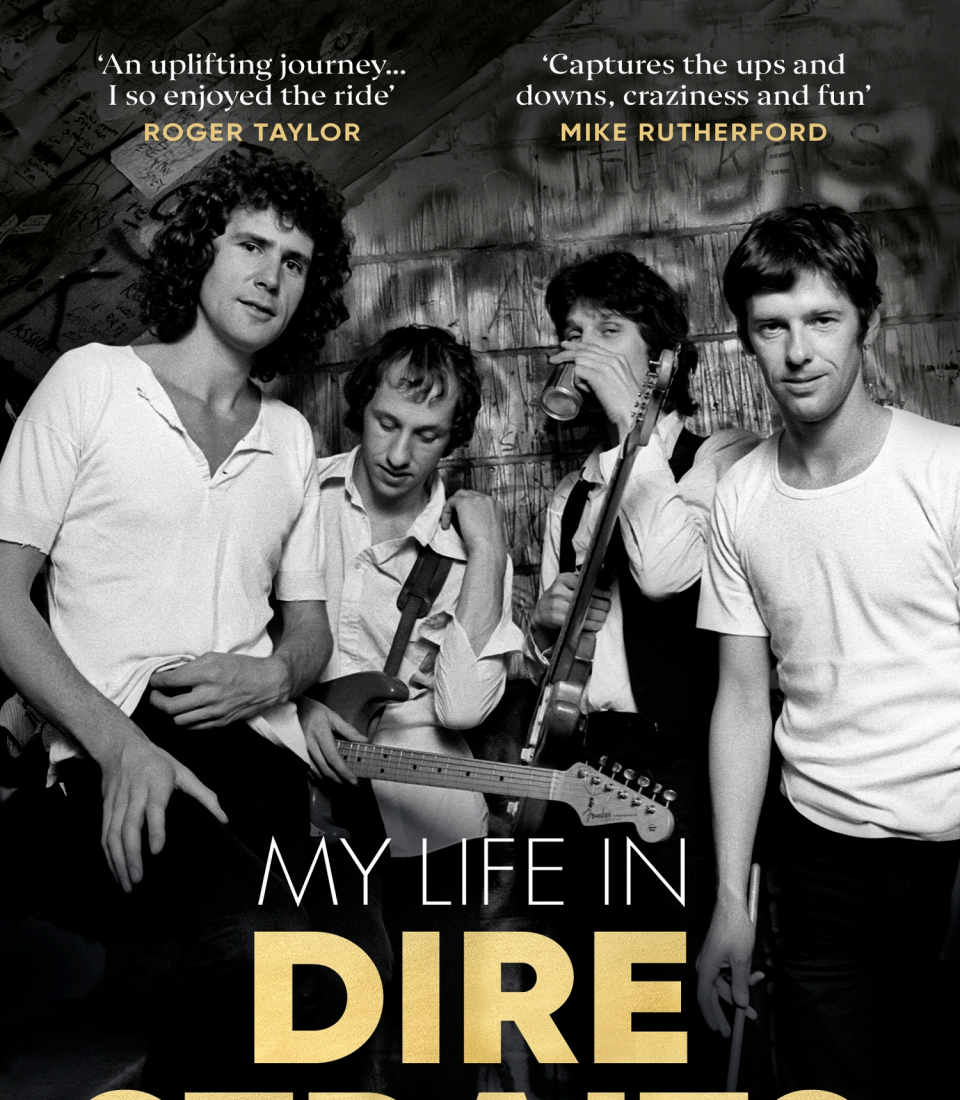
'An uplifting journey... I so enjoyed the ride'
ROGER TAYLOR

