe the song, sophisticated is probably the word I'm looking for. For me, "Moondance" is a sophisticated song. Frank Sinatra wouldn't be out of place singing that.'²⁷

The opening verse is a scene setter and the second is not unlike its album

companion 'Caravan' in its seeking to seduce with humour as well as the pleasures of the night: 'Well I wanna make love to you tonight / I can't wait till the morning has come'. That urgency, cogently expressed, is made to run in parallel with the forces of nature – the day and the night, the breezes, the moon and the sun – and is set in a context of complete naturalness and therefore, an irresistibility. The girl is seen as being as much a part of the natural world as the surroundings ('The stars up above in your eyes . . . The soft moonlight seems to shine in your blush') and the autumn setting places the song within Morrison's own group of 'leaf songs', examined later in this book. The song is autumnal in its colour and tone as well as in its lyrical specifics, the arrangement dry and crisp, the vocal tone moving between cloud and sun. The song is in itself more big-band, even jazz-pop than traditional or modern jazz, and Morrison is not 'trying' to sing like a jazz singer. As composer and author of the song, he sings it how he feels it – perhaps exemplified by the very pleasing burbling he drops into the vocal towards the end, resolving itself into dazzling vocal directness and clarity, with a final restatement of the chorus line – and his overall intention – over the final squall of horns.

Morrison's own regard for this song is evidenced by its enduring presence in his live sets, a liking which is both in harmony with and responsive to the song's public reputation – he re-recorded it for his 'jazz' album *How Long Has This Been Going On?* in 1995, and has included it on two of five live albums, various best-of's and themed compilations. This restatement of the song illustrates that he feels there is a world to be explored within the song, as well as acknowledging the plain fact of its popularity. Curiously, given how the 'jazz' methodology functions in his work, the song has never expanded live in the way that 'It's All In The Game', or 'In The Afternoon' have; the closest it came to this was being appended by 'My Funny Valentine' on the San Francisco live album, and by 'Fever' in the live set early in the 90s. The relative 'undevelopment' of a song which has featured almost continuously in his set for nearly four decades is an anomaly, and one which speaks of how satisfied the composer must be with the faithfulness of his initial recording to how he feels the tune. It has often been used almost as a theme tune – the warm-up number before he comes onstage – and it has a hot-valve, 50s TV theme dimension to its runs, and so functions nicely in that context.

'Moondance' is also related to *Astral Weeks*, in a way, in that he has not really attempted another song like it. Strands connect, say, 'I Will Be There' or the swamp-jazz undertow of *A Period Of Transition*, but the song stands as complete and definitive in its original state. The remakes have kept close to the original, the 1995 take being prefixed by the bright, brassy blare of a horn intro that will be familiar to those who have attended his shows over the decades, and

has become an integral part of the number. Georgie Fame's off-mike following of the horn line on the *A Night In San Francisco* album (0.01–21) is almost a definitive encapsulation of the spirit of that band; despite its familiarity, it is often the centrepiece of a set, and can provide a turning point. The paradox of the freedom and the discipline at the heart of jazz that this song brings can provide a focus for Morrison's energy and a sluggish set can be transformed by a good and successful 'Moondance'.²⁸

His next overtly 'jazz' cut was 'I Will Be There', which sits atypically on *Saint Dominic's Preview*; it loafs between 'Gypsy' and 'Listen To The Lion', sounding nothing like either. Led in by a Big Easy piano, the tune is both brash and lazy in its sound and its swing, of which it has plenty. It locks into a low-riding finger-pop early and stays there, ratcheting up through the horns above and behind the vocal, counterpointing and making richer Doug Messenger's straight Tal Farlow-esque chord-strum on the guitar and the light brush of the drums. Morrison's vocal high-kicks and at the song's close he steps up to deliver one last blurt of the title phrase, drawing out 'there' over four bars, before the song collapses in on itself to good effect with a loving thud on the kit. It's great, and transcends pastiche of the traditions it clearly draws upon – Sinatra, the big bands – but no-one would have bet good money on it having the shelf life it has turned out to have. Yet its dynamics are perfect for the live stage, and it would prove itself to be something of a model for later, more fully realized jazz projects.²⁹

