



**nick cave**  
**lecture: "the love song"**  
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Ladies and gentlemen,

To be invited to come here and teach, to lecture, to impart what knowledge I have collected about poetry, about song writing has left me with a whole host of conflicting feelings. The strongest, most insistent of these concerns my late father who was English Literature teacher at the high school I attended back in Australia. I have very clear memories of being about twelve years old and sitting, as you are now, in a classroom or school hall, watching my father, who would be standing, up here, where I am standing, and thinking to myself, gloomily and miserably, for, in the main, I was a gloomy and miserable child, "It doesn't really matter what I do with my life, as long as I don't end up like my father." At forty years old I would appear that there is virtually no action I can take that does not draw me closer to him, that does not make me more like him. At forty years old I have become my father. And here I am. Teaching.

What I wanted to do here was to talk a bit about "The Love Song", to speak about my own personal approach to this genre of songwriting which I believe has been at the very heart of my particular artistic quest. I want to look at some other works that, for whatever reason, I think are sublime achievements in this most noble of artistic pursuits: the creation of the great love song.

Looking back at these last twenty years, certain clarity prevails. Midst the madness and the mayhem, it would seem I have been banging on one particular drum. I see that my artistic life has centered around an attempt to articulate the nature of an almost palpable sense of loss that has laid claim to my life. A great gaping hole was blasted out of my world by the unexpected death of my father when I was nineteen years old. The way I learned to fill this hole, this void, was to write. My father taught me this as if to prepare me for his own passing. To write allowed me direct access to my imagination, to inspiration and ultimately to God. I found through the use of language, that I wrote God into existence. Language became the blanket that I threw over the invisible man, that gave him shape and form. The actualising of God through the medium of the Love Song remains my prime motivation as an artist. The Love Song is perhaps the truest and most distinctive human gift for recognising God and a gift that God himself needs. God gave us

this gift in order that we speak and sing Him alive because God lives within communication. If the world was to suddenly fall silent God would deconstruct and die. Jesus Christ himself said, in one of His most beautiful quotes, "Where ever two or more are gathered together, I am in your midst." He said this because where ever two or more are gathered together there is language. I found that language became a poultice to the wounds incurred by the death of my father. Language became a salve to longing.

Though the Love Song comes in many guises - songs of exultation and praise, songs of rage and of despair, erotic songs, songs of abandonment and loss - they all address God, for it is the haunted premises of longing that the true Love Song inhabits. It is a howl in the void, for love and for comfort and it lives on the lips of the child crying for his mother. It is the song of the lover in need of her loved one, the raving of the lunatic, the supplicant petitioning his God. It is the cry of one chained to the earth, to the ordinary and to the mundane, craving flight; a flight into inspiration and imagination and divinity. The Love Song is the sound of our endeavours to become God-like, to rise up and above the earthbound and the mediocre.

The loss of my father, I found, created in my life a vacuum, a space in which my words began to float and collect and find their purpose. The great W.H. Auden said "The so-called traumatic experience is not an accident, but the opportunity for which the child has been patiently waiting - had it not occurred, it would have found another - in order that its life become a serious matter." The death of my father was the "traumatic experience" Auden talks about that left the hole for God to fill. How beautiful the notion that we create our own personal catastrophes and that it is the creative forces within us that are instrumental in doing this. We each have a need to create and sorrow is a creative act. The Love Song is a sad song, it is the sound of sorrow itself. We all experience within us what the Portuguese call *Suadade*, which translates as an inexplicable sense of longing, an unnamed and enigmatic yearning of the soul and it is this feeling that lives in the realms of imagination and inspiration and is the breeding ground for the sad song, for the Love Song is the light of God, deep down, blasting through our wounds.

In his brilliant lecture entitled "*The Theory and Function of DUENDE*", Federico Garcia Lorca attempts to shed some light on the eerie and inexplicable sadness that lives in the heart of certain works of art. "All that has dark sounds has duende", he says, "that mysterious power that everyone feels but no philosopher can explain." In contemporary rock music, the area in which I operate, music seems less inclined to have it's soul, restless and quivering, the sadness that Lorca talks about. Excitement, often; anger, sometimes; but true sadness, rarely. Bob Dylan has always had it. Leonard Cohen deals specifically in it. It pursues Van Morrison like a black dog and though he tries to he cannot escape it. Tom Waits and Neil Young can summon it. It haunts Polly Harvey. My friend the Dirty 3 have it by the bucket load. The band Spiritualised are excited by it. Tindersticks desperately want it, but all in all it would appear that duende is too fragile to survive the

brutality of technology and the ever increasing acceleration of the music industry. Perhaps there is just no money in sadness, no dollars in duende. Sadness or duende needs space to breathe. Melancholy hates haste and floats in silence. It must be handled with care.

