

Michael Marra: bard & sage

To the left of us fly the monkeys in the trees

And to the right of us flows a stream

To the back of us, old foolish notions

And ahead of us lie our dreams

- "Constable le Clock"

Michael Marra was born in Dundee, Scotland in 1952 and died there in 2012.

He spent three years on and off in London in his late twenties, but apart from that he lived in or near his birthplace. Singer-songwriter, actor, artist, playwright, and theatrical composer, he was often on the road, but family, home, and friends mattered more than recognition or commercial success. Rooting his work in the familiar, he drew on the local and particular to craft tunes with universal themes.

Michael and his four siblings grew up in the working class neighbourhood of Lochee. Music and conversation lay at the heart of family life. The singer Sheena Wellington, also from Lochee, said that the Marras "had a faith, an ethic, and a working-class decency which Michael grew up with. . . . He knew what was right, what was wrong, and in the middle was compassion."

What Marra didn't have was patience at school. Rebellious, mischievous, and truant, he was encouraged by school authorities to leave at fourteen. Working at a series of jobs, he started soloing in folk clubs and playing with bands like Hen's Teeth and Skeets Boliver. When the latter split up, he went south to London under contract with Polydor.

Commuting from Scotland, he wrote and recorded two albums. The first was successful enough, but Polydor never released the second. Inevitably, Marra began to resent the label's interference in his work, especially when it objected to Scottish diction and references in his lyrics. Fed up, he left London behind. He'd married at twenty, and by the early-1980s he and his wife Peggy had a daughter and a son. In 1985 he released an album entitled *Gaels Blue*, signaling his commitment to Scotland:

Gaels blue

We've been weighed up and found to be true

Though we never had the Chevys or the Baptist church

We had a choice of colours for a broken crutch – we'll do

Whatever it is that we do

You can ask the driver on the glory train

We're singing

Up to heaven and home again

Gaels blue

He released five studio albums in his lifetime, two concert albums, and three EPs. The final EP was recorded with The Hazey Janes, a Dundee-based group comprising four musicians, including his daughter Alice and son Matthew. Since his death, the second Polydor recording has been made available, as well as a third concert album (*High Sobriety: Live at the Bonar Hall*), and Alice has released a full-length interpretation of her father's music, *Chain Up the Swings*.

But Marra's achievements went far beyond recording and touring. He acted on stage and in film and television, and he collaborated with many other artists. Above all, he worked in radio and theatre, writing some of his most inventive and haunting songs for the stage. He was restless, kinetic, and insightful, and he'd turn his hand to anything, including visual art and short story writing.

In the five years before his death, Marra, essentially self-educated, received two honorary doctorates, one from the University of Dundee, the other from Glasgow Caledonian University. Sheena Wellington delivered the laureation address at Dundee:

Mention Michael Marra to anyone who has worked with him and you find both huge respect for his music and deep affection for this gentle gifted man. He has given numerous concerts for charities, and in his own quiet understated way he has been a constant supporter of the fight for justice and the right of people to live free from fear and want. . . . Michael Marra sits awkwardly as his home city's bard, a troubadour voice for the working-class heart of an increasingly cosmopolitan town . . .

There's a photograph of Marra scrubbed up for his day at the uni. He looks very happy.

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Marra's voice has been likened to "gravel stirred in melting chocolate." It is rich, gritty, and complex, and you can hear a range of styles in his work. There are simple, straightforward melodies, but also tunes that fold in elements of jazz, rock, pop, reggae, hymnody, music hall, and musical theatre. Sometimes,

as a musician friend of mine says, “his voice bends pitches at odds with the scale he’s using” – intentionally – and the results can be seriously dissonant.