Then came a sidestep – his cover of Louis Jordan's 'Caldonia' for a one-off single in 1974, accompanied by the Caledonia Soul Express. Though the cover is straight, on the label and in his pronunciation the title is slyly changed to 'Caledonia'. Morrison's love for this phase of 40s and 50s jazz was, as we have seen, derived in part from his father's record collection. Its energy and verve links it to r'n'b and even early rock and roll, but it really is something different to 'rock' as it was understood at the time Morrison was recording these tracks. Morrison's vocal is unmistakably 'live' and his cover of the song offers illuminating evidence of the root of his conviction that the sound of the vocal, the feeling of it, is more important than exemplary diction, syntax or note-perfect delivery. In fact, on 'What's Up, Crazy Pup?' the single's B-side, the vocal duties are compressed to a rhythmic element, a straight chanting of the title in the mid-section of the number, and a wild, ridiculous and beautiful shout at the track's close. Morrison's 1980s instrumental period, and his interest in non-vocal music, has its roots much further back than a reading of Alice Bailey – it is rooted in his listening to Bechet, Armstrong, Jordan and the rest. Morrison's vocal on 'Caldonia' is one of his toughest and most robust vocal performances, being abrasive and controlled, righteous and good-humoured, and as such is wholly true to the spirit of jazz.³⁰ Peter Wolf remembered that Jordan was one

of Morrison's favourites when they became friends in Boston in 1967:

'Over and over we would listen to what he called "the gospel" of Jackie Wilson, Ray Charles, Hank Williams, Louis Jordan, Billy Stewart, Elvis and John Lee Hooker. "They're the real deal," he'd say. He played Gene Chandler's live version of "Rainbow '65" so much, I had to get a new needle for my turntable.'³¹

This intense enthusiasm for the music that moved him way, way back led him to pick up the threads two decades later. That's how long this had been going on.

How Long Has This Been Going On? (1995)

Morrison's brace of 'jazz' albums came together in the mid-90s in rapid succession – *How Long Has This Been Going On?*, and a Mose Allison 'tribute' album, *Tell Me Something*. The records have two distinct sets of ambitions: they are in some respects aspirational, but they are also determinedly bringing the songs to a wider audience. Furthermore it was an attempt to build upon the remarkable togetherness of the band as heard on the *A Night In San Francisco* and let that energy explore and inform another field. Morrison's creative urge is always to go forward, so after the massive James Brown-style review of the early/mid-90s band as recorded on *A Night In San Francisco* had reached its apotheosis, he did as he had done in 1974 and chose to dissolve the group. In 1974 the next step was scaled down and ambient, on *Veedon Fleece*; in 1995 the way forward seemed to be in the direction of jazz.

Befitting the connection between jazz and the idea of 'liveness', *How Long Has This Been Going On?* was recorded in a single live session, on 3 May 1995, at Ronnie Scott's Club on Frith Street in Soho, London. The club was empty of paying guests but the ambience of the 'jazz space' of its interior was present and correct. That a live recording could so closely resemble a painstaking studio endeavour is testament not only to the acoustics of the room but of course the skill of the players, and Morrison had the advantage of some top-drawer British jazz collaborators. The choice of Ronnie Scott's was itself an aspirational gesture, it being the symbolic (arguably the *actual*) home of British jazz, and Morrison was, rightly, clearly delighted to be moving in this company and recording in such a place. The sleeve art makes much of the venue, with Morrison and Fame pictured with Ronnie Scott on the steps outside the club. The emphasis is strongly on this British dimension – a cover shot of Morrison and Fame at a Soho café includes London listings weekly *Time Out* and a copy of the *London Evening Standard*. This, it says, is British music.³² Yet of course the record is full of American songs; it is the playing of them that belongs specifically to the British jazz methodology. There is a briskness and a conciseness, the sound is

snappy and hard-working. The album includes a quartet of Morrison originals and ten from the wider repertoire, drawing in Louis Jordan, Johnny Mercer, Cannonball Adderley, Leo Hickman and Mose Allison among others. This, alongside Morrison's willingness to reinvent or at least test out some of his own 'jazz' numbers under these conditions, offers us a chance to consider his skill as an interpreter.