All Love Songs must contain *duende*. For the Love Song is never truly happy. It must first embrace the potential for pain. Those songs that speak of love without having within their lines an ache or a sigh are not Love Songs at all but rather Hate Songs disguised as Love Songs, and are not to be trusted. These songs deny us our humanness and our God-given right to be sad and the air-waves are littered with them. The Love Song must resonate with the susurruration of sorrow, the tintinnabulation of grief. The writer who refuses to explore the darker regions of the heart will never be able to write convincingly about the wonder, the magic and the joy of love for just as goodness cannot be trusted unless it has breathed the same air as evil - the enduring metaphor of Christ crucified between two criminals comes to mind here - so within the fabric of the Love Song, within it's melody, it's lyric, one must sense an acknowledgement of its capacity for suffering.

In Lou Reed's remarkable song "Perfect Day" he writes in near diary form the events that combine to make a "Perfect Day". It is a day that resonates with the bold beauty of love, where he and his lover sit in the park and drink Sangria, feed animals in the zoo, go to a movie show etc., but it is the lines that lurk darkly in the third verse, "*I thought I was someone else, someone good*" that transforms this otherwise sentimental song into the masterpiece of melancholia that it is. Not only do these lines ache with failure and shame, but they remind us in more general terms of the transient nature of love itself - that he will have his day "in the park" but, like Cinderella, who must return at midnight to the soot and ash of her disenchanted world, so must he return at midnight to the soot and ash of her disenchanted world, so must he return to his old self, his bad self. It is out of the void that this song springs, clothed in loss and longing.

Around the age of twenty I started reading the Bible and I found in the brutal prose of the Old Testament, in the feel of it's words and it's imagery an endless source of inspiration. The Song of Solomon, perhaps the greatest love song ever written, had a massive impact upon me. It's openly erotic nature, the metaphoric journey taken around the lovers' bodies - breasts compared to bunches of grapes and young deer, hair and teeth compared to flocks of goats and sheep, a legs like pillars of marble, the navel, a round goblet, the belly, a heap of wheat - it's staggering imagery rockets us into the world of pure imagination. Although the two lovers are physically separate - Solomon is excluded from the garden where his beloved sings - it is the wild, obsessive projections of one lover onto another that dissolve them into a single being, constructed from a series of rapturous love-metaphors.

The Song of Solomon is an extraordinary love song but it was the remarkable series of love song/ poems known as the Psalms that truly held me. I found the Psalms, which deal directly with the relationship between man and God, teaming with all the

clamorous desperation, longing, exultation, erotic violence and brutality that I could hope for. The Psalms are soaked in suadade, drenched in duende and bathed in bloody-minded violence. In many ways these songs became the blue-print for much of my more sadistic love songs. Psalm 137, a particular favourite of mine and which was turned into a chart hit by the fab little band Boney M. is a perfect example of all I have been talking about.

### Psalm 137

- By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down  
yea, we wept. when we remembered Zion
2. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
  3. For there they that carried us away captive  
required of us a song; and they that wasted us  
required of us mirth, saying  
Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
  4. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?
  5. If I forget thee, O Jerusalem. Let my right hand forget her cunning.
  6. If I do not remember thee. let my tongue cleave  
to the roof of my mouth: if I prefer not  
Jerusalem above my chief joy
  7. Remember, O lord, the children  
Of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said  
Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.
  8. O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed;  
happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.
  9. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth  
thy little on against the stones.

The Love Song must be born into the realm of the irrational, the absurd, the distracted, the melancholic, the obsessive, the insane for the Love song is the noise of love itself and love is, of course, a form of madness. Whether it be the love of God, or romantic, erotic love - these are manifestations of our need to be torn away from the rational, to take leave of our senses, so to speak. Love Songs come in many guises and are seemingly written for many reasons - as declarations or romantic love, lamentations or petitions to God, for revenge or praise, to flatter or to wound - I have written songs for all of these reasons - but ultimately the Love Song exists to fill, with language, the silence between ourselves and God, to decrease the distance between the temporal and the divine.

