

Drifting back into focus

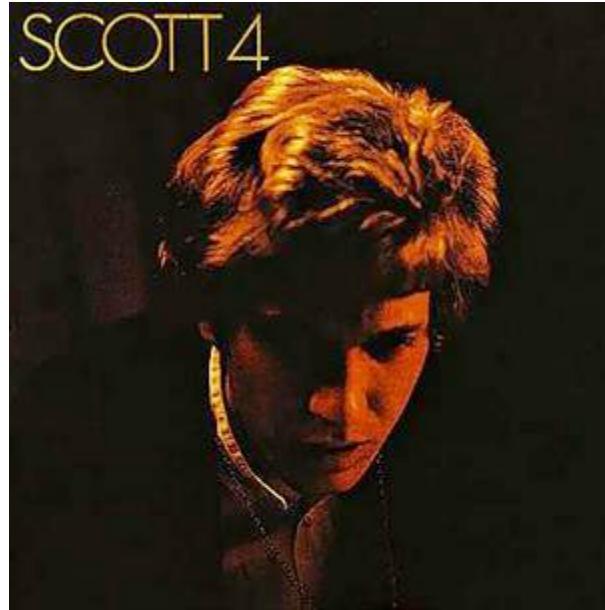
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Scott Walker once sang about the "30 Century Man". He himself is the 11-year man, writes Mark Sawyer.

This is a story about what the sane survivors of '60s pop stardom do. They don't all prance around stadiums or ply the nostalgia circuit, be it Copacabana Beach or the local leagues club. One of them surveys much wider horizons. He waits until his 50th year as a recording artist to unveil an album which, even before its official release on May 8 was being hailed - and strongly contested - as a career high. It will certainly set a new trail of clues for the bloodhounds to follow - a conga line of devotees stretching from Bowie and U2 to Radiohead and Goldfrapp.

This is a story about Scott Walker, but you're not really going to be able to trust everything I say about him. The information is reliable, eliminating some of the stories that got better with the telling, and the opinions honestly held, but there can be no orderly narrative. Walker defies any attempts at this; in fact he transcends anything written about him, whether in the pop magazines devoured by teenagers, mainly girls, in the 1960s or the predominantly male internet obsessives of today. The raves of fellow musicians and the indifference of the wider public, who long ago decided they wanted only a bite-size piece of the Walker musical stew, are as one to him. The records released in his name run the gamut of interpretations. What is one to believe: an album title such as *Fire Escape in the Sky - the Godlike Genius of Scott Walker* or the album with liner notes that breezily discuss the "slow decline" of his career?

I bought the latter record in 1981, my first Scott Walker purchase. It was the only record I could find in Sydney of a singer who was getting some generous retrospectives in my three-month old copies of Britain's *New Musical Express* and *Melody Maker*. I was compelled to check it out, despite its aura of defeat. The album was on the (already defunct) Philips label's Rock Legends



No regrets ... Scott Walker in 1969

series, with cheap-o lettering, gaudy artwork and vague, misleading liner notes and recording information. When compared with the lavish, laminated gatefold sleeves that Philips had afforded the artist when he was a selling act, the package was shabby. Luckily the music wasn't. If the word "widescreen" applied those days as an adjective, it was this. The audacious combination of full-blown orchestral backings for stark lyrical themes made the music I had been hearing in my first 20 years suddenly seem wan, pallid. It was jaw-droppingly bold, layered in grandeur and pathos, witty, vulgar, despairing and life-affirming all at once. The lyrical themes evoked Europe, sitting way outside the parameters of British, American and Australian pop. The song characters, sad people in drab flats, forlorn spinsters, wallflowers, rogues and suburban Walter Mittys, were drawn with the novelistic scope of a Paul Simon, Leonard Cohen, Lou Reed or a David Bowie (my suddenly deposed favourite singer), but with many a surreal twist. "So straight yet so bent at the same time," as an Australian musician, the late Steve Connolly, told me many years later.

The cryptic liner notes hinted that I was listening to a 1968 album by Scott Walker called *Scott 2*. He's not very imaginative, I thought. Luckily, the music ...

Try this on for a career, aspiring singers ...

Teens, Hollywood - teenage balladeer, many singles, all flops. Twenties, England: front trio of pretend brothers, become big star, top the singles charts. Magazine covers, minor crack-up, solo career, top the album charts, TV show. Alienate fanbase. Thirties, England: Establish permanent exile from US. Career slide. Abandon songwriting, rely on golden voice but public forsakes you. Reunite with former bandmates, see chart action for last time. As your group implodes, launch a new phase of career - doomy, non-pop music. Forties: famous fans cite your influence, record one album. Fifties: more praise from famous fans, record another album and work on some soundtracks. Sixties: fans both famous and lesser await first album in 11 years. It's May 2006, and you deliver.