The album opens with that unexpectedly long-runner from 1972, 'I Will Be There', ushered in with a bowling snare roll and a wide-screen splashy arrangement – this is full-on big-band jazz in the tradition of Rat Pack Sinatra crossed with Lester Young. It finishes, as one knows it will, on a blare of brass. 'Symphony Sid' is Louis Jordan's homage to the DJ at Birdland and on jazz radio in the 40s and 50s, and gives a rare example of Morrison sharing a vocal word for word, 'duetting' with co-pilot Georgie Fame. This is a song reeking of 50s jazz, and Fame's voice fits it like a kid glove; Fame is certainly a more experienced singer of this kind of music than Morrison, maybe even a better one, although he is an inferior vocalist overall – this paradox lies at the heart of Morrison's 'explicitly' jazz recordings. Chet Baker, as we shall discover, somewhat grouchy said that Morrison 'shouted' and that which serves him so well in his own work and the blues material – such as the jazzed version of Leo Hickman's 'Early In the Morning' that follows 'Symphony Sid' – somehow limits his fit with some of the (paradoxically for a musical mode that is predicated on self-expression) strict conventions of jazz performance. Yet Morrison manifestly is a jazz performer in his approach – never the same way twice – and thus the paradox lies in this fall-off between his natural creative pattern and the rules that guide jazz. This we see from the (third!) version of his 'All Saint's Day' included here, where Fame's voice clearly reflects the techniques of Mose Allison and Chet Baker, making the human voice hornlike, following the melody of the horn chart – listen to Baker's version of Elvis Costello's 'Almost Blue' for a concise example of how he applied the technique to a song by a pop/rock songwriter.³³ In contrast Morrison vocalises in a natural 'jazz' pattern – there is clear saxophonic phrasing in the way he sings, the bright surges, the slow fallings away. Though unlike the clean lines of Fame or Baker, this vocal technique is still pure jazz.

Morrison's own songs sit comfortably alongside the covers, be they the rhythmic tone poem of 'Sack O'Woe' or the Broadway standard 'Who Can I Turn To'; yet the dominant vocal sound of the album is that of collaboration. 'Moondance' and 'I Will Be There' are of course showcases for Morrison's voice, but the ensemble enterprise, according to jazz tradition, prevails. 'Centerpiece' and the title track display this to great effect, vocally and musically. The inclusion of a pair of Mose Allison songs, 'Your Mind Is On Vacation' and 'Don't

Worry About A Thing', is significant beyond being Morrison's first Allison since 1985's 'If You Only Knew'. It shows the enduring influence of the older man's caustic cynicism about the music business on Morrison's own work – both directly (the lyric of the former includes the phrase 'talk is cheap', later to adorn one of Morrison's 'fame blues') and less overtly (the latter reverses the usual pop formula that everything is going to turn out fine, something Morrison later echoed in 2008's 'No Thing'). Mose gave Van a model for articulating his blues about the music industry, and the dry humour of 'If You Only Knew' can easily give way to the more fractious mood of 'Your Mind Is On Vacation'. We can see the conceptual link between the choices of the Allison tune and 'That's Life'; we also see feelingly the debt Morrison's own 'I Will Be There' owes to 'That's Life' once they are in such close proximity. The older song is more restrained on this record than Morrison's own tune but their shared DNA shines through, and it is this mixture of the one-take, high-kicking, big-band Sinatra and the grittier models of British jazz playing, composition and arrangement that characterises Morrison's forays into 'real' jazz music. Morrison also borrowed the promise from 'That's Life', to be back on top in June for the title of 1999's *Back On Top*.

The appearance of 'Heathrow Shuffle', effectively a jump-style instrumental with a scatted vocal line, *à la* 'What's Up Crazy Pup?', bears the influence of Louis Jordan and also the time of its composition, being approximately 1973–74, when Morrison was breaking down his accepted styles and deliberately branching out and away from the Belfast Cowboy role that had been cut out for him. The tune turns up in an audience-confusing form on the DVD of his turning-point show at Montreux in 1974, and very occasionally on set lists thereafter but it is the one surprise guest at this particular table. Undoubtedly it was waiting for the right moment and context to emerge on a 'real' Morrison album; other jazz instrumentals of that era, such as 'Much Binding In The March', have yet to find such a home and, archival projects aside, probably never will. The tune is worn lightly, in the spirit of the jump-jive to which it owes a debt, but also records, in its wry observation of the slow movement through endless airport arrivals and departure lounges, some weariness with the responsibilities ('Gotta go to Heathrow! Gotta go to Heathrow!'³⁴) that are the cost of Kerouac's dream of eternal movement, and of the lure of being on the road.

