

KITE IN THE SKY

Ian Inglis

I was born in the mid-1970s and grew from childhood into adolescence and adulthood to the accompaniment of all the unruly music of the next twenty years – heavy metal, punk, new wave, disco, reggae, grunge. I bought lots of records and, over time, changed from a mere purchaser into an enthusiastic collector. Only of vinyl. Music on vinyl has a texture, a sound of its own, quite different from the clinical perfection of a CD. I concentrate on what I think of as the classic acts from the 1990s. No boy bands, or Britpop, or rap, or female divas like Celine Dion and Mariah Carey, but what I regard as quality rock – REM, Clay Lake, the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, the Smashing Pumpkins, U2. Most of all, Clay Lake. And I've always felt that the band's finest album is *The Green*. Oh yes, there's *Earthquake Blues* and *Hidden Places*, but *The Green*'s subtle transition from folk-rock to rock, its eclectic mix of musical perspectives, and its thoughtful, often obscure, lyrical intensity have given me more enjoyment over the years than any other album. Even now, more than three decades after its release, I never tire of hearing it. I'm as familiar with it as I am with the contours of my own face.

Work had been getting me down for some time and in the spring, after yet another argument with the new boss, I was fired. I wasn't sorry to be leaving and I decided to take an early holiday and revisit some of the places in the south that I'd known in younger, happier days. Linda decided to stay at home. We'd not been getting on too well, and we both agreed the break would do us good. I caught the train to Plymouth, hired a car and drove eastwards along the coast. Torquay, Bournemouth, Southampton and Portsmouth were all much as I remembered them. My final destination was Brighton. As long as I've known it, the town has always boasted a fascinating mix of people and personalities – business commuters, the retired, foreign language students, a fair sprinkling of actors and celebrities. And despite possessing a beach composed entirely of shingle and pebbles, it remains one of the country's most popular seaside resorts

I stayed there for two days. Halfway up a steepish road near my hotel was a small record shop. I passed it once or twice, and it was only the threat of rain and my appreciation of the clever pun in the name above the door – *Slipped Discs* – that persuaded me to go inside on my last afternoon. There was the normal collection of LPs and CDs, posters, books, DVDs and videos, some new, but mostly second-hand. I headed for the vinyl section where the LPs were arranged alphabetically. Some performers had their own, clearly labelled sections: Bob Dylan, Neil Young, David Bowie, the Grateful Dead, Van Morrison, etc. And Clay Lake. There were several bootlegs – *Crashing In Flames*, *Love Out Of Sequence*, *The Third Wave*, and so on. Nothing I didn't already own. And the official releases – *Dear Sir*, *Vegetable Plot*, *Grosvenor House*, etc., etc.

I picked up a well-worn copy of *The Green* and, after looking at the familiar purple-and-blue cover designed by conceptual artist Con Coniston, I flipped it over. There was the stylised image of the jukebox, the production credit (Marvin Webb & Clay Lake), the catalogue number (PK 7891-2) and the list of songs I knew by heart. SIDE ONE: “Malt Castle”, “Going Again”, “North Wind”, “Tell Me Sarah”, “Kafka”, “Funny You Should Say That”; SIDE TWO: “Kite In The Sky”, “Velvet Dream”, “Recreation”, “Rust On The Decks”, “Yours Sincerely”.

I saw the rain was easing and was halfway to the door when I stopped. Some small thing tugged me back. What was it? *What?* And then I knew. The opening track on Side Two. “Kite In The Sky”. An additional track. *The Green*, at least every copy of *The Green* that I’d ever seen or owned or played or heard, only had ten tracks. And “Kite In The Sky”? I’d never heard of it, either by Clay Lake or anyone else. Of course, I knew that several of their songs first emerged as demos under different titles – but this rang no bells at all. It meant nothing to me, and I was sure I’d never seen any reference to it in written accounts of Clay Lake’s music and career.

My fingers were trembling as I picked up the album again. I took the record from its sleeve and looked closely at the circular maroon-and-gold label: “Kite In The Sky”. I gave it to the young woman behind the counter and asked if she could play the first track on Side Two for me. She lowered the stylus on to the disc.

‘Yeah, that sounds fine,’ I said, casually, as the closing chords faded away. ‘Not too many scratches. How much is it again?’

‘£4.99,’ she said. ‘Do you want a bag? Looks like it might rain again.’

‘I’m only just round the corner,’ I said, handing her a £5.00 note. ‘At The Mulberry Hotel. But maybe you’re right...I wouldn’t want it to get wet.’

She put the album into a promotional *Slipped Discs* carrier bag, and gave it to me with a smile.

‘There you go. You can have that on me.’

‘Thank you. Is this your shop?’

‘No...I just work here,’ she said. ‘Enjoy the record.’

I sat on the bed and reflected on the full significance of the last twenty minutes. “Kite In The Sky” was genuine: of that, I was certain. The yearning vocals of Marlon Valentino, Rik Rikowski’s chiming guitar work, Phil Burns’ lean, spare drumming, and the melodic bass lines of Julian H. Trent were unmistakable. Although I’d only heard it once, I felt it belonged, stylistically and chronologically, in the category occupied by songs like “Cambridge Scene” and “Beach House Boulevard” – mid-period, up-tempo tracks that were unashamedly commercial and perfectly-crafted. But alongside my elation, there were unexplained mysteries. When and where was the track recorded? Why had it stayed hidden for so long? How had it surfaced in a nondescript record shop on an apparently authentic copy of *The Green*? Who had been the LP’s original owner? And what should I do now?