That album, *The Drift*, is Scott Walker's first in 11 years, his third in 28 years. An output of roughly one song a year in that time. But this is a man who has been upping his work rate. In the past decade he has written two ambitious suites for Ute Lemper, worked on a film soundtrack with Nick Cave and recorded a song for a James Bond film. His 1969 song *30 Century Man*, a signature tune if ever Walker had one (but no *My Way*), surfaced on the soundtrack to *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* and lends its name to an upcoming documentary. At 63, and 49 years into his recording career - he hasn't performed in public since

1978 - few fans or critics would bet Scott Walker has peaked, except as in chart success.

To return to, and flesh out, the narrative of Noel Scott Engel, born Ohio, 1943:

It's 1950s Hollywood and you are a teenager recording teen ballads for Mr Liz Taylor, Eddie Fisher. You are still doing that as the '60s roll around, but no one pegs you for stardom and you drift into musical sideman jobs as a bass player. Gary Leeds, one of the fast-talking cats you meet, is just back from playing drums for a trouser-splitting guy named P.J. Proby in England. He says Blighty is the place to find fame, and the pair of you, along with John Maus, a tall handsome fella with a fine tenor to complement your baritone, bounce into swinging but chilly London, February 1965. Engel, Leeds and Maus become the Walker Brothers. Taking your initial sound from the Righteous Brothers, then incorporating soul, show standards and beat pop, you are placed in the care of some of the best band leaders in the music biz and run a string of hits up the British charts. *My Ship is Coming In*: No.3. *Make it Easy on Yourself*: No.1. *The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore*: No.1. Girls pull your hair and try to drag you off stage. You become the soundtrack of many a life (and death: your biggest hit is playing on the jukebox as one of the Kray twins, Ron, shoots George Cornell at the Blind Beggar pub in London's East End in March 1966. Some accounts have the ricocheting bullet stopping the record).

Death stalks you, too. Fame is all too much, and '60s London isn't all dolly birds and Aston Martins. You quarrel with your bandmates and you are found unconscious in a gas-filled flat.

As you take in more arty influences, your group's sound becomes more formulaic and the public lose interest. 1966 becomes 1967. Pop becomes druggy and psychedelic while your group looks clean-cut and unfashionable, even if you are writing more experimental songs. You are hapless bystanders at one of the clock-chimes as "pop" becomes "rock", two months before the Beatles usher in the album era with *Sgt Pepper's*. It happens when you top the bill on Jimi Hendrix's first big British tour, one of the last of the old-style mixed bill roadshows that played theatres with names like Gaumont and Odeon in a virtual last gasp of vaudeville. Hendrix is "tomorrow", you are "yesterday". Luckily there is just enough "today" left for you to launch a solo recording career (your fan club is bigger than the Beatles'). And a girlfriend has given you a life-changing gift: a record by a Belgian singer named Jacques Brel.

The sardonic, fiercely anti-clerical, chain-smoking Brel fitted into Walker's burgeoning European sensitivities perfectly. He was refusing to perform in America because of the Vietnam War; Walker was keeping clear of the draft.

Brel wrote songs about prostitutes, drunks and sailors, tedious minor bureaucrats, puffed-up provincials, the grasping relatives of the dying, faithless women (he had a misogynist streak), the "low, grey skies" of the Low Countries; bullfights from the bull point of view. His favourite topic became the title of one of his songs: *La Mort*. Relying on the (latterly controversial) English translations of Brel by American songwriter Mort Schuman, Walker recorded it as *My Death* on his first album, and then performed it on *The Billy Cotton Band Show*. An audience out for a luvvly night's entertainment were treated to lyrics such as "My death waits there between your thighs / Your cool fingers will close my eyes." It was a cross-cultural mindboggler cited increasingly by today's fans of bizarre musical moments. You can't compare that with anything that could happen in these post-ironic times.

THE MUSIC

Scott Walker could sing. And he could write songs. And in three years at the end of the '60s he recorded five albums that represented the Everest that Bowie, Nick Cave, Marc Almond, Pulp's Jarvis Cocker, Divine Comedy's Neil Hannon and a host of others have tried to climb.

Walker was dubbed a the Sinatra of the streets, even the psychedelic Sinatra, but that was always too glib. He preferred Jack Jones and Tony Bennett in any case, and his focus was a world apart from flower power, which he disdained.

* *Scott*, released in September 1967, just four months after the Walker Brothers imploded, confirmed Walker as the biggest solo star in Britain. It is a mature work (he was only 24), marred only by a couple of bows to his middle-of-the-road fanbase. The first three of nine songs Walker recorded by Brel are here, and the thunderous clarion call of the Belgian's *Mathilde* is up there with the great debut album openers.

* *Scott 2* saw the mix of anthemic originals, Brel and (sometimes) sympathetic covers (Tim Hardin; Bacharach/David) taken to its apogee. It fought off the cream (and Cream) of the '60s rockocracy to top the British album charts for a week in 1968.