Unlike the hallowed jazz space that hosted its predecessor, 1996's *Tell Me Something: The Songs Of Mose Allison*, was laid down at Morrison's own Wool Hall Studios. The album's subject appears on a brace of the 13 tracks, 'I Don't Want Much' and the closer, 'Perfect Moment'. The band is that of the Ronnie Scott's album, plus the substantial addition of ace jazz pianist and scholar Ben Sidran. Sidran's skilful articulations of the techniques, meanings and purposes of jazz (and music in a wider cultural sense) are well known to readers of his

writings on the subject, including the utterly indispensable *Black Talk* and *Talking Jazz*.³⁵

I asked Ben Sidran about the experience of making this album.

PM: How did the idea for an album of Mose Allison songs recorded in this way come about? In your sleeve note you allude to Georgie Fame approaching you – do you recall the circumstances?

BS: Georgie was travelling with Van at the time and apparently Van said he wanted to do this tribute to Mose and because I was producing Mose's records, and obviously was a devotee of his music, Van asked Georgie to give me a call and see if I would participate.

PM: How did you decide upon the songs that would be included, and were there any songs recorded that didn't make the final cut for the record?

BS: Originally, the idea was that we would all pick three or four of our favourite Mose songs and bring them to the sessions. In the end, I chose 12 – I couldn't narrow it down any further – and when it came time for the sessions, I was the only one who had a list, so we did all the songs I had picked. With the exception of 'Self Love' which I think was Van's idea. I do not believe there were songs cut but not released. I'm not certain.

What emerges here is that Sidran's precision and expertise really drove the project in terms of content, the exception being 'Self Love' aka 'Benediction', which Morrison had been playing in his live set for some time. How, I wondered, did the 'one take' principles favoured by Morrison play out in the conditions of making a 'real' jazz record, as opposed to one which draws upon the free spirit of jazz?

PM: Your sleeve note mentions the recording being swift. Do you perhaps recall how long it took to record the album, and the 'spirit' in the studio during the sessions?

BS: It took two afternoons. It was just a groove. I had prepared charts of all the songs based on the charts we had used in the original Mose sessions. We just passed them around and ran the songs down. The spirit was very loose and relaxed. All music.

PM: You mention too that the majority of the songs on the record were put down in one or two takes. On Van Morrison's studio recordings there is much emphasis on this idea of 'first takes', with apparent run-throughs ending up on the finished album – is that how the songs for *Tell Me Something* were recorded?

BS: We were set up 'live' in the studio – that is without baffels so we could hear without ear phones if we wanted to. I think we spent an hour or so running over songs before Van arrived. When he got there, he went to his microphone, pulled out some harps, and off we went. They were all performances, no overdubs, mostly first takes.

PM: Is that in your view the best way for jazz (or indeed music of whatever hue) to be recorded in the studio?

BS: Recording live in the room and going for the feeling is the best way to capture a spirit. It's not necessarily the best way to make a jazz record but I think it was a great way to make this one.³⁶

So Ben Sidran's impression of this experience is intriguing: he recalls clearly that the album was made in an open and free-flowing atmosphere – 'the spirit was very loose and relaxed. All music' – but that this wasn't 'necessarily the best way to make a jazz record' although it was right for this one. In this candid and complex answer, Sidran illustrates a masterly and intuitive understanding of how to employ jazz as a creative principle and knowing when and how to apply it – today it's time to lean on the music, tomorrow maybe not.

The album's opener, 'One Of These Days', promises, while never actually committing, to do the sensible and self-preserving thing and the rest of the collection shows how and why that isn't an option, either for the song's author or his younger interpreter. The vocal duties here are shared between Morrison, Fame and Sidran. Morrison takes the solo lead on four tracks, and shares with Fame and Sidran on what is perhaps the album's best-known number (in that it featured in his live set well before and after the album's issue, and also turns up on 2007's *Best Of III*) 'Benediction'. He also duets on two tracks with their author, 'I Don't Want Much' and 'Perfect Moment'. Of the remaining half of the album, Sidran takes four leads, and Fame a trio. What this album does, apart from show us that Morrison can indeed collaborate and create as part of an ensemble, is that it opens up the Mose Allison songbook to show a much wider range and shows the songs are far more humane than his reputation as a prickly cynic would suggest. The closer, 'Perfect Moment', is a kind of jazz manifesto, and bears a lyric which could easily have been from Morrison's own pen, with its sunsets, mountains, crystal clear autumn nights and its connection of the nature of nature to that of music: the 'perfect moment' (outside the nightclub, we note) is 'Never twice th' same'. Allison's repertoire contains a number of these songs, such as 'The Gettin' Paid Waltz', glimpses into the grimly twinkling reality of the jobbing musician, who is hanging on to another of Allison's lines, in 'Your Time Will Come', sung here by Ben Sidran: 'If you live, your time will come.'³⁷