'Captures the ups and downs, craziness and fun'
MIKE RUTHERFORD



MY LIFE IN DIRE STRAITS

JOHN ILLSLEY

WITH A FOREWORD BY
MARK KNOPFLER

John Illsley is an English musician who rose to fame as the bass guitarist of the critically acclaimed band Dire Straits. With Dire Straits, John has been the recipient of multiple BRIT and Grammy Awards, and a Heritage Award. As one of the founding members (with Mark Knopfler, his brother David and drummer Pick Withers), John played a major role in the development of the Dire Straits sound. When Dire Straits finished touring in 1993, John became involved in the art world. Having carved out a reputation for himself as a painter, John had solo exhibitions in London, New York, Sydney and across Europe. He also co-founded the children's charity Life Education in 1987 which was recently integrated into Coram, one of the oldest UK charities. John also owns a pub, the East End Arms, in the New Forest.

www.penguin.co.uk

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

MY LIFE IN DIRE STRAITS

JOHN ILLSLEY

WITH A FOREWORD BY
MARK KNOPFLER



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Bantam Press
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Penguin paperback edition published 2022

Copyright © John Illsley 2021

John Illsley has asserted his right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

Extract from 5 February 1981 edition of *Rolling Stone* on p. 194 reproduced
by kind permission of David Fricke

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN
9780552177894

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable
future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book
is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Copyrighted Material

For Steph, James, Jess, Harry and Dee Dee, with love

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Contents

	Foreword by Mark Knopfler	ix
1	The Heart of It	5
2	Night Flight to Luxembourg	18
3	Banjos, Beatings and Bass	28
4	Girls and Gigs	42
5	Timber and Tenements	52
6	Mr Knopfler, I Presume?	63
7	Punks on the Lawn	72
8	Five Hundred Quid	87
9	Panic in the Shower	95
10	Off with the Heads	107
11	Wolverhampton Woe to Marquee Magic	119
12	Sessions in the Sun	134
13	Into the Blizzard	148
14	The Night at the Roxy	159
15	Into the Arena	168

Copyrighted Material

16 Grim Fairytale of New York 179
17 The Big Wheel Keeps on Turning 191
18 Electric Power 209
19 Brothers and Souls 228
20 Jerusalem Syndrome 245
21 Live Aid Union 258
22 New Worlds 269
23 What Now? 277
24 Here We Go Again 290
25 When the Music Stops 300

Acknowledgements 311
Picture Acknowledgements 313
Index 315

Copyrighted Material

Foreword

We were lucky we weren't teenagers – that would certainly have been fatal. Nearly everything we were to experience in the professional music game was for the first time, so we had to learn as we went, at ever-increasing speed through an ever-changing landscape.

John had wanted it all as badly as I did. He was a great companion for the trip the band took, and he continues to be a great mate today. John felt like an old friend from the beginning. Whenever we see one another now, which is often, it feels exactly as it did when we first met. He was a constant support, full of the positive energy and willpower required in a touring and recording outfit.

Although Dire Straits received a lot of international attention relatively early, I'm not sure that could happen now. John and I both feel extremely fortunate and always have: it was the era before downloading and piracy, a time which could support careers in music. Nowadays, recording contracts often don't last for more than an album or two. The music business has become more impatient, less inclined to nurture talent and more likely to demand instant success.

Copyrighted Material

So there's music, and there's the music business: two different things. But mainly, for us, it was a huge adventure and a hell of a ride, with all its comedy, absurdity, exhaustion, madness and sadness. Like everyone, we had to learn to cope with some of the more negative aspects of the game, but John and I always valued and appreciated the success. I'm writing this in my own recording studio, for example: all the hard work paid off. I know John feels the same.

The ride is not for everyone, not for those who can't take the pressures and the pace, for whatever reasons. It was a different world. And John has remembered a pretty big chunk of it.

MK
May 2021

Copyrighted Material

Elbows on the balcony railing, I'm looking down on the Sunset Marquis pool, watching a guy spinning in his inflatable, nursing his Daiquiri, an uneasiness gnawing a little at my guts. My cocktail is different, a heady mix of nerves and exhilaration. I have been living off it for five weeks, night after night, coast to coast in the States. But tonight, the whirlwind tour almost done, there is a double shot of nerves in the shaker, two parts nerves to one part exhilaration, with a dash of fatigue and a twist of disbelief. We're playing the Roxy.

