

Summer of love redux



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In a Heartland Healing Magazine exclusive interview, music legend Donovan describes his new record, the metaphysics of music and the connection with healing

between the balmy, carefree beats of the Beach Boys and the edgier introspection of the Beatles, with less grit than Dylan and more mysticism than the Rolling Stones, Donovan Leitch, known simply as “Donovan” then, bounded to the top of the charts in the mid-1960s.

His iconic hits such as “Mellow Yellow,” “Hurdy Gurdy Man,” “Catch the Wind,” “Atlantis,” and “Season of the Witch,” Donovan led more than one generation to metaphysics as music and music as mystical musings. His strong anti-war stance and embrace of Transcendental Meditation (TM) made him the epitome of peace, love and elevated consciousness.

He was rock royalty, leading the Beatles and Hollywood illuminati to India to study

the ancient traditions of awareness long before “yoga” was an everyday word in America.

Trained as a classical musician with roots as deep as the ages, he gathered legendary musicians to play on his records in the ‘60s. The members of *Led Zeppelin* first played together in the studio on his “Hurdy Gurdy” sessions. Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page were regular guitarists on his hits.

In September of 2005, Donovan will begin a year-long world tour celebrating his 40 years in music. He recently concluded a tour with John Mellencamp and has a new album out entitled *Beat Café*. It’s a revisiting of the roots of Bohemian culture that pervaded the hip, cool-cat scene of the 1950s, the days of James Dean and Jack Kerouac.

Recently I chatted with one of my musical heroes about metaphysics, music, healing and his Celtic roots.

I always see a level of metaphysics in your music of the ‘60s. Is that still there today?

There is a song on the new record called

“Shambala” that is related to the healing sound of music and metaphysics. On *Beat Café* I tried to present a kind of Bohemian manifesto. At least seven of the subjects came out of Bohemian life and into popular culture and one of them of course, is the healing sound of music and also metaphysical interests that George [Harrison] has and I have so the track “Shambala” is a sort of tribute to him.

The natural tempo of “Shambala” is something that I found myself naturally doing, Michael. And it lowers the heart rate. Of course, meditation does the same. The Celtic healing systems could do this and I come from a tradition like that. The tempo of the song “Shambala” is quite extraordinary. It’s like temple music.

That characteristic “Donovan” vocal vibrato has a soothing feel to it. Is it an intentional thing?

I found myself naturally doing it. You can hear it appearing early in my music but it came fairly forward I suppose on “Hurdy Gurdy Man.” It’s a kind of yogic breathing



coming from the solar plexus. Neil Young has a real slow one, his own particular one. Phoebe Snow has a fast one. My one is of a particular speed, you're quite right. I would just describe it as a soothing feeling at best. A lot of people thought it was [an electronic] tremelo coming through a guitar amplifier. [It isn't.]

The effect of the way I sing, I found I could move the air in certain ways. I found this naturally and only later did I read about it and found that it actually once upon a time was taught in ancient Celtic days as part of the teachings of poetry and how to sing. A fascinating subject.

With the new album, Beat Café, have you moved from 'humble minstrel' to beat poet?

I explore various sounds of jazz, blues and folk but also certain subjects that came from the Bohemian culture. It's an exploration of the Bohemian effect which has been constant since 1840 when the word 'Bohemian' was attached to disaffected youth by the writer Balzac. The various arts are all attracted to Bohemian cafes and I feel Bohemia through the *Beat Café* as a vital force that actually offers tools to society though it looks like it's rejecting society. It creates the café atmospheres of the last 100-plus, 200 years of various artists and thinkers and radicals and painters and poets and playwrights and actors and dancers and singers to actually gather and read and share ideas.

Poetry has been a very powerful part of my life. I'm not turning into a 'beat poet' as much as honoring Jack Kerouac and Burroughs and Ginsberg as figures that were very seminal and very, very influential to songwriters like Bob Dylan, myself, John Lennon and Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell and countless others in breaking through barriers in the '40s and the '50s and pulling down these barriers for us to come through.

Donovan made the new record at Capitol Studios in Los Angeles with roots producer John Chelew [Blind Boys from Alabama], veteran session drummer Jim Keltner and longtime collaborator Danny Thompson [Pentangle, Nick Drake, Maryanne Faithful]. The mystical part of the equation emerged early on, before



Keltner came on board.