As for his lyrics, they are characteristically sympathetic, especially to those who are damaged, broken, or poor. They are also smart, playful, and funny, reflecting a keen sense of how the absurd and incongruous show up, common as onions, in daily life. There is sadness in some of the tunes, but also an optimism and a faith in people, if not in institutions. There is light behind the darkness: “*When the shining light comes in,*” “*We were all flooded with a scarlet light,*” “*There must be a twinkling seam of Love,*” and “*Big light must shine on someone / May as well be me and you.*”

He had no desire to write about himself – there’s nothing confessional in his songs – but he’d take on anything else: a football player, the Battle of Culloden, amoeba, Mary Queen of Scots, gossip, admirable Englishmen (Thomas Paine, Stanley Spencer, and Harold Pinter among them), dreary and puritanical old-time religion, a soldier’s execution by firing squad, and Frida Kahlo’s imagined and beautifully surreal afterlife visit to one of the songwriter’s favourite bars in Dundee. He read systematically and thoughtfully, and his mind ranged far, wide, and deep. But always, even when he was enraged by an act of injustice or meanness, there was a kindness and solidarity in his lyrics:

*Sometimes when the night winds blow and
Whispers make their way
When reputations can be lost or found
And a kind word leads to solid ground
O mercy then befriend us
To temper all we’re told
Lead us to the fold*

*In this Heaven
Far from above
Those who have stumbled and fallen
Need our Love

- "The Fold"*

*o fellow man
blessed is he who must with dance band sing
who with twinkling eye will rainbow climb
though he may stumble or even fall sometimes,
we all sometimes
lose control of the ball sometimes
unless we pass it on to our Fellow man

- "O Fellow Man"*

Sometimes fantastic, romantic, or whimsical, his work remains grounded in the grit and pulse of life. While volunteering at a prison, he wrote:

*When you hold a photograph
The way you once held a gun
That's when you know that
Eternity has just begun*

And when Shirley McKie, the former Scottish police officer, was falsely accused of perjury and misconduct by senior police authorities, he stepped up:

*I am Shirley McKie
She is me and I am she
You are too, Shirley is you
We are she because Shirley is we*

*If we let her down imagine the view
If we do nothing like we usually do
Watching Justice's blindfold slip
To form a gag around her lips*

Some songwriters add words to music. Marra's words seem natural, not contrived or cut-to-fit. Words and music seem to arrive together, hand in hand, so it's all the more remarkable that his lyrics stand on their own and read so well on the page. Short poems, often narrative, they're fine by themselves.

Liz Lochhead, Scotland's former *makar* (poet, in the sense of poet laureate), was a close friend and collaborator. She wrote two poems with Marra in mind. The first, dedicated to him, was about Ira and George Gershwin and the alchemy required to find just the right words and music. The second, "The Optimistic Sound," was written in Michael's memory and begins:

*Today
one of the hundreds of friends at your funeral
was just desperate to tell me the story of when he first met you, . . .*

And journalist and broadcaster Leslie Riddoch, writing only hours after Marra's death, refers to him, as others have, as Scotland's contemporary Robert Burns. Driving south on Skye, she thinks: "*I'll bet there's hardly a village hall Michael hasn't visited. If there is, it's too late now. The man has passed on. Dundee has lost its bard. And Scotland has lost one of the few people who ever really understood it – kindness, squalor, hilarity, warts and all.*

Referring to his musical genius and stubborn refusal to be packaged, Riddoch writes that Marra was "driven by compassion, humanitarianism and a deep-seated fury at cruelty – whether it was the callous cruelty of war . . . or the

cruelty of men towards women.” Citing “Frida Kahlo’s Visit To the Taybridge Bar,” she notes Marra’s dislike of Kahlo’s man, Diego Rivera, and adds: “It’s hard to believe anyone but an abused woman could have written the lines,

There’ll be no more lies and no more tears

No more listening through the fat man’s ears

No more tears and no more lies

No more looking through the fat man’s eyes

• • •

James Robertson, poet, short story writer, novelist, and friend of Marra’s, was also traveling south when he learned of Michael’s death. “I was on a train to London when Marianne phoned to tell me the next morning. I sat with my head against the window pane and ‘cried like a baby in the darkest night.’”

Several months ago, Robertson published *Michael Marra: Arrest This Moment*, an unconventional biography of his friend. Part text, part Marra scrapbook, this labour of love is lively and fun but physically heavy with the coated stock suited to its dozens of images. There are pictures of Marra at every stage of life, and photos of family, pals, artwork, ticket stubs, posters, whatever meant something to him. Sometimes *Arrest This Moment* seems not so much a biography as an invitation to sit with old snaps, memorabilia, and tales.