Neil Young, Frank Zappa, The Temptations, Bob Marley, Van Morrison, Bruce Springsteen, Chuck Berry, Lou Reed, Jimmy Cliff, The Ramones, Patti Smith, Etta James, Jerry Lewis, B.B. King . . . and 'Tonight, ladies and gentlemen, all the way from London, England, yes, please give it up for . . . Dire Straits!'

Or, in my head at least, please give it up for four lads from the borough of Lewisham.

That's how it feels anyhow — not quite believing it's real — and I am trying to get my head around the absurdity of it, pretend it's just

Copyrighted Material

another gig, like the ones we were doing a few months back. It's not a big gig, the Roxy, just a couple of hundred guests, but it's the Roxy. The Roxy! Tiny, but in its way, in kudos terms, as big as Madison Square Garden, the Hollywood Bowl, Wembley . . .

Right below me, Southern rock band the Ozark Mountain Daredevils, all bushy beards and long hair, are poolside, slumped on loungers, swilling long-neck beers, bantering with the beautiful Californian babes milling around in their bikinis. A couple of cool-dude waiters are floating between the tables handing out cocktails and clearing the empties. The music is low but amplified in the intimacy of the pool area, a small courtyard overlooked by two storeys of rooms on all sides. The sky over to the west is a deep burnt orange fading to grey and the outdoor lights come on, silhouetting the miniature palm trees.

There's a hand on my shoulder. It's Mark.

'You all right?'

'Yeah, great, it's just, you know . . .'

'Weird.'

'Yeah, weird. A long way from Deptford, that's for sure.'

'Embrace it. We could be in the Dog and Duck begging for a midweek slot after the darts match.'

I picture us around our little wooden table, four pints of brown ale, rolling our fags, moaning about the band on the little stage in the corner labouring through their set of Beatles and Stones tracks, a few old guys on their bar stools reading the Racing Post.

Below me, a guy with an afro is walking into the shallow end with a beer in one hand and a smoke in the other.

Mark says, 'Come on, we've got to go. Reception just called – the limo's here.'

'Limo!' This time it felt right. We were in Hollywood, for God's sake. You didn't take the bus.

We knock at Dave's and Pick's room and make our way down, past the pool, Pick playing the air with his imaginary drumsticks, the real

Copyrighted Material

ones sticking out of his back pocket. One of the reclining Ozarks, a hot beach-babe sitting on his lounger now caressing his chest hair, raises his beer bottle by the neck.

'Way to go, guys!' He smiles. 'The Roxy – you made it, man. Enjoy!'

In the air-chilled lobby, the doorman nods and stands aside, pulling open the door to the street, and we are back out in the soft, dry heat, making our way down the carpet under the long golden awning. Spring, like autumn, barely exists in LA. The temperature hovers between 60 and 70 degrees and I am overdressed in my charity-shop DJ jacket and heavy Levi's. A smiling chauffeur in his peaked cap has the rear door open for us and we disappear into the huge interior of the shiny black Lincoln, bigger than the kitchen back in Deptford.

We pull away, swing left into Sunset Boulevard, downtown Los Angeles behind us, Beverly Hills up ahead. We are all silent, staring out of the windows, taking in Hollywood's neon bar signs, the roller-bladers and the lightly stirring palms. Our second time in a limo in as many weeks. (We find out back in London the record company has put them on our bill, like breakfast at the Portobello, and the sirloins and salt beef in Nassau.)