The album may well always be seen as a marginal element of the catalogue but this seems to miss the point. It was both an experiment for both Morrison and his audience, a mix of a pleasurable embrace of the one-take philosophy and a respectful, useful acknowledgement of the work of the older, less well-known musician. So how did all these experiments impact upon his live work in the wider sense? Intriguingly, this material received only limited outings – there was no ‘jazz tour’, and the performances tended to be one-offs or specials, such as the August 1995 show with the BBC Orchestra at the Edinburgh Festival, broadcast live to air as part of the Festival’s jazz wing. However in the long run, his work in the decade following showed how these full-on journeys into jazz were absorbed into his own musical language. After the issue of *Tell Me Something* Morrison returned to something bluesier, and closer to his natural *style*. His musical DNA is blues-based, and he tends to write songs which, even when country or pop in outward show, are predicated on the structures of the blues. Yet his natural *approach* seems closer to jazz. So the blend of the two influences sublimate and the music shows aspects of both – the attention to structure, the freedom to wander away from them, while keeping them in mind. It’s instructive that he has never made an overt ‘blues’ album in the way that he made these two jazz collections. Connecting the blues to the jazz of America and American song traditions enables us to arrive at another subgroup of stylistically related albums – the country records.

CALEDONIA SOUL MUSIC?: THE COUNTRY RECORDS

Country music’s popularity in Scotland and Northern Ireland is well documented, and rooted in the historic connections between Appalachian and British Celtic music; the original hillbillies were Irish immigrants. It’s also been said that country music offers a kind of white man’s blues, or white soul music, connecting the music of America and of Morrison’s upbringing. Indeed listening to George Jones it is easy to see where the connections are made; the soulful power and emotional force inherent in the voice which does not seem to be trying very hard. So when Morrison sings a song made well known by Jones, such as ‘Things Have Gone To Pieces’, we have the opportunity to compare the two styles, and see how the younger man’s approach locks with the form. Morrison’s first effort at a country record, *Tupelo Honey*, ended up feeling more like a superior singer-songwriter album of the time than the pure form, certainly more California than Nashville, while his second, 2000’s *You Win Again*, was a mix of country, blues and early rock and roll which – we learn – was effectively a country-blues hybrid. Indeed it seems an echo from

a time of wholeness, ‘in the days before rock and roll’, where the styles were inward-facing and drew from each other freely and with ease, before musical tribalism became embedded. If we accept the premise that modern country music’s performative codes and musical shapes are substantially drawn from the work and style of Hank Williams, we can also see how that seminal figure in all his innovative splendour also to some extent laid down rules that were not there formerly. This template has arguably ossified into a kind of conservatism which mitigates against and resists innovation: as Waylon Jennings sang, ‘Are you sure Hank done it this way?’³⁸

Morrison’s interest in country music goes back as far as his taste for the blues, to the records in his father’s record collection and the music he heard in the neighbourhood. On the Nashville DVD that came with his *Pay The Devil* album, he recalls that:

‘When I started out, first started in music, I was singing songs like “Half As Much”, “Your Cheatin’ Heart”, “My Bucket’s Got A Hole In It”, “More and More” . . . there was Leadbelly, and there was *that*, y’know? I think the first song I learned was “Midnight Special” and the second was “More and More” . . . so it was all part of the same thing. I knew a guy, a neighbour, who had all Hank Williams’ stuff, but I seemed to zone in more on Webb Pierce, Ray Price, Faron Young, also Tennessee Ernie Ford, his earlier stuff, which was boogie woogie, a mixture of boogie and country stuff.’³⁹

That mixture of the blues and the country is in itself a reflection of the initial undivided nature of the two – so that early rock and roll music came into being on the wings of these rhythms, only later to be divided up and commodified separately. Listen to early Sun Records Jerry Lee Lewis or to Elvis Presley’s ‘Milk Cow Blues’ for the same label and hear how the two styles existed in a single musical entity.⁴⁰ As Morrison himself has often remarked, blues musicians would be equally likely to play country songs: in his *Blues: The Basics*, Dick Weissman notes that Robert Johnson, the King of the Delta Blues himself, would play country tunes ‘in his spare time’.⁴¹ So the dividing line between country music and blues music is to some extent an artificial one, one devised in order for them to be sold – so we had ‘race records’ and we had ‘country and western’, targeted to specific populations, places, and skin tones. Like the blues, country music is in its sensibility attentive to the social function of the music – it tells stories about ‘ordinary life’. Morrison:

‘I think these songs are kind of similar to the blues in the fact that they’re the true poetry of everyday life, really . . . a lot different than just pop songs . . . they actually *mean* something. It’s the truth! It’s something I can relate to, and is very real. The

lyrics are real, it's about real life experiences, it's very similar to the blues . . . in fact they might be one and the same thing.⁴²

So these unities are historic, and are, as his final comment suggests, very real; but we still recognise the differences between a 'blues' song and a 'country' song when we hear them back to back. So this far-back unity is something which is reached for each time the country blues is played, but the distance is also confirmed in the same moment. Of course, 'country blues' is not simply blues and country music welded together, rather it is the source, and the two distinct forms we recognise are a kind of dual growth away from the shared beginnings.

Morrison's hidden gem 'Foggy Mountain Top' addresses this common root. While it is musically unrelated to the Carter Family song of the same name, Morrison was most likely familiar with that song – he mentioned that his father's record collection included the Carter Family to Paul Jones in 2008. Using the Carter Family's title acknowledges that influence, which is reflected in the lyric itself: 'I've been listening to this music, ever since the age of three.' This is a song he seems to hold a fondness for, giving it a long life on the concert stage regardless of its obscurity in his catalogue (it was unissued until 1998). He included it in the set for the Montreux 1974 gig, in his performance with Derek Bell and Clive Culbertson at the University of Coleraine in 1988, and in live shows as late as 2007. Lyrically, it could be read as little more than a superior improvised blues doodle; in performance it evokes much more. Musically, it is a straight country walking blues and it is perhaps this simplicity and uncomplicated nature that have allowed it to endure. In common with its contemporary 'Twilight Zone' it is a song driven by the vocal, and wheresoever it leads the band follows, with Pete Wingfield particularly skilful in his attentiveness to the nuances of Morrison's performance – responding, reinforcing emphases and echoing the step-downs in tone; listen to Morrison respond to Wingfield's 'sound picture' of the clean glass of water (1.45–50).

The borrowing of the title gives Morrison a mood to explore, an atmosphere to inhabit – while it is a long way from Appalachia to Belfast city, there are correspondences between the landscapes of the Carter Family's song and Morrison's Northern Ireland, where the foggy mountain tops look over the city and the sea. It's not a metaphorical or a mythological mountain; indeed it is an image familiar from Morrison's career-long lexicon, from 'Hey Girl' on *Them* to the epic 'Burning Ground' performances of the late 90s, where he would 'keep going up that mountainside'. Here it is evidence of him seeking to reach for a more straightforwardly realized soundscape than the lush ornamentation of the high state that the Caledonia Soul Orchestra had reached. The song gives

us voice, drum, bass and piano and, the cherry on the top, his harmonica, strong and wild and bluesy. The Montreux 1974 take has no harmonica, instead featuring a harder driving blues rhythm and more of the round-backed semi-acoustic that Morrison focused his attention upon so thoroughly throughout the performance. The song has a flexible root to its apparent simplicity and is one that always brings some clear space to any set it is part of, a clean glass of water in itself. Morrison's use of an extant title is both an act of acknowledgement and the carrying forward of tradition via innovation.⁴³ Morrison's first country album embodies this creative tension.

'I was really trying to make a country and western album,' Morrison told Ritchie Yorke in 1974; the country album he wanted to make arrived as *Tupelo Honey*. This is a 'proper' American record, just in advance of the California cowboys who would dominate American popular music and prove extremely successful and exportable, until the arrival of disco in the mid-70s. The album is sepia toned, like its cover art, taking its cue from The Band's 'back to the roots' American music. Thus Morrison mixes the Hank Williams model of country with some Nashville and California cowboy musical touches characteristic of the time, also bringing his tougher blues approach to the table, modifying the singer-songwriter requirement of the time. He quickly saw *Tupelo Honey* and its sister album *His Band And The Street Choir* as products of being placed in a certain position in a certain market, telling Ritchie Yorke in 1974:

'I wasn't happy with *Tupelo Honey*. It consisted of songs that were left over from before and that they'd finally gotten round to using. It wasn't really fresh. It was a bunch of songs that had been hanging around for a while. I was really trying to make a country and western album.'⁴⁴

There are only really two survivors from the album that have endured in either the public consciousness or that of their composer, judging by his live sets, and they are 'Wild Night' and 'Tupelo Honey'. It's clear from listening to *Tupelo Honey* as an album that he wanted to make a country and western album, in the traditional sense, but one which stood free of both the centre of country music production – it was recorded in San Francisco, not Nashville – and of its repertoire in that the nine tracks are all Morrison originals. His late turns to the genre in 2000 and 2006, *You Win Again* and *Pay The Devil*, are by contrast heavily loaded in favour of the standard repertoire with merely a trio of Morrison originals between them and only a cover of Rodney Crowell's deathless 'Till I Gain Control Again' deviating from the country blues songbook.

Tupelo Honey makes clear the links between American country music (which is a strand of a bigger American folk music, of course) and the musical roots in

Caledonia that have so intrigued and tugged at Morrison's work almost since the outset. To take an example, the light and lovely 'I Wanna Roo You' has the simplicity of a field song, a charming song of seduction which is also fresh enough to be sung in an innocent spirit almost like a children's rhyme or a skipping game – not unlike the way 'I'll Tell Me Ma' is learnt. This cyclic rhythm and the upturned corners of the melody's smile are emphasised by John McFee's elliptical pedal steel motif. The song, in its subtitle '(Scottish Derivative)', also flags up its own debt to a melody from traditional Scottish folk music – a repertoire which is as powerful an influence in Northern Ireland, as is the more readily recognisable 'Irish' music of the south. The images of domestic contentment in 'I Wanna Roo You' are unusual in a catalogue often distinguished by its sense of movement and restless awareness of the lure of the road, but there is still itchiness here, if good-natured and roguish – 'You know what I'm after, and I'm gonna try it'.⁴⁵ While sounding very male in its seductive laying out of his ambitions ('roo' being a saucily ambiguous, rougher cousin of the more chaste 'woo'), the song has been covered by women, notably by Jackie de Shannon and Goldie Hawn, thereby changing the song's perspective and restoring the link between the feminine voice and domestic context which is, perhaps, the cultural norm in popular song.

The tone of the album is undoubtedly upbeat, evoking energetic new vistas for living, intensely felt experience, equally powerful emotion, and love, love, love. 'I Wanna Roo You', 'When That Evening Sun Goes Down' and 'Straight To Your Heart Like A Cannonball' are all 'proper' country songs – they are to do with affairs of the heart, they are connected to the world of weather (snow, setting suns), being out in the open air ('There beneath the stars above' is repeated in the album closer, 'Moonshine Whiskey'), full of trains and railroads and the countryside. All these features and themes recur in Morrison's work of any period or style, we will appreciate, but they are also clearly more closely linked to the country blues of Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Williams than the Nashville of the 1970s. Similarly innovative with form, the bold dual structure of 'Moonshine Whiskey' anticipates his more determined incorporation of distinct movements within a single song that surfaced a decade later on *Common One*.

The title track was the song that most closely allied Morrison to the American singer-songwriter mood of the moment, absorbing both the traditions of the country song and also the modish Californian confessional milieu, and while the songs can seem light, there is a consistency of emotional tone which emphasises the unity of the collection. 'Tupelo Honey' is a slow-dripping declaration of love, free of the murk of the blues – the gentleness and determinedly non-blues tone of Morrison's vocal flags up the coming of the otherworldly falsetto which

emerged on 'Warm Love' and *Veedon Fleece*. It feels like a country song, yet if we listen we find no pedal steel, and the languid yet busy drum pattern is closer to a jazz skitter. Vibes settle gently on the offbeat, and Morrison's acoustic guitar runs anticipate his 80s style. Approaching the first climax of the song, an extended improvisation around the chorus, which drops down back into a repetition of the first verse with one of Morrison's characteristic mispronunciations, dropping 'Chyne-aer' from the line, his singing of the line 'She's as sweet as Tupelo Honey' from 5.35–43 is the emotional heart of the song. This is the place the song has been building up to, or earning access to, and the rest of the tune is an exploration of that moment, once reached. Curiously this heady love song was twinned with the acerbic fame blues 'Why Must I Always Explain?' in live sets in the late 1990s. Buzacott and Ford point out that the songs are 'harmonically similar',⁴⁶ but the two lyrical discourses make for a deliberately startling juxtaposition. A later studio remake with Bobby Blue Bland – a soul/r'n'b singer, we note, not a 'country singer' – restored the song to its sweet completeness, and Morrison sounds delighted to be singing with one of his inspirations. Especially enjoyable is hearing the way Bland pronounces the title 'Tipelo'. So this song, and album, is a bold innovation upon the traditional form.⁴⁷

