



# Terence Blacker

...saved by a song

Photo: Albanpics

**“...I don’t see writing a song or writing a novel as different things. Writing and singing songs is just another way of telling stories, conveying feelings, asking questions, and now and then expressing opinions...”**

I first met Terence Blacker six or seven years ago when he did a floor spot at the Everyman Folk Club near Woodbridge in Suffolk. Like many other floor spots that night, he was a man of a certain age accompanying himself on the guitar. All the more surprising, or not, then, that one of his songs that night was called *Sad Old Bastards With Guitars* about ageing singers who still hope they are going to “make it” and imagine they are still capable of “pulling the birds”. Neither of which, of course, are remotely likely.

Terence’s songs are intelligent, witty and often satirical, but what struck me as much as his lyrics was his accompanying guitar style. The singer-guitarist he reminded me of most was the French chansonnier, Georges Brassens. I had a chat with Terence that night and told him this. Apparently, other people had compared him to our very own Jake Thackray and even Jacques Brel, but both were way off the mark as far as I was concerned; I’d been familiar with and loved Brassens’ songs for 30 or so years.

The other song Terence sang that evening was *I’d Rather Be French*, about the oh-so-English Guy Wittingham-Smith and his wife, who moved to France to make a new life for themselves but, for some inexplicable reason, didn’t quite fit in. So, does Terence have a French connection I wondered? “Yes, I ran away from England and Englishness in 1973 and lived in Paris for 18 months or so. I did think briefly about making my life in France but, even before I was a writer, I sensed that I needed the unique mess that is the United Kingdom to give me material - and energy. I think France would have been too pleasurable to be entirely good for me.”

Since that first meeting, we’ve welcomed Terence to our folk club in Hadleigh on several occasions and he has never disappointed our audiences. He appeals to folk club audiences not because he’s a typical folksy but because they identify with his good-natured, fun-poking and occasionally cruel portrayal of 21st century mores and attitudes. After all, the English are naturally, often hypocritically, self-deprecating, and audiences love to be mocked, especially if the performer himself belongs to the target group. I saw him most recently performing alongside Virginia Ironside - the ex-Daily Mail agony aunt. Between them they spent the evening in song and spoken word taking a humorous look at the ageing process. The audience - mostly of a similar age - lapped it up.

But there is a lot more to Terence Blacker than a sad old bastard with a guitar. He has been a professional author and columnist since he was in his thirties, turning to song-writing and performing about 10 years ago. When I interviewed him, he told me how he combined his life as a writer and a musician. “For me, it’s all writing. I don’t see writing a song or writing a novel as different things. Writing and singing songs is just another way of telling stories, conveying feelings, asking questions, and now and then expressing opinions. Music has always been an important part of my life. I taught myself the guitar in my teens and I’ve played gigs since I was in my thirties. For years, I saw it as fun, therapy - an escape from the serious business of earning a living, and in a way, I rather regret that lost songwriting time.”

In addition to this creative writing element, Terence increasingly enjoys performing: “As I’ve got

older, I’ve turned more and more to music. I’ve realised that the one thing which was missing for me when writing books was performing - and the contact that brings with an audience. I used to love going into schools and talking about my children’s books but, apart from that, writing was a solitary business. What I love about playing my songs is what I get back from audiences. That’s why there’s quite a lot of chat in my shows - talking about the journey to a song is almost part of it. It’s a great pleasure and privilege to get an audience laughing - or being moved. I often feel that a song hasn’t completed its journey until it has been performed several times. Some songs, which sound just great at home, don’t quite catch when exposed to the outside world. Others, which feel nothing special when played to yourself, take on a new life when performed.”

The folk scene is a very broad church and has always featured musicians of all kinds, from ultra-traditional unaccompanied solo singers, to angst-ridden young singer-songwriters, and from folk rock ceilidh bands to earnest or humorous poets. I wondered how Terence saw himself fitting into this scene. “In many ways the folk scene is amazing. In our manic, technology-obsessed world, I love the way songs and tradition are surviving and being celebrated in upstairs rooms in pubs and community centres across the country. All that musical knowledge, all that singing! Now and then there are evenings at clubs when there’s an extraordinary atmosphere of people celebrating the power of song down the years. The thing about my songs is that they reflect the way I feel and think. I come at things from a bit of an angle, like the songwriters I admire - Randy Newman, Dan Hicks, Jake Thackray, Gillian Welch and Ray Davies. So if I want to write about a mean bastard, as in my song, *First World Blues*, I might write in the voice of the mean bastard, as he justifies his meanness.