A small crowd of a few dozen is hanging outside as the chauffeur eases the limo to the kerb. The Roxy looks like a detached family house, minus the stacked logs and plus double swing-doors. Right outside, there are two Hells Angels-style bouncers and a lamp post with a big orange neon 'R', like a giant lollipop, planted in the sidewalk between the towering palms. We climb out, a few heads turn our way and a guy with a boogie box on his shoulder shoots through us on his skateboard, trailing the smell of weed.

The owner, Lou Adler, record producer of The Mamas & the Papas and Sam Cooke, greets us in the lobby – Pick playing air drums probably the giveaway that we must be the band he'd booked. You can't mistake Lou, in his beret, beard and shades. He's very friendly, and none the worse, it seems, for his recent kidnapping and split from Britt Ekland.

Copyrighted Material

We shake hands, thank him for the honour of playing his venue and, yes, we promise to come and find him in the bar after the show.

'Hey, man, no idea you guys were English. That's so cool. The music sounds so, you know, American. Rock 'n' roll with a touch of the blues.'

Mark says in Geordie, 'Yeah, we've had that a lot since we've been here.'

The dressing room backstage is no bigger than the ones in the village halls back in England and, if we were lucky to get one at all, in the pubs too. We can swing a kitten, but not much more, and we're bumping into each other, cursing and apologizing as we get ready, heading out into the open of the passageway to neck a few beers before the guy comes and tells us it's time. 'The Roxy is full, guys, and it's ready to rock.'

When we flew out to the States we were in great shape, tight as a drum skin, not a chord or beat out of place, song after song. You can't hit the road out there unless your performance is at peak fitness. If you're not stage-ready and you're lucky to be playing on the right side of the tracks, they'll groan and shuffle away to the bar. In less courteous places, especially the unis and the hick towns, you'd better have some slick dance moves to avoid the shower of projectiles from the floor.

You probably won't see that in the Roxy, but I'd sooner take a hurricane of Bud bottles in Pig's Knuckle, Arkansas, than a glum silence in Lou Adler's joint. Screw up in the Roxy and influential people in the music world will soon get to hear you weren't up to much. Get the place jumping – and you never knew who would be in the audience any night at the Roxy – and the good news travels fast. These little gigs at iconic venues have a unique atmosphere, and the pressure to perform well was hard to put out of our minds. In front of a small, exclusive audience with big names from the music industry seated below, you really don't want to mess up.

We are on top of our game, roused by the sheer thrill of the experience, and we go straight on stage and into our set, no conferring, and kick off with 'Down to the Waterline': 'Sweet surrender on the quayside / You remember we used to run and hide . . .'

Copyrighted Material

Chapter 1

The Heart of It

If you were to run a line north to south down the centre of England, then another midway across from east to west, the point of intersection would fall bang on a little town called Market Harborough, or as near as makes no odds. It might even score a direct hit and pinpoint 'Stonehenge', the very house in which I grew up. It was halfway down Shrewsbury Avenue — a small close off an unmade road on top of the hill, overlooking the town to the north and, in all other directions, the gentle, rolling, hedge-framed countryside of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire. This is as far from salt water as it's possible to be in the UK, as far from the wide-open seas and the world beyond as you can get. It is the heart of Middle England and, for better or for worse, this is the world that shaped who I became, a small world that brought great comfort and security but a world that made me yearn for the distant shores of somewhere way more exotic.

One morning I was walking with my mother down the High Street in Market Harborough, the pavements busy with shoppers filing in out of the butcher's, the greengrocer's and the ironmonger's.

Copyrighted Material

I was nine or ten, so it must have been about 1959. We were going to pick up my father from the Westminster Bank and drive him home in our Vauxhall Wyvern for his lunch. My father had risen to the post of manager and, although we were comfortable, he didn't earn a pot of money. Very few households had more than one car back then, so my mother did this every day of the week, also dropping him off in the morning and picking him up in the evening. The only time she got a break from her role as *chauffeuse* was when the River Welland broke its banks in the great floods of 1958. For a week or so, my father rowed himself across the dirty, swollen waters, looking a little incongruous in his three-piece suit, pipe stuck in the corner of his mouth.