We started off with acoustic guitar and what the brief was is this:

John Chelew said ‘You do this mantric thing with Danny. Your guitar and your vocal and his bass need to be like a mantra. Can we start off the album just with a chant and we’ll see where it goes?’

So I got into chanting and got into it with the vibrato. And it worked very well with the guitar and then it worked with Danny as well.

At one point, my wife Linda was in the studio. Linda is a veteran of... many... recording... sessions. She was there when the Rolling Stones made their first four records. She was with Brian [Jones] then, before I met her. So Linda is sitting there when John Chelew says ‘I’ve got this great drummer I want to introduce you to.’

Linda said, ‘There’s only one drummer that can come in.’ We all turned around to

her and said, ‘Who’s that?’ and she said ‘Keltner.’ And we were in L.A. so we phoned up Jim and in he came.

Then I realized we had done seven tracks in a row over a week with hardly any arrangements. I realized that what we were doing was that we were exploring this atmosphere of Bohemia where you could actually do this — you could open up improvisationally with a basic theme and that’s how it began. Anyway, that’s how Danny and Jimmy and I and John Chelew came together.

Many hear a tribute to George Harrison on the track “Shambala.”

Of course, Jim Keltner was so close to George. He saw him to the last, the very, very last of George’s life before he dropped the body... this time.

So we were sitting in the studio and John Chelew was saying to try the traditional

“The Summertime is Comin’” maybe you could try that. To each of the songs there is a mantra. Not so much on purpose but it’s there when I sing in the certain styles and I move the air in a certain way.

So I was doing ‘The Summertime is Comin’” then I remembered I was working on something called ‘Shambala’. Well, should we try that?

As soon as I started singing it the image of George came into my mind. And Keltner was there. And he looked at me and I looked at him and I said ‘Let’s do it.’ And Jim started playing these temple gongs and cymbals and soft toms. It’s an extraordinary thing. I think we got it in two takes. And it was an open tuning with drums and this sitar-like droning going on. And Danny was playing this extraordinary antique Victorian bass. So between the three of us we created ‘Shambala.’

Of course Harrison was the Beatle most interested in TM. Do you still do TM?

It’s a mixture. I do a bit of TM and Buddhist daily. After a while, it wasn’t continually TM style. After you break through into meditation you can use a number of techniques. The actual technique has nothing to do with it really, in the end. It only steadies the mind. One should really be able to fall into meditation without any mantra, any counting. That’s the whole point. And one should continually be able to have the meditation continuous. I don’t mean sitting still. I mean walking, living, breathing.

So yes, it is a technique learned from TM but also breathing and stretching. We were very early into these Five Rites, Tibetan rites which are yogic meditations, visualizations and chakra meditations. Recently my wife and I took a rather rare course called Vortex Healing, which is really chakras again but reinterpreted through a Celtic visualization.

Was the founder of TM, the Maharishi, the hurdy gurdy man in your song?

The Beatles and I were hurdy gurdy men of course, because I sing ‘I am the hurdy gurdy man.’ We’re all potentially hurdy gurdy men. But in the beginning, yes. It was like the hurdy gurdy man is the one who comes singing songs of love and so, yes you could also include Maharishi.

We have been more involved, my wife and I, with Tibetan lamas and the Dalai

Lama and a high lama called the 'Dragon'. These are modern hurdy gurdy men because they come bringing techniques and songs of compassion. So the Beatles came and brought songs of love and so did I and Maharishi is included in that.

Are we missing that kind of voice today? Love conquers all?

Tibetan issues are extremely 'sexy' in the entertainment world right now. So what we're getting is not so much the introduction of mantric music into pop music as the actual artists are supporting the Tibetan cause. Not only just to free Tibet but to raise money to preserve Tibetan culture. My wife and I, along with others like Geldof, Dave Gilmore and Ringo sometimes; we raise money to build this school in this place called 'Little Tibet.' It's a piece of real Tibet stolen away by India a hundred years ago that is a preserved piece of Tibet. The Dalai Lama has a palace there.

So even though musically it doesn't seem supported in the actual musical content, it seems to be supported strongly otherwise. There's not a lot of guys like me around, you see, Michael, that want to introduce the music to their records. But that's not a bad thing.