I decided to ring Linda to tell her my news.

‘Well, that’s just great, David. I’m very happy for you. And I’ve got some news. I may as well tell you now. I won’t be here when you get back.’

I wasn’t surprised. Relieved, if anything. Easy come, easy go.

‘OK,’ I said, and hung up.

I lay back on the bed and closed my eyes. I must have nodded off for several minutes, and was snapped back into consciousness by the ringing of the telephone on the bedside table.

‘I’ve had a gentleman on the phone, asking to speak to the person who just purchased a record from *Slipped Discs*,’ said the receptionist.

‘What makes you think that might be me?’ I asked, warily.

‘I noticed you had one of their bags when you came in a little while ago, sir. I haven’t told him anything...just that I’d ask around among our guests. Shall I call him back, or would you prefer not to speak to him?’

‘Did he say what it was about?’

‘No.’

‘Did he give his name?’

‘No.’

‘I think,’ I said slowly, ‘that I’d prefer not to speak to him.’

‘Certainly, sir. If he calls again, I’ll tell him that none of our guests have visited the shop. I’m sorry to have bothered you.’

I ate in the hotel restaurant that evening and went up to my room before nine o’clock. There were no more telephone calls. In the morning, I checked out before breakfast, dropped the car off, caught an early train to London, and from there, back home.

The only person I’ve ever met who knows more about Clay Lake than I do is Matt Carter, a friend since school days. Three days after returning home from Brighton, I ran into him in the bar of The Red Lion. When I told him Linda had left me he said, ‘Well, that’s what you get if you live with a woman whose musical tastes run to Sting, Rod Stewart, and Queen.’ When we eventually got round to Clay Lake, I was cautious in what I said to him.

‘I thought I’d come across an interesting bootleg a few weeks ago,’ I began. ‘*Sky Of Kites* or something like that – but when I took a look, it was just the usual collection of demos and alternate takes. Have you heard of it?’

'No, can't say I have. I don't think, after all this time, there's any material we haven't already heard.'

'Yeah, I guess you're right. Pity, though,' I said. 'It would have been nice to find something new.'

'It would. Another pint?'

I'm not sure why, but I've tried to limit my playing of "Kite In The Sky". But each time I've allowed myself to listen to it, I've grown more confident in my assessment of the track. It would have been an ideal single. More than that, its extended closing chorus, '*Like a kite in the sky, I'm aching to fly*', would have made it the perfect song to end a live performance. I still worry about the strange phone call from *Slipped Discs*. Maybe it was perfectly innocent. Had I left something behind? Did the sales assistant want to tell me about other Clay Lake albums in the shop? But I couldn't escape the nagging fear that the shop owner had realised his mistake in allowing the LP to be sold and now wanted it back. Whatever the explanation, I tried to push it to the back of my mind. But I still faced the problem I'd posed myself in Brighton. What should I do now?

I decided to test the waters by ringing the offices of *Groove!*, one of the country's more knowledgeable monthly music magazines. I was eventually put through to a young man who introduced himself as a rock historian.

'So what's the song called?' he asked.

'It's called "Kite In The Sky". I found it on a copy of Clay Lake's *The Green* album.'

'No, no,' he said. 'Let me stop you there, mate. There's no song of that name on the album. I think you've made a mistake.'

'I don't think you understand,' I tried to explain. 'I know that track isn't on the album. That's precisely why I'm calling you.'

'Hang on a minute,' he said.

After a few seconds, he came back on the line.

'OK. Yeah. Sorry, mate, I don't really think we can help you with that. Now if it were a lost Beatles track...'

'You're not interested in an unknown Clay Lake song surfacing ten years after they disbanded?'

'Well, we've only got your word for it that it's genuine. Might be someone imitating them. Have you ever heard of tribute bands?'

I put the telephone down without answering.

In the last few weeks, I've made a decision. For a while, I was thinking about contacting the local radio station to ask if they wanted to interview me and play the track. I thought I should give everyone the chance to hear it and enjoy it. But now I've changed my mind. For all I know, I might be the only person in the world to possess a copy of "Kite In The Sky". The more I think about that, the more I like it. And I've realised something else: I don't want to share it. Why should I? I found it, I recognised it. It's mine. In a way that's hard to explain, the song brings me closer to the band. Not everyone would understand. Linda, for example. But Matt would. And I think most Clay Lake fans would, too. They'd understand. They wouldn't resent me for not sharing it. They'd envy me, of course. But they'd understand. If they love the band's music as much as I do, if they've enjoyed *The Green* as much as I have, if Clay Lake mean as much to them as they do to me, they'd understand.

Ian Inglis was born in Stoke-on-Trent and now lives in Newcastle upon Tyne. As Reader in Sociology and Visiting Fellow at Northumbria University, he has written several books and many articles around topics within popular culture. He is also a writer of fiction, and his short stories have appeared in numerous anthologies and literary magazines, including *Prole*, *Popshot*, *Litro*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *Riptide*, *The Frogmore Papers*, and *Bandit Fiction*.