Anyhow, that morning we were crossing the street when the whole scene froze as if zapped by a giant stun gun from the skies. Everyone just stopped, including us, and the traffic, light as it was, slowed sharply. Only one pedestrian was moving — a young man from India or Pakistan. I was transfixed. I had never seen a brown face and neither, so it appeared, had anyone else. Had the man been wearing no trousers and a top hat, he couldn't have triggered greater fascination. After a few moments, somebody pressed the play button, the scene moved on, the world resumed spinning on its axis.

In that fleeting, weirdly thrilling moment, the curtain had been yanked back and I got my first glimpse of the world beyond our sleepy little market town. It wasn't so much the man himself that intrigued me, but the reaction of the locals, the farmers hopping out of their filthy Land Rovers in muddied boots and flat caps, the grannies in knitted bonnets and the well-to-do housewives in pencil skirts and matching tweed jackets all frozen to the spot. I can't say for sure that it was at that precise moment I set my course on a life more adventurous than the one on offer in Market Harborough, but it was certainly around that time that my imagination began to take flight.

Insularity was a state of being for Britons in the fifties; the sight of a

Copyrighted Material



My mother and father, Wilfred and Bubbles. Their marriage took place in late 1939 shortly before he headed off to war. I have a great deal to thank them for.

Copyrighted Material

'foreigner' rare as hen's teeth. Most of Market Harborough's population had never set foot in London, let alone journeyed overseas. Only the old soldiers like my father, now in their thirties and forties, had 'crossed the water'. A trip to Leicester, eighteen miles up the road, was a major excursion; to Birmingham, about sixty miles, it was a right old adventure; and to London, a hundred miles, it was an epic that people would dine out on for weeks – and, for some, a tale even to tell the grandchildren. London might just as well have been Tokyo for the farm workers, bank employees and shopkeepers of Market Harborough.

One evening around the same time, in a rare break with the no-nonsense traditions of her kitchen, my mother put her reputation for good sense on the line and served my father with a curry dish. I was the official veg gatherer from the garden, as well as her *sous-chef* (chopper-in-chief), and I could tell by the smells from her stove that something new and exciting was in the air that evening. My mother, it was obvious, was a little nervous when she laid down the plate of steaming spiced food before him. There was a short silence, then my father slowly picked up his fork, leaned back a little and prodded it, like she'd served him roadkill. 'What on earth is this?' he asked, politely bemused, politely horrified even.

Like almost every other household in Britain at the time, most evening meals comprised some undressed meat, some potatoes and one type of vegetable, maybe two, preferably boiled to rags. (My mother was a fine cook, but that was the *mode du jour.*) Home-made fish and chips on Friday was the great excitement of the week. The Sunday roast was an event too, but it came with a price – leftovers on Monday. Curry was what people ate during the Raj because they were unable to get hold of minted lamb chops and boiled spuds or sausages and mash. Curry was never seen in a British dining room and, outside the major cities, there was not a curry house to be found on any High Street.

Copyrighted Material

Whether Mum's curry was proof that Britain was on the verge of a great cultural transformation (which it was) or a sign of just how small-minded and conservative we were back then (which we were), I was too young to judge. The fact that I remember these two trivial incidents as significant childhood events tells its own story about the settled, parochial domesticity of British family life in the late fifties. How could we have guessed that British culture was a year or two from being given a mighty shake-up and left standing on its head? Maybe Mum's exotic, daring curry was the sign, a harbinger of things to come.

I don't remember our first home, a small semi in Leicester, because I was four years old when Dad borrowed some money from his mother and some from his bank, both at favourable rates of interest, and we moved into 'Stonehenge', so called I suppose because it was built from this warm, golden Northamptonshire stone. It was not the flashiest house on the street by a long stretch, but it was honest and comfortable with solid oak window frames and even a downstairs loo, which was considered quite fancy in those days. Why we had an outside loo as well, I can't tell you.