Then you have that whole thing loosely called 'new age music' that probably actually began a long time ago with Paul Horn; [chuckle] probably with me. There's a whole genre of music which is meditational. It doesn't have to be popular music. Now it's a huge section in music stores. The term hadn't even been invented when I was first doing it.

My new, new, new record, I am loosely calling 'Ritual Groove' which I am working on for 2007 and it will have a lot of rhythmic stuff and chants.

Do you own your past masters?

We weren't smart enough in the Sixties to do that.

I have a whole bunch of master tapes in the basement which we are preserving. I've gone through quite a few. We've already released nine tracks on the 64 album, the first nine recordings that I ever made. That record is on my label, Donovan Discs and available on the website, www.Donovan.ie. They were before the first single, before 'Catch the

Wind.' They were the demos when I just walked into Southern Music in 1964. We're going through the history of it. I'm going through it bit by bit.

Do any particular American regions or cultures specially appeal to you?

There is a taste of everything in America and I'm a great gourmet of music, as you know. When you mention New Orleans, for example, when you dip into that – gosh, it's the root of so much. I love historical New Orleans music.

Then there's the West Coast, San Francisco the jazz and poetry connection. That was fascinating to me. I actually spoke with Lawrence Ferlinghetti when I was in San Francisco last year. It was on the phone; he couldn't come down to the gig. I went into City Lights but he wasn't there that particular day. There is a connection to those cities for sure.

We touched on it before, but tell me more about metaphysical healing and sound.

The trip to India was to rediscover what mantras and meditation techniques had been taken out of the Christian background that I grew up with. I knew there had to be something. The rich, northern European culture before Christianity had it. But where did it go? I knew that the Celtic thing was important. They burned a lot of manuscripts but a few survived. The Celtic bardic tradition is passed on in oral fashion.

So when the Druids and bards ended, and by the way, there were schools of Bardic poetry in 17th century Scotland, hidden schools — what was lost? Where was that meditation? Where was that healing? Then I realized it was in the music, in the storytelling. It was actually projected through story, poetry and song.

As for the healing aspects of chanting, it's very highly advanced. I was part of the tradition. Probably the last of it. And when I could move an audience with the sound of my voice, I was using the healing technique of the Celts, of the ancient Druids. They went to school for 21 years, in seven-year periods learning techniques. What were those techniques? Why would you take that long? What were they learning? So there was a whole mystery school that was lost. When we went to the East, we can't be Eastern.

Where was the Western school?

So that healing aspect of my music I now relate to the techniques that I naturally have inherited from a school that has been lost.

And so I just wanted to add that to you because you were talking about metaphysical healing and sound; I guess it is part of your exploration I would think.

The power of speech is still in Celtic tradition. Lennon, McCartney are Celtic names. They come from Irish descent. The powerful actors Sean Connery and Richard Harris, the power of oratory and poetry with Joyce, Yeats, Seamus Heaney.

This powerful healing is extraordinarily strong still. Guthrie is a Celtic name. Pressley is a Celtic name. It traces through the bloodline, somehow it's passed on. I don't know how.

This sort of aspect of the music and the words is very powerful Western magic or healing. The chanting of Irish girls especially is very powerful as well.

Melody, which is probably something we'll talk about at some other time, Michael, melody is very important because it's linked to chakras. The absolute mastery of melody that the Beatles had was mixed with the absolute mastery of harmonics which was described by a professor in the Sixties as Aeolian. And the Everly Brothers harmonies are Aeolian, unusual. I don't know anyone who has been able to copy the Everly Brothers.

Are you inferring that one can take a harmony and move it from chakra to chakra?

It's somehow related. When the harmonies are highly advanced and the sound is highly balanced in rhythm, poetic meaning comes later. Rhythm, harmonics, structure when highly advanced, it harmonizes the chakras.

People whose chakras are no longer spinning, that is one of their emotional problems. They're not conscious that one of their chakras is not spinning properly.

Trying to relate a tone to a chakra is a difficult one. There are more than seven tones and they all blend into one another. But yes, you can realign with certain melodies; go up and down the chakras. That's a simple answer. I can't describe it in any other way. Fascinating.