For that traditional repertoire, we need to go to the collaboration with Linda Gail Lewis, *You Win Again*. Issued in September 2000, the 13 tracks cover much ground. Befitting the co-billing, the album gathers in several tunes well known in recordings by Linda's brother, Jerry Lee Lewis, including the Hank Williams-penned title track alongside John Lee Hooker's 'Boogie Chillen' and Terry Thompson's 'A Shot Of Rhythm And Blues'. The mix of country, blues and, well, country blues is testament to the source music for much of Morrison's original exposure to American popular music, and harks back to a time 'before rock and roll' where stylistic demarcation was less stringent. That it coincided by and large with Morrison's childhood and youth is both coincidental – he just happened to be born as one of the 'war children' – and absolutely pertinent; this was the age of 'no concepts' as he sings in 'Pagan Streams', and of free and unprejudiced discovery, of being one of the wild children, free to discover.⁴⁸

There is only one Morrison original on *You Win Again*, a song both perfectly tailored for its place and its use: 'No Way Pedro', with its slightly prickly good humour, will probably never be anyone's favourite Van Morrison song, but it is not built to grandstand in the company it keeps on this album. What it does do is show its composer's integral understanding of this music, so that, as Jools Holland says in his sleeve note, it sits alongside the other material here 'as if it were made at the same time'.⁴⁹ The record has an uneven reputation. Hardcore fans held wild and wildly differing opinions as to the live shows around the time of its issue, and the working relationship between the co-billed vocalists was

not destined to endure, but the album has much that is important for an understanding of how Morrison works and how he brings traditional models to what he is working on in the present moment. The arrangements are constant, and the record has a satisfyingly unified sound, which has been only infrequently the case in Morrison's twenty-first century output.

Of the album, and the experience of making it, Linda Gail Lewis said:

'Van is a genius as a vocalist and I didn't know if I would be able to phrase and harmonise with him because his style is so unique. But I did it. I don't totally understand what happened but when we sang together we seemed to know what each other was going to do. People have said he's hard to work with. But he's not. It's a challenge at times but if you're going to be creative you need that. I was amazed at what a good country singer he is. It was incredible. It's like you're listening to Hank Williams.'⁵⁰

She downplays her own role in this project somewhat here, as the blend of their voices is strong and fine, but the close vocal harmonising on this album is unusual for a number of reasons. It's not atypical in country music of course, but the combination of the male and female registers is less common, and frequently complicates the emotional certainties upon which country music is at least in part predicated upon. It is also unusual for Morrison – co-vocalists have functioned as a contrast (Brian Kennedy), a sweet backing voice drawn from established traditions of arrangement (Katie Kissoon), or as a way to give him space for improvisation away from the central task of singing the melody (the trio featured on the Belfast live album). Until this album he had not sung so closely with anyone, in concert or on record, and the album is billed as a vocal collaboration, the only example of this in Morrison's album catalogue. So whatever virtues or failures the record contains, the verdict is to be distributed evenly. In some ways, this record, for all its simplicity, confuses some of the emotional registers of country music by this mix of the male and female voice.

By contrast, the opening seconds of *Pay The Devil*⁵¹ let us know most directly what kind of country music this is: Webb Pierce's 'There Stands The Glass', a hit in 1955, opens with the image of the glass, half empty or half full, which is going to bring succour, comfort, and possibly ruin. Therein lies the appeal and the adventure, as signified by the line 'It's my first one today'. The dominant tone of *Pay The Devil* is just that; the world as a cold and inhospitable place, rendered so by the emotional upset suffered within, turned inside-out and then projected onto the outside world. This is the key to many of these songs – Leon Payne's 'Things Have Gone To Pieces', most famous from George Jones's 1962 version, is a superb example of this technique. The mood is quite different from the bluesy, dusty atmospherics of *You Win Again*, which I think of as outdoor