The garden was just under an acre, large enough to accommodate a veg plot to serve our needs most of the year. There was even room left over for Dad to create a grass tennis court, but one that bore only the faintest resemblance to Wimbledon Centre Court. Take the net away and it was pretty well indistinguishable from the rest of the grass. It was my task to mow and roll it and, although I took my responsibilities very seriously, the ball never bounced true, forever mocking the players by shooting away at all angles.

My two elder siblings got their own bedrooms – Richard, who was eight years older than me, and my sister, Pat, five years older. I shared the fourth bedroom with William, who was just over a year older – near enough to my birthday for me to confront my mum after some kid's jibe in the primary-school playground that I had been a 'mistake'.

Copyrighted Material

'Of course you're not, darling!' she exclaimed. 'We were so keen to have you, we couldn't wait any longer.'

As the fourth child, I wasn't mothered too hard and, under William's protection, I was pretty well left to do what I liked outside



Holding hands with my brother Will for the first and probably the last time, in 1951.

Copyrighted Material

school, biking for miles and miles along the country lanes, building rafts on the Welland, fishing for chub in the canal and, in the winter, sledging all day long down our hill and skating on the pond at the bottom. Many memoirs recall terrible childhoods, but I'm afraid I'm unable to lay claim to one. Mine was a happy one and there's nothing I can do about that.

Sure, my parents were strict. I would never have dared defy them or talk back to them. But they were always fair. We weren't churchgoers, except at Christmas, and we took Communion from time to time, but they instilled in us a very keen sense of what was right and what was wrong. When I was a bit older, living in Deptford and very short of cash, I wrote to my dad, telling him I was struggling a little and asking if he might help. He sent me twenty quid by return of post with a letter explaining that, because he was giving me the money, he was also sending the same sum to my three siblings, even though they were all in employment. You always knew where you stood in Stonehenge.

They were loving parents, although, in true post-war fashion, the love was never exhibited in words, let alone in a public display. Perish the thought. That would have made everyone go red and feel ashamed of their weakness. Like most others of the time, we were not a family given to hugging. Many years later, towards the end of my father's life, I thought, *To hell with it, I'm going to give him a hug before he dies.* I took a deep breath, but when I stepped forward Dad's face creased in alarm and he recoiled as though I had come at him with a six-inch blade. But I hugged him anyway.

Still, in that repressed non-verbal, non-tactile English way, we all knew we loved each other. We just never dared say it or show it, no matter how desperate we might have been to give or receive a warm embrace. You didn't build empires by sobbing and hugging one another, after all. I guess that generation, with a Lee-Enfield at its head, would say, 'Of course we love our children! They know that. It's obvious, but you don't need to harp on about it, for heaven's sake!'

Copyrighted Material

My father had certainly done his bit for Queen, country and empire – not that he ever talked to anyone about it, except his old pals from the Royal Signals Corps, one of the first into action, to set up battlefield communications. Like any schoolboy, fascinated by tales from the war – a mighty war that had ended just four years before I was born – I was desperate to know about his experiences fighting across North Africa and up through Sicily and other parts of Italy. *Did he ever meet Monty? How close did he get to capturing Rommel? Were the Hun really awful cheats?* But he would rarely be drawn. He would just clamp his pipe in his teeth, ruffle my hair and say something like, 'Come along now, let's go and finish building your go-kart.'

It must have been strange for those soldiers, away for so many years, fighting those hideous battles, suffering heaven knows what degree of what we'd now call PTSD. The term wasn't even invented then. They still called it 'shell shock' but, to be diagnosed with it, you virtually had to be naked on all fours drinking from puddles before being led away by the men in white coats. My father would have seen some dreadful fighting, given his campaigns, but he never let on about the horrors. I often wonder how he might have suffered.