In Psalm 137 the poet finds himself captive in " a strange land" and is forced to sing a song of Zion. He swears his love to his homeland and reams of revenge. The Psalm is ghastly in it's violent sentiments, as he sings for love of his homeland and his God and that he may be made happy by murdering the children of his enemies. What I found, time and time again, in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was that verses of rapture, of ecstasy and love could hold within them apparently opposite sentiments - hate, revenge, bloody mindedness etc, that they were not mutually exclusive. This idea has left an enduring impression on my songwriting.

Within the world of modern pop music, a world that deals ostensibly with the Love Song, but in actuality does little more than hurl dollops of warm, custard-coloured babby-vomit down the air-waves, true sorrow is not welcome. But occasionally a song comes along that hides behind it's disposable, plastic beat a love lyric of truly devastating proportions. "Better The Devil You Know" written by hit-makers Stock, Aitkin and Waterman and sung by the Australian pop sensation Kylie Minogue is such a song. The disclosing or disguising of the terror of love in a piece of mindless, innocuous pop music is an intriguing concept. "Better The Devil You Know" is one of pop music most violent and distressing love lyrics.

#### BETTER THE DEVIL YOU KNOW

Say you wont leave me no more  
I'll take you back again  
No more excuses, no. no  
Causo I've heard thom all before  
A hundred times or more  
I'll forgive and forgot  
If you say you'll naver go  
Cause it's true what they say  
Better the devil you know  
Our love wasn't perfect  
I know, I think I know the score  
You say you love me, O boy  
I can't ask for more  
I'll come if you should call

I'll be here every day  
Waiting for your love to show  
Cause it's true what they say  
It's better the devil you know

I'll take you back  
I'll take you back again

When Kylie Minogue sings these words there is an innocence to her voice that makes the horror of this chilling lyric all the more compelling. The idea presented within this song, dark and sinister and sad - that all love relationships are by nature abusive and that this abuse, be it physical or psychological, is welcomed and encouraged, shows how, even the most innocuous of love songs has the potential to hide terrible human truths. Like Prometheus chained to his rock so that the eagle can eat his liver each night, Kylie becomes love's sacrificial lamb bleating an earnest invitation to the drooling, ravenous wolf that he may devour her time and time again, all to a groovy techno beat. *"I'll take you back. I'll take you back, again"*. Indeed. Here the Love Song becomes a vehicle for a harrowing portrait of humanity not dissimilar to that of the Old Testament Psalms. Both are messages to God that cry out into the yawning void, in anguish and self-loathing, for deliverance.

As I said earlier, my artistic life has centered around the desire or more accurately, the need, to articulate the various feelings of loss and longing that have whistled through my bones and hummed in my blood, throughout my life. In the process I have written about two hundred songs, the bulk of which, I would say, were Love Songs. Love Songs, and therefore, by my definition, sad songs. Out of this considerable mass of material, a handful of them rise above the others as true examples of all I have talked about. *Sad Waters, Black Hair, I Let Love In, Deanna, From Her To Eternity, Nobody's Baby Now, Into my Arms, Lime Tree Arbour, Lucy, Straight to You*. I am proud of these songs. They are my gloomy, violent, dark-eyed children. They sit grimly on their own and do not play with the other songs. Mostly they were the offspring of complicated pregnancies and difficult and painful births. Most of them are rooted in direct personal experience and were conceived for a variety of reasons but this rag-tag group of love-songs are, at the death, all the same thing - life-lines thrown into the galaxies of the divine by a drowning man.

The reasons why I feel compelled to sit down and write Love Songs are legion. Some of these came clearer to me when I sat down with a friend of mine, who for the sake of his anonymity I will refer to as J.J. and I admitted to each other that we both suffered from psychological disorder that the medical profession call *erotographomania*. Erotographomania is the obsessive desire to write Love Letters. My friend shared that he had written and sent, over the last five years, more than seven thousand Love Letters to his wife. My friend looked exhausted and his shame was almost palpable. I suffer from the same disease but happily have yet to reach such an advanced stage as my poor friend J. We discussed the power of the Love Letter and found that it was, not surprisingly, very similar to the Love song. Both served as extended meditations on ones beloved. Both

served to shorten the distance between the writer and the recipient. Both held within them a permanence and power that the spoken word did not. Both were erotic exercises, in themselves. Both had the potential to reinvent, through words, like Pygmalion with his self-created lover of stone, one's beloved. Alas, that most endearing form of correspondence, the Love Letter, like the Love Song has suffered at the hands of the cold speed of technology, at the carelessness and soullessness of our age.