* However skewed his take on romance, Walker had been operating within the parameters of the love ballad, but on *Scott 3* (1969) his characters have succumbed to severely diminished circumstances and are living in a wintry world of lost love, lost opportunities. The "fire escape in the sky" song, *Big Louise*, about an ageing, lonely transvestite, was given its orchestral backing by a man who went on to have a sex change (and a hugely successful career in the US, Angela Morley). The 10 originals are the most impressive stretch of songs thus far. Walker was listening

to Debussy, while the Brel influence was fading.

British fans took *Scott 3* to No. 3 but it dropped out of the charts after only four weeks. Too bleak. At a stroke, Walker's mass audience deserted him. As popular music fragmented into pop, rock and innumerable subgroups, Scott was stranded with his balladeer's image. The first response of his management and record company was to dig him a deeper hole. He was steered into hosting his own television variety show, on which he duetted with Dusty Springfield; an album of show tunes, *Scott Sings Songs from His TV Series*, was rushed out and went UK Top 10.

His record company, Philips, as later insiders have admitted, was utterly indifferent to any pretensions of artistic excellence. But the TV series gave him some breathing space to work on his third album of 1969, and first entirely self-penned work, *Scott 4*. The 10 terse songs came out under his own name, Noel Scott Engel.

Flinty, funky, with massed male voices, and a touch of mariachi . . . and that was just *Scott 4*'s opening track, *The Seventh Seal*, inspired by Ingmar Bergman's 1957 film.

Orchestration was jettisoned for sparse strings and shades of guitar - making *Scott 4*, an exceptionally strong collection, the closest Walker has come to recording a conventional pop-rock album.

Lyrically there was as much bite as ever - a young man loving an old (not just older) woman; Russian tanks in Prague; a crippled soldier's isolation - but no-one was buying.

Bowing to record company pressure, Scott allowed his new manager, Ady Semel, to steer him towards the middle of the road. *'Til the Band Comes In* (1970) featured the first easy-listening covers since *Scott 2*, but also a suite of original songs based on the lonely inhabitants of a block of flats. They varied from quasi-Walker Brothers balladry through country and western to moments of captivating stillness.

A thoughtful compilation, *Boychild*, collates the best Walker originals from the golden era and adds *The Plague*, a torrid 1967 B-side which could be called psychedelic Sinatra.

THE MUSIC - LATER YEARS

Any profile of Scott Walker contains colossal lacunae where he simply ceased to exist in the public eye. One marriage, one daughter, some trouble with booze, but no real scandals. He

simply disappeared for long stretches, and was forgotten for much of the 1970s. He recorded nothing original as the singer-songwriter boom of the early 1970s took off, and there is no entry for him in any of the rock encyclopedias of that era - *Rolling Stone*, *New Musical Express*.

Walker returned from a long spell in the creative wilderness in 1978. He had confessed to an interviewer that he was blown away by the likes of Joni Mitchell and Randy Newman - he could not match them and therefore had no more songs to write. It was his contrary spirit that wrenched four new songs out of him. The Walker Brothers had made a briefly successful comeback on the back of a Top 10 hit, Tom Rush's *No Regrets*. But this had been followed up with two dreary albums and no more hits, and the trio again sank into obscurity. They reconvened to record a third album, *Nite Flights*, as their record label announced it was going out of business. Suddenly, with nothing to lose, Scott unveiled four songs that shifted the direction of his career. One, *The Electrician*, apparently about South American torturers, and drawing the ecstatic connection between sex and death, came to the attention of David Bowie and Brian Eno, who sought a collaboration. (You can also blame Scott for Ultravox's tedious hit *Vienna* - Midge Ure said it was inspired by *The Electrician*.) Employing stark, menacing and rockier musical backings, with a bit of John Lee Hooker thrown in, Walker swapped narrative songwriting for terse, menacing couplets. It set the stage for the following albums, 1984's *Climate of Hunter* and 1995's *Tilt*. The latter, while having its fierce critics, is a breathtakingly ambitious work, one which astounds me at every (frequent) listen, but one which defies easy analysis (so *listen*).

If the internet buzz surrounding *The Drift* is any indication, it will land with a bigger and better reception than its 1995 predecessor. In Sydney, the one radio station that might have been expected to champion *Tilt*, 2JJJ, gave the title track a spin in a feature on new releases, but then left it alone. The British press gave it some nice reviews but most end of year round-ups placed it behind such stayers as Tricky, the Charlatans and Elastica. But David Bowie's late 1995 album, *1.Outside*, was widely seen as being influenced by *Tilt*.

"Scotty Engel" recorded his first single, *When is a Boy a Man*, for the RKO label at the age of 14. An extended play was released in Australia in 1958. (His only Australian tour was as part of a "Far East" swing via Singapore and Japan with the Walkers in January 1967.) He had 17 flop singles before the Walkers hit big. It may well be that the "slow decline" has been a slow ascent.

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