Posted to North Africa early in the conflict, he popped back on leave for a couple of weeks, not to return for four years. When he did finally come home, he met his son, my brother Richard, for the first time – a walking, talking son about to go to nursery school! I was about to say that I can't get my head around that – but I can. I ended up doing half a dozen tours of the world, each one lasting a year or so, roughly the length in total of the Second World War. There were no guns (except in Italy), no deaths, but the absence from home can't have felt any less acute than it had for my father. I never considered my father's anguish, never pictured him sitting in some tedious camp in the rear waiting for orders to go into action. It was only when I went on the road myself, leaving my wife and children at home,

Copyrighted Material

that I gave it some thought. You're playing music in front of large audiences, not gunning down Germans and Italians, but it's still a weird and dislocating experience being on the road, detached from that security and homeliness. But more of that later.

My father never really escaped the long shadow of the war, his six years of combat in distant lands. On demobilizing, he immediately signed up to the Territorial Army, and every summer he'd host a reunion with his old chums in our back garden. Half a dozen men, dressed in their fatigues and berets, would sweep into the drive in their jeeps, set up their field tents and unload all the impedimenta of war. There were no guns or artillery pieces, which was disappointing, but otherwise it was a perfect re-creation of a proper camp, complete with billy cans and jerry cans, ammo boxes and portable cooking stoves. It was the highlight of the holidays for me, and William and I would sleep out in one of the tents, the comforting stench of damp, musty canvas filling our nostrils.

The Second World War may have been one of the most momentous events in history, claiming the lives of millions, hastening the end of the British empire and re-shaping the world order, but as soon as hostilities ended, for most combatants, ordinary life restarted with barely a moment's reflection. My father was back in post at his bank within two weeks of his return, heading off in his three-piece suit after six years continuously in his khaki uniform.

He was a good man, my father, hard not to respect. Even now, heading into my seventies, when faced with a difficulty, I still ask, 'What would Dad have done?' Mum's character was the mirror image of his: thoroughly decent, unflappable, kind, loving, dutiful. Like him, she was Leicestershire born and bred, the daughter of a schoolmaster. Hers was a life of domestic toil, bringing up four kids, all the household chores falling within her brief. She went about it happily enough as far as I could tell, but I was observant enough to see it was hard graft. She shopped for and cooked all the meals, baked

Copyrighted Material

the bread every few days, drove my father to and from the bank four times a day, constantly cleaned the house from top to bottom, scrubbed and wrung all our clothes (until our first washing machine arrived at the end of the fifties) and, with me as a part-time helper, she tended to all the tasks in the garden too. She neither smoked nor drank – unlike her cigar-smoking, gin-loving mother – and her one escape from the rigours of housework was an occasional round of golf down at the club at the foot of the hill. She must have been quite keen because, like Dad, she was the captain there for a few years.

The only time my mother got a break from the kitchen was when we travelled up to Ashby-de-la-Zouch to take Granny out for lunch at the Crown Hotel. That was every bit as exciting as it sounds – so miserably formal, the atmosphere so stultified that it was no more fun than going to church. And they were excited to make me eat something called 'smoked salmon', which made me feel sick. Raw orange fish! Otherwise, we never ate out, partly because, apart from the bigger hotels, there were very few restaurants to eat out in, and partly because it would have been considered an abominable waste of money. Why shell out a tenner when Mum can cook it just as well at home?

There was little 'culture' in our lives. My parents weren't great readers or music-lovers and I don't remember any conversations around the dining table about the arts. That, too, I think was fairly typical of the time. My parents belonged to a practical generation, mending and making do, and getting on with the main business of creating an ordered household in which the children might grow up safe and happy, just as they had done. It came as a surprise then, after their deaths, to learn that my mother, who I knew had a gorgeous singing voice, had joined a choral society and that – this all after we had flown the nest – my father had turned to painting. Just as I was to do later in life, too. Clearing out their belongings, we found quite a number of Dad's drawings, and they were really impressive for

Copyrighted Material

someone with no formal training. I can't but wonder quite what they – especially my mother – would have done with their lives had they not been so fanatically dutiful in raising the family, putting all their effort, money and time into that, leaving themselves so little to nurture their own gifts and interests. There was nothing glamorous about their lives, but there was something a little heroic in their self-sacrifice and unmovable sense of duty to us.