*“When there’s an earthquake, I try to donate, When I go to my church, I put change in the plate, I’m just saying, It’s always me who’s paying.”*

“I think that’s more interesting than simply looking at the mean bastard from the outside and saying how terrible he is. Traditional folk is obviously more direct, and so sometimes folkie fundamentalists are wary of that approach. All that said, some of my best nights have been at folk clubs and I love the way that each of them has its own character and style. And they are always on the side of the singer. And there’s a real democracy there - audience, floor singers, guest are all in it together. In this age of celebrity, that’s rare.”

It’s quite obvious that Terence has no great love of hollow celebrity and, in his song, *Young Girl With A Ukulele*, he mocks our star-struck culture which creates and venerates stars with the flimsiest of talents. (Though I have to add that the song itself tells only part of the story. Download and read the free Kindle story version for a very different and surprising interpretation.) Is this a kind of bitterness? In another of his songs, *The Thoughts Of An Average Man* from an earlier album, *Enough About Me*, he picks up the theme of the cynical thoughts of a disappointed musician contemplating the success of others. Is Terence mocking himself, for any such unworthy feelings? This is the song’s chorus:

*“Not that I am bitter,  
Not that I give a damn  
I’m just sitting here in my old armchair  
With the thoughts of an average man.”*

In addition to playing folk clubs and festivals, Terence has played in arts centres, pubs and theatres. He’s done the Edinburgh Fringe, played in Germany and toured New Zealand. Although he usually performs solo, he has recorded four albums of his own songs, some of which feature other musicians.

His latest album, *Playing For Time*, reviewed in Issue 133 of *The Living Tradition*, features a great band of European musicians. The whole experience was joyful and exhilarating and Terence is pleased with the results. He explains how this collaboration came about: “A couple of years ago, I did a gig in Freiburg with the brilliant German accordionist,

Hartmut Saam. We got on so well, personally and musically, that he suggested that I should record my next album in Cilento in southern Italy where he lives. So last autumn I spent a week in a town called Policastro Bussentino and, in a studio near there, I recorded nine songs on the new album. It was a fantastic experience. We had brilliant professional musicians - in addition to Hartmut there was Giovanni Rago on guitar, Domenico de Marco on drums, Fortunata Monzo doing vocals, and Giovanni Crescenzi on bass. We had a brilliant engineer called Mario Perazzo on the desk. Then I took all the tracks, in quite a raw form, back to David Booth at his Recording Booth studio in Suffolk where we finished the recording and final mixing."

Given his prolific output, I was interested to find out more about the song-writing process for Terence. To my question, "What comes first, the words or the music?" he replied: "I find the process of writing songs completely fascinating and often frustrating. Sometimes it starts with a musical phrase. Or a rhythm that you want to catch. Now and then it's an overheard phrase, or half an idea that you want to tease out. At any one time, I'll have words that are in search of the right melody and, annoyingly, tunes that need words. What's strange to me is that, as a writer, one is never quite in control. When you follow a lyric or a melody, you don't know where it's going to end up - if it ends up anywhere. An idea that you think is going to be funny may become a tearjerker along the way. Something rather heartfelt turns into a comedy song. The finished song that you arrive at is rarely where you expected to end up when you set out. Then, just occasionally, a song will come to you out of nowhere and is quickly done, as if someone was conducting in your brain. There are a couple of those on *Playing For Time*."

