

## WRITERS BLOCK

Mickey Moses was two days away from his fiftieth birthday, a prospect that did not please him.

'I'm old' he thought 'I'm actually old'.

Mickey stared at himself in the mirror.

Long greying hair scraped back, stubble littering a lined face, he looked what he was. A washed up, broke musician. With arthritis in one hand.

He stood on the balcony and rolled a ciggie. He loved the tower block. Top floor flat. Breathing thin air. The only way to live he'd concluded. In truth he'd become a bit of a recluse. Cast adrift and forgotten. The Ben Gunn of Merseyside.

The August sun was kicking the morning mist into touch. On a clear day he could see the west coast of Ireland. He'd toured there a few times. In the sixties backing Gary Glitter, Alvin Stardust.

Mickey grimaced and flexed his fingers instinctively. Not so stiff this morning. Maybe he'd play a bit later. Who was he kidding? Hadn't picked up his guitar in months.

He was suddenly aware of the D.J squawking on the radio. He went back into his living room. Mickey was sure the D.J. had said "Can't stand the pain".

The record began and Mickey shivered. For a few seconds he was completely disoriented.

It was his song. The one he'd written ten years ago. It was his song. "Can't stand the love, can't stand the pain". The only song he'd ever completed. Modern arrangement of course. But his melody and words. His. Hers. Stella's. The one woman he'd really loved. Stella. His heart raced

Stella was a singer. Good voice, lot of presence. She could have made it big if the right break had come along. Instead Mickey had come along and they fell in love there and then. Fierce love. Good love, full of rows, reunions, tears and sex.

Don't want to live with you, don't want to live without you.

Can't stand the love, can't stand the pain.

They split.

He had written the lyric in half an hour. He'd written nothing since, though he'd tried. Ten years. The all time writers block.

The record finished. The D.J drawled the news that the song was 'shooting up the charts'. Mickey slowly rolled another smoke. He had written a hit. A major money earner!

He struggled to remember what he'd done with the song after he wrote it. He could see the cheap exercise book in which he'd written the words, and the small recorder he'd sung into. After that....? Nothing.

Mickey thought about the love of his life, Stella. She'd be forty two now. He tried to imagine her ten years older. What had happened to her? He had to know.

He went into town to buy the record. It had gone straight in at number five. The record was good and he played it for most of the night, and thought of Stella. His name was on none of the credits, not that he'd expected it to be. He didn't feel cheated. Just sad, as much for Stella as himself. He had always seen the song as theirs, rather than his.

Next morning he started the process of tracking down the record company. He was referred to the Fran Baxter Agency. Fran Baxter. Yeh—he and Fran had been quite close in the old days. They'd drunk a lot when Stella left. Had he given Fran the tape?

That evening Mickey got the shakes. Bad. He was frightened. He got drunk on vodka and cider.

He woke late next morning. He was fifty. There were no Birthday Cards, just a crashing headache. But the shakes had gone and he felt strong enough to make a rare train journey.

The Fran Baxter Agency was in the trendy part of Manchester near the canals. Bistros, boats and megabytes. And Baxter. In his office Mickey sipped iced water.

'Nice to see you're still alive' Baxter said "The smart money was on you not making another year' A shaft of realisation made him sit up. 'Christ it's your birthday. It is, isn't it. Fifty. Well,well.'

'What about the record?' Mickey asked.  
'Great isn't it? What do you think?'  
'I think it's my song'.  
'Yeh. It is'. replied Baxter  
Mickey stared at him. 'You're not denying it?'  
Baxter shrugged.

'I bought a copy' Mickey continued. 'Couldn't see my name anywhere. Baxter grinned ' . You never could take your song writing seriously. It's going to be mega. The States..Japan..Australia. Then there's the album of course.' 'You deliberately trying to wind me up/' 'Just laying out how it is' Baxter said quietly. 'It's my song'. Mickey thought he was beginning to sound pathetic. 'You've said that already. And I agreed. In reality, it's your song. In law it's mine. You got some proof you wrote it? If not I'd be careful what you say.'

'How did you get your hands on it?' Mickey asked. 'You don't remember? You put one copy down on that crappy recorder of yours, and you gave it to---' 'Stella' Mickey said as his memory split open. She had returned to collect the rest of her gear and he'd slipped the tape into her bag.

'Stella gave it to you?' Mickey asked 'We met by chance' Baxter replied 'I persuaded her to give it to me. I told her you were a wreck. Career – non existent. Life expectancy – zero. If its any consolation she did cry a lot.'

Mickey stood quickly and was immediately pulled back in his chair by a large man who had entered behind him. Baxter smiled. 'Mickey...Mickey..you're too old for that sort of thing man. Tell you what. Write some more songs, and if they're any good, I'll listen to them. Fair?'

Mickey walked by the canals to cool off. Baxter was right. If you value your work and yourself, you don't write songs and chuck them away. He'd never taken himself seriously. Fifty years to wake up to the fact. Brilliant.

He turned away from the water and almost knocked her over. She was still beautiful. Slim, dark, with piercing blue eyes.

'Hello Mickey. Long time'. The voice was even deeper. 'Yeh. You look good, Stella.' 'You've seen Fran? He's told you? I'm sorry.' Mickey looked away 'It was as much your song as mine, really.' She smiled. 'Always the generous spirit. You wrote it. It's yours.'

'Why did you give it to him'? he asked.

'He told me you were as good as dead. Oh..I don't know why. Tired of listening to it, I suppose. Needed to move on. What are you doing with yourself?' 'I live in a tower block.' He had nothing else to say. 'The record sounds good'.she said'Word is it's next week's number one. You've written a number one. Oh Mickey.' She was close to tears. 'I could get you a cut. If I ask Fran he'll do it'. 'You have that much influence?' 'I live with Fran. It's a good life. Why not?' He nodded slowly. 'Yeh. Why not?'

He walked away to catch his train and she followed him for a while. He heard her call his name twice. It sounded good after all these years. When he did stop and look back she was gone.

The sun was collapsing with late summer fatigue when he got home and he went straight to the roof. He watched the kestrels plan their evening ambush as he tried to unscramble his feelings. It had not been a good day. Baxter had everything—money, his song, Stella.

It was still hot. He went to the wall and stood on an old milk crate. Below the rush hour traffic was in full crawl. At least I've spared myself that, he thought. He looked east towards the moors, from where a breeze had whipped into life. It felt so good.

He realised he felt good too. Loose. Calm. Calmer than he could ever remember. Seeing Stella again had put something to rest. What had she said? 'You've written a number one.' He had. That was the truth. He knew what he was at last. He was a songwriter. And proud. God that felt good.

He'd work. And he knew this time he meant it. He'd go back to Baxter with wonderful tunes. He would do it. For himself.

He tilted back his head to gaze at the high sky which stretched forever and laughed wide-mouthed. He couldn't stop. The quickening wind, tasting of heather and damp earth, dived down his throat, towards the very centre of his being, where songs had begun to form.

By Neil Shenton September 2000.