

## Those songs, those bloody, bloody songs

### Uninvited Guests

#### *Love Letters Straight From Your Heart*

Tramway, Glasgow, 09/02/08

This first one is dedicated to Uninvited Guests. It's been a long hard road, and I ought to confess it wasn't exactly love at first sight. Your systematic use of mediated or found text. The considered performance style you had, with its strange amplifications, intensities pitching like a boat in a storm. My unreasonable suspicion of anything that laid out its stall so simply and openly in the way that you did. *Offline* was the first time we met, remember? Happy days. Your show about love on the internet, a lover's stroll which ambled along to a soundtrack of schmaltz played by the cheapest general MIDI sounds you could find. And I couldn't 'get in'. I couldn't engage. It wasn't going to happen on the first date. But I spent longer with you – literally, in the durational version of that same project, and I was happier. It seemed more human, more vulnerable, and that made me think that maybe there could be something between us: if I let my guard down, and if you did the same.

So here we are then, many shows, many years later, and it's the second time I've seen *Love Letters*. The first time was funny, beautiful... the second time, magical. Such a simple idea: trap a whole bunch of people in a room full of other people's song dedications, with all the images, memories, stories, hopes, dreams and regrets that come spilling from the music. Because unlike dedications of the type heard daily from the radio station of your choice, these cannot be switched off – you can't be doing the washing up, you can't answer the phone. The audience form part of the process, witness to each announcement, be it a shout out to a friend or a eulogy for the dear departed.

So here we are then, and it's about music, and about how the most saccharine piece of crap translates into the most evocative of symphonies for someone. So here we are, and it's about standing up for the song you believe in, not being ashamed by it or what it says. So here we are, and Richard Dufty has begun shouting at the top of his lungs as Kate Bush's *The Hounds Of Love* thumps from the speakers, shouting about missing you so much, and missing you so much, missing you so much, his voice rasping and cracking under the strain. The audience member next to me is suddenly in floods of tears, uncontrollable, patting her clothes for a handkerchief she can't find. I know it's the first time she's seen this show, so I know it's not just me. I know it's not just because I've grown up with you, Uninvited Guests, just because I've become accustomed to your wily ways. Because along the way I'm sure we've both changed.

So this is a thankyou. And as for the song I'd like to dedicate to you? Well, I thought it appropriate that it should be a cover version. And probably my favourite cover version in the world is "Women of the World" by Jim O'Rourke,

from Ivor Cutler's original. It's deceptively simple, repetitive... but it gets there, and it gets to you. In the end.

*Women of the world, take over  
Cos if you don't the world will come to an end  
And it won't take long*

This next one is dedicated to the audience. Go, team.

Some of you I didn't get to see around much; but as we were sat at two long tables, wedding / seminar / board meeting style, a good half of you I was able to watch intermittently throughout the show. The mottled burnt orange wall behind you, glitterball reflections twinkling in your green / blue / black eyes: god, you guys were beautiful. I'd particularly like to mention the good-looking bloke with the cheeky smile with whom, a few minutes into the show, I was asked to lock eyes for the length of *The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face* as sung by Johnny Cash. Sorry, mate: I've seen the show before. I knew it was coming. I was well prepared. You seemed a little more fazed.

As I set my face into something that I hoped was approaching the approachable (as opposed to what I fear it was, a pervy smirk) everyone around us was doing the same, gazing into the eyes of the person opposite. Some found it easier than others. Little bursts of laughter interrupted Johnny Cash to my left and right, like birds sounding off in a dark forest.

Our hosts knew what they were doing. The rules of engagement were laid out clearly: we, fair audience, were fair game. Later on, we'd be asked to scramble around the perimeter of the space after one of the performers in a playground kiss-chase (which some of us did suddenly, and unexpectedly.) We'd be asked to stand as if the dedication were ours, even when it wasn't, representing a stranger's memories. We'd be told "If this song means something to you, feel free to stand up at any time." It was "*Heroes*" by David Bowie, and I jumped to my feet as if prompted by a pistol shot. Yep, that was me. We were plied with alcohol and party poppers; we were asked to throw flowers onto two lovers as they rolled about between the tables; we were asked to slow-dance at the end of the show. But mostly, we were asked to listen.

I wonder which dedication struck you the hardest? For me, it was *Lady In Red*. What a song! Chris de Burgh's whiny, sexless vocals. The dying robotic twitch of its drum machine. The dull mush of its faux-string synthesisers, the useless twunk of its rubber-band guitar. All in all, an appalling piece of simpering bullshit, almost apocalyptic in its awfulness: but it was dedicated to someone's Grandmother, and the accompanying homily ended with the words "Every day without her in the world is the less for her absence," and suddenly... how could I have hated this song so much? How could I when somehow, somewhere, it channelled a sentiment like that? And what's more, I knew the way the show had been compiled: this was a dedication by one of my fellow viewers, present, somewhere, in the room. Sorry, whoever you are. Are we still friends?

Presenting these pop vagaries requires no small amount of subtlety. Theatrical tricks can't get in the way. The performances by Jess Hoffmann and

Richard Dufty were remarkable in this respect; for the much of the opening five minutes of the show, they simply sat behind their apple macs, at opposite heads of the table, mixing love songs at each other in a sort of DJ tennis, saying absolutely nothing and letting the music tell its many tales. Their faces were quietly mischievous, flirting, each track a chat-up line. “Yeah!” shouted Dufty as the guitar solo in *I Believe In A Thing Called Love* kicked in. He ramped up the volume. Hoffmann looked at him with the quiet tolerance of a lover, a patience many years in the making. Later, the songs shifted, a romance gone awry. *Love Will Tear Us Apart. Heaven Knows I’m Miserable Now.*

So, comrade audience, our own story... well, it’s done. It was a one-night stand, I see that, in retrospect. And as for my dedication? In the spirit of songs which may mean one thing to you and another to me, I’m going to chose a track by that most marmite of vocalists, the love-her-or-hate-her Björk. And a remix, to boot: the Plaid mix of *All Is Full Of Love*, new chords snaking about Björk’s original melody, messing with its DNA.

*You’ll have to trust it  
Maybe not from the sources  
You have poured yours  
Maybe not from the direction  
You are staring at*

Bit of a curveball, this last one. But bear with me.

This is to the man who I first remember speaking of those sweet, meaningless songs, wafting up the stairway. The bittersweet melody lilting from the scratchy gramophone. This is to the man who gave those cadence-like memories their own, unique dramatic shape. To the man I think of as I leave *Love Letters*, as I recall the line from *The Singing Detective*, spoken by his character Phillip Marlowe: “Those songs. Those bloody, bloody songs.”

I’d like to dedicate *Eyes* by Alex Glasgow to Dennis Potter. *Eyes*, a piece of music I discovered when morosely leafing through my departed grandfather’s record collection. “Take whatever you want,” my Grandma had said, in her usual brusque Yorkshire way. “I’m not likely to listen to any of it.”

And Alex Glasgow’s strange warbling voice over a bed of keening strings lifted my spirit, and made me twice as sad, all at once. A bit like *Love Letters*, truth be told: it spoke of the persistence of memory, and of the fading light... both of how terrible and beautiful it can be.

*Eyes look kindly on me  
Eyes of thine look kindly on me  
Thine eyes  
Mine eyes  
Tell me no lies and look kindly on me*