Robertson said in an interview that Michael was sitting on his shoulder throughout *Arrest*, keeping him on his toes. And though family members actively supported the project, they ruled out any “straight A to Z biography.” “Being totally honest,” Robertson said, “we all thought Michael would have

resisted the idea of any book being written about him.” So what we get is a story rather than a standard biography. Robertson lets Marra speak for himself, and there are wonderful extended dialogues between author and subject in which we really hear the man. That these dialogues were invented – based on past kitchen conversations and things Michael had said elsewhere – just adds to the book’s playfulness, informality, and resonance. It’s an excellent read.

Robertson describes his friend’s “extreme antipathy to being told what to do and when to do it,” but also his humility. His maverick life didn’t come from pride or self-importance but the simple need to be what he was. “I wanted to be a songwriter of the old school,” he said. “I didn’t want my name in lights, I wanted it in brackets.” No labels, no flash, no ego. In 2000, a writer in *The Herald*, Scotland’s main newspaper, referred to Marra as “the Greatest Living Scotsman.” He must have winced: he read the papers daily.

Some of the most striking passages in *Arrest This Moment* are quotes from people who knew Michael:

Andy Pelc: “He loved the idea of instant creativity – of making something out of nothing. I think that actually explains a lot about him as a person, that he would make something out of the smallest wee thing. He would get angry about the smallest thing. He would make a musical piece about the smallest thing.”

Liz Lochhead: “He was a one-off. He turned everything upside down and made you see it differently. His way of looking at things was so exciting and illuminating. . . . Once you had known Michael, you wanted to conduct your life as much as possible as he conducted his, . . . An awful lot of people who knew Michael became better people because of knowing him.”

Karine Polwart, another singer-songwriter: "There's such humanity to Michael's songs, even when he's writing for laughs. He's expert at satire but doesn't sneer. . . . There's a tremendous positivity in a lot of the songs. . . . it's his humility and his humour and his humanity above all else that distinguish him."

And Iain McKie, Shirley's father, after Michael's death: "We knew that Scotland had lost one of its finest ambassadors for truth and justice. A man to whom we would be eternally grateful. A man of peace, unafraid to stand up against hypocrisy and the misuse of power."

At the same time, as Robertson says, Marra resisted being fenced in and harboured "a deep mistrust of the political system and of all political parties." Reluctant to join or declare for any camp, he remained unaffiliated. "There was something about having the freedom to pack up and go somewhere else that appealed to Michael, even if in other respects he was very much a home bird, happiest in his own place among his own family."

. . .

I saw him perform just once, in Leith, Edinburgh's port area, in 2006. A friend who had toured with Michael reserved tickets, and we bused and walked to the Leith Dockers Social Club for an evening with the man himself. I can't say for sure that it was the best concert I've attended, but it was definitely the most memorable. In addition to Marra's music and celebrated patter, we were treated to his quiet but intense silencing of a drunken misogynist in the room. Silencing may not be the right word, but he made it very clear where he stood on the subject of men and women and the sort of remarks he would not tolerate.

Something drew him to performance, despite a stage fright he couldn't shake. His advice to a young songwriter: "Breathe deeply for a while before you go on and feel confident about your material; you are entitled to do that because your stuff is good. Leave your real self in the dressing room and enjoy the gig. I am assuming of course that since you are a songwriter you are neurotic like myself."

In the mid-1990s, he wrote a song called "Houseroom." It didn't make the cut for his next album, *Posted Sober*, but fifteen years later, shortly before his death, he recorded it with The Hazy Janes. It had been written in response to the depravity of the Bosnian War and its killing streets:

*If you ever catch me moaning
Show me where to go
If it's how tough my life is
Singing on the radio

Don't give me houserom
Don't be polite
While some voice is silenced
For a loaf of bread in the dead of night

If you ever hear me grumbling –
Don't give me houserom
But a scornful look
As some soul makes a midnight sprint
Through a sniper's sights
For a library book*

In 2012, terminally ill, he wanted to go on record. Save your pity for the poor, he says, and for the oppressed and afflicted:

*If you ever catch me moaning
Show me where to go . . .
If you catch me spouting hatred
Firmly close the door . . .
Don't give me house room
Don't let me in
Don't let them tell you you're different
Because he's got a bungalow
And you've got a biscuit tin*

"He just kept getting better," his brother Chris said. "You can see the progression in his songwriting all the way through his records." And always there was Michael's wordcraft and love of verbal play: "Place any two independent artists in a room together," he said, "and they will produce trouble or love. I have seen both, and if those artists have a similar approach to their work, things can go from badinage to worse. I have witnessed metaphysical fights to the allegorical death over metaphorical punctuation and they have not been productive."

In the end, however, his subject and the wellspring of his work was love. Love of family, nature, companionship, learning, and life itself. From "Farlow":

*There's love in this world for everyone
Every rascal and son of a gun . . .
With every precious smile you make
And every act of kindness*

sources and works:

James Robertson's biography of his friend: *Michael Marra: Arrest This Moment*, Big Sky Press, October 2017;

studio albums: *The Midas Touch* (1980), *Dubiety* (recorded in the early 1980s but not released until 2017), *Gaels Blue* (1985), *On Stolen Stationery* (1991), *Candy Philosophy* (1993), *Posted Sober* (2000), *Silence* (EP, 2003), *Quintet* (EP, 2007), *Houseroom* (EP with The Hazey Janes, 2012);

live albums: *Pax Vobiscum* (1996), *High Sobriety (Live at the Bonar Hall*, recorded in 2000, released in 2017), and *Michael Marra With Mr McFall's Chamber* (2010);

music composed for the theatre: *They Fairly Mak Ye Work* (1986), *Witch's Blood* (1987), *A Wee Home From Home* (1988), and *The Mill Lavoies* (1998); these may be hard to find, but some of their tunes show up on the studio and live albums; in addition, Marra worked with Liz Lochhead on her version of *Beauty and the Beast*, and together they staged a revue, *In Flagrant Delicht*, off and on over the years; other theatrical works include *If the Moon Can Be Believed* (a comic operetta) and *Saint Catherine's Day*;

Alice Marra's *Chain Up the Swings* (2017);

selected audio-visual sources:

"All Will Be Well," a 29-minute video with interviews and performance clips; with Robertson's book, this is a brilliant place to start:

<https://www.musical1.com/michael-marra/youtube/9/michael-marra-all-will-be-well>

a short video of Marra and the late Martyn Bennett during their recording of the latter's "Liberation":

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7blRCnjFDE&list=RD-7blRCnjFDE&start_radio=1

a March 2012 BBC Radio Scotland interview with Marra:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WsPIT0xpFI>

BBC Radio Scotland's tribute to Marra (November 2012), in which Karine Polwart, Liz Lochhead, Sheena Wellington, and Jemima Levick emphasize his generosity and sense of humour:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IC26IDVMJUE>

BBC Radio Scotland's "The Michael Marra Family Album" (January 2013):


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QivqcVJEO1w&t=490s>

Alice Marra and Andrew Mitchell at St. Mary's Church, Dundee, 2015, performing Michael's "The Angus Man's Welcome to Mary Stuart":

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8mLudKkf0w>

in June 2018, Big Noise Douglas – Douglas is an area in Dundee's east end – gave its first public performance. Sistema Scotland's fourth children's orchestra, Big Noise Douglas marked the occasion with, among other things, a joyously "cacophonous rendition" of "Hermless," Marra's sweet song about a gentle Dundonian and his friends: *"There's ane or twa lads wha I could cry my chums / They're canny and meek as can be / There's Tam wi' his pigeons, and Wull wi' his mice, / And Robert McLennan and me."* Marra was a passionate advocate for a Big Noise Orchestra in Dundee, and his family and friends carried his advocacy forward:

<https://www.thecourier.co.uk/fp/news/local/dundee/670976/video-dundee-youngsters-take-to-stage-for-brilliant-first-big-noise-orchestra-performance/>

Marra urged us to “make the optimistic sound,” and Big Noise Douglas and the city’s “Michael Marra Musical Trust for the Young People of Dundee” are a fitting legacy. 

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