I would like to look, finally, at one of my own songs that I recorded for *The Boatman's Call* album. This song, I feel, exemplifies much of what I've been talking about today. The song is called *Far From Me*.

## FAR FROM ME

For you dear, I was born  
For you I was raised up  
For you I've lived and for you I will die  
For you I am dying now  
You were my mad little lover  
In a world where everybody fucks everybody else over  
You who are so far from me  
Far from me  
So far from me  
Way across some cold neurotic sea  
Far from me

I would talk to you of all matter of things  
With a smile you would reply  
Then the sun would leave your pretty face  
And you'd retreat from the front of your eyes  
I keep hearing that you're doing best  
I hope your heart beats happy in your infant breast  
You are so far from me  
Far from me  
Far from me

There is no knowledge but I know it  
There's nothing to learn from that vacant voice  
That sails to me across the line  
From the ridiculous to the sublime  
It's good to hear you're doing so well

But really can't you find somebody else that you can ring and tell  
Did you ever  
Care for me?  
Were you ever  
There for me?  
So far from me

You told me you'd stick by me  
Through the thick and through the thin  
Those were your very words  
My fair-weather friend  
You were my brave-hearted lover  
At the first taste of trouble went running back to mother  
So far from me  
Far from me  
Suspended in your bleak and fishless sea  
Far from me  
Far from me

*Far From Me* took four months to write, which was the duration of the relationship it describes. The first verse was written in the first week of the affair and is full of all the heroic drama of new love as it describes the totality of feeling whilst acknowledging the potential for pain - for you I'm dying now. It sets the two lovers it describes against an uncaring world - a world that fucks everybody over - and brings in the notion of the physical distance suggested in the title. Strangely, though, the song, as if awaiting the "traumatic experience" that I spoke of earlier to happen, would not allow itself to be completed until the catastrophe had occurred. Some songs are tricky like that and it is wise to keep your wits about you when dealing with them. I find quite often that the songs I write seem to know more about what is going on in my life than I do. I have pages and pages of fourth verses for this song written while the relationship was still sailing happily along. One such verse went:

The Camellia, the Magnolia  
Have such a pretty flower  
And the bells of St. Marys  
Inform us of the hour

Pretty words, Innocent words, unaware that any day the bottom would drop out of the whole thing. Love Songs that attach themselves to actual experience, that are a

poeticising of real events have a peculiar beauty unto themselves. They stay alive in the same way that memories do and being alive, they grow and undergo changes and develop. A Love Song such as *Far From Me* has found a personality beyond the one that I originally gave it, with the power to influence my own feelings around the actual event itself. This is an extraordinary thing and one of the truly wondrous benefits of song writing. The songs that I have written that deal with past relationships have become the relationships themselves. Through these songs I have been able to mythologize the ordinary events of my life, lifting them from the temporal plane and hurling them way into the stars. The relationship described in *Far From Me* has been and gone but the song itself lives on, keeping a pulse running through my past. Such is the singular beauty of song-writing.

Twenty years of song-writing has now past and still the void gapes wide. Still that inexplicable sadness, the duende, the saudade, the divine discontent persists and perhaps it will continue until I see the face of God Himslef. But when Moses desired to see the face of God, Exodus 33, 188, he was answered that he may not endure it, no man could see His face and live. Well, me, I don't mind. I'm happy to be sad. For the residue, cast off in this search, the songs themselves, my crooked brood of sad-eyed children, rally round and in their way , protect me, comfort me and keep me alive. They are the companions of the soul that lead it into exile, that sate the overpowering yearning for that which is not of this world. The imagination desires an alternate world and through the writing of the Love Song, one sits and dines with loss and longing, madness and melancholy ecstasy, magic, joy and love with equal measures of respect and gratitude. The spiritual quest has many faces - religion, art, drugs, work, money, sex - but rarely does the search serve God so directly and rarely are the rewards so great in the doing.

Thank you.