Common themes which recur in his songs include personal feelings, relationships, Englishness, middle-class stupidities, the ageing process and what I might call very loosely political thoughts, as in *Europa Mein Amour*, for me the outstanding song from the latest



Photo: Mike Wells

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album. When I asked Terence to comment on the themes I'd identified, he was non-committal. "I'm not sure a writer should self-analyse too much. The themes find me rather than my looking for them. Writing songs, maybe all writing, is an attempt to convey what it's like being you at a particular moment. Sometimes that can be funny, or sad, or angry, or a bit of each. But the main thing is to produce songs that entertain. Luckily the subjects which interest me have appealed to audiences too. The themes change over time, too. *Playing For Time* is more personal than the previous three albums. I have no idea where future songs may take me. As for being political, I've written other songs that have a satirical edge - *First World Blues* is about selfishness, *Family History* is about the way class brings power to the same people generation after generation - but I tend not to come at these things head on. I'll tell a story about them, or invent a character, rather than get on a soap-box. I was upset by Brexit,

where I thought - and still think - that Britain is on the wrong side of history, but I'm not the person to write an angry song savaging Nigel Farage or Boris Johnson. When we were all exhausted by the rows over Europe, I decided to write a song that was simply sad about what was being lost."

The chorus is a farewell to Britain's membership of what many still consider to be a power for good in the world.

*"Adios, auf Wiedersehen, Europa, mein amour. Maybe you'll miss me But I know I'll miss you more. How I wish we could remain Together down the years But that's all passed So let's raise a glass And say skål, saluti, cheers."*

Terence homes in on many aspects of modern life, and comments, usually humorously, on how he sees them or they affect him. *I Can't Call My Baby 'Baby'*, from *Enough About Me*,

is a wry reflection on rules of political correctness which try to govern how modern men should address women. Terence lists "twentieth century names" that he is not allowed to call his woman, including "honey bunch", "pussy pie" and "snuggle-bum". It's difficult not to smile.

*Fake News*, from *Playing For Time*, was inspired by an advert Terence found on Facebook. It read, "Gorgeous Asian Women are looking for older men in Beccles." If you know Beccles, you'll realise how unlikely this is.

*"Well, I was online, feeling fine When these words are what I found. They read 'Lovely Asian women Are in your local town. Koreans, Thais and Filipinas With pleasing ways and shy demeanours, And every oriental queen has A thing for the older guy.'*

*So I went on down to my local town, My heart was in a whirl. I looked in Browns the Butcher for an oriental girl.*

**"...In our manic, technology-obsessed world, I love the way songs and tradition are surviving and being celebrated in upstairs rooms in pubs and community centres across the country. All that musical knowledge, all that singing!..."**

*But there was no Korean at the old Co-op, No Malaysian miss at the Oxfam Shop, No Bangkok babe at the town bus stop Then someone told me why.*

*(It was) Fake news, fake news I felt my poor heart break news. 'Cos how can you ever know what's really true? When wrong is right and black is white, It just depends on how you feel. 'Cos everything is fake news That's the only thing that's real."*

I wish I could write more about Terence's excellent, thought-provoking songs, but many of them are on YouTube and his website, which also features the lyrics of all the songs on his latest album. Terence has been especially busy during lockdown, livestreaming his weekly Monday Escape and has written a characteristically acerbic song called *Everyday Hero* about what we've been up to. The chorus celebrates "sitting on me arse for England." On his videos, he

always takes the trouble to provide us with interesting background information or to make a relevant comment.

I realise that asking a musician about their plans for the future might seem a little futile in the current circumstances, but I'm presuming that our present incarceration will eventually come to an end and that public performances will return, but despite this, I asked Terence about his long-term musical ambitions. His reply shows him to be a realistic and modest musician with an admirable attitude to what he does: "I'll just keep on writing songs and performing them if I'm asked to. If I'm not writing, I'm an empty husk, a waste of space. Of course, I'd like to get the songs to as wide an audience as possible - I'd love them to be covered by other artists - but writing and performing is my real pleasure. I've also wanted for some time to write a biography on Jake Thackray, who would be a fascinating subject. I've been told,

unfortunately that one is currently being written."

I ended with a question I tend to ask almost all my interviewees: "Is it really worthwhile making physical CDs at a time when music is increasingly consumed in download form?" Again, Terence's answer makes it very clear that he sees writing and performing songs primarily as a source of creative enjoyment. "I don't really care how the music is consumed, as long as people are hearing the songs. I've done four albums since 2012 - that's about one every two years. It's worthwhile as long as I enjoy writing the songs and others enjoy listening to them."

Terence's website:  
[www.terenceblacker.com](http://www.terenceblacker.com)

Terence's YouTube Channel:  
[www.youtube.com/user/brd30](http://www.youtube.com/user/brd30)

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