Life probably wasn't a great deal different in Market Harborough to what it had been before the First World War. In 1954, the UK became the last country to end rationing, and within a few years the economy was surging. The boom in consumerism found its greatest expression in technology and gadgetry, whetting the appetite for all things new and, in youngsters like me at least, creating a yearning for modernity, for something different. In 1950, the year after my birth, half of British homes had no bathroom and millions of people shared an outside loo with their neighbours. Homes in remote rural areas had no electricity, food was kept cool in the larder, clothes were washed by hand, most people had a weekly bath in a tin tub and virtually no one had a car. By the end of the decade, televisions, washing machines, refrigerators, gramophones and vacuum cleaners were filling homes and most families outside of the cities had a car in the driveway, buffed and polished with pride every weekend.

My very first memory, a little before this boom, is watching the Queen's Coronation on a television set bought, like so many others, especially for the occasion. It's a cliché to say it, but this was an impossibly exciting moment for a four-year-old boy. I sat cross-legged on the floor in my shorts, transfixed, the room rammed with neighbours and friends, the little square screen in the corner flickering and fuzzing in shades of grey as Her Majesty made her way down the aisle of Westminster Abbey.

It seems laughable now, this lust for a modernity that now seems so quaint. Mum made the most delicious bread, but all I wanted was

Copyrighted Material

the sliced and processed stuff all the kids were boasting about at primary school, down in the heart of Little Bowden at the bottom of the hill. When finally I got to try some, with baked beans on top no less, I returned from my mate Mike's across the road feeling really 'with it', like I had now truly arrived in the modern world. So, too, for my mother when the Co-op opened, the first self-service shop in Market Harborough. Until then, Mum would tramp from one specialist store to the next, clutching her list, and the shopkeeper would hurry around the shelves picking out the items desired. The Co-op was no less than a revolution. Maybe Market Harborough wasn't such a backwater after all — that was the feeling in town. Who needs London when you've got a Co-op?

So, you get the picture of my childhood. Middle England, middle class, safe, happy and comfortable, but a tad grey, unadventurous and unimaginative. My only exposure to culture was the occasional trip to the pantomime and, most exciting of all, twice to London for the International Motor Show at Earls Court with Dad and once to see *My Fair Lady*. The great highlight of the year was the annual holiday in Cornwall. Weighed down by six passengers and our luggage, it took twelve hours for the Wyvern to crawl the 280 miles to our rented cottage overlooking Trevone Bay. (Today, that journey takes five hours.) The car was so heavy that when we reached the Somerset market town of Frome three of us had to get out and walk so that the Wyvern could make it up the steep hill.

My mother and father were expecting me to follow in their path and stick around in lovely, sleepy Leicestershire. Why wouldn't they? What other kind of good life was there? Why leave Market Harborough when it offered everything a young man might want? Pubs, shops (including a Co-op!), a cinema, beautiful countryside, walks, fishing, a golf club, a rugby club and, if you must, a railway station to take you into Leicester. And there were dozens of pretty and hearty farmers' daughters to settle down with. What on earth does

Copyrighted Material

London have to rival such a contented life? All that squalor and pollution and fast women and con men.

Then William built himself a crystal radio from a kit — and any hope of me leading a quiet life in rural Leicestershire vanished overnight.

Copyrighted Material

Chapter 2

Night Flight to Luxembourg

The crystal radio was a very basic bit of equipment that required no batteries, just a long antenna to pick up signals from nearby transmitters. In our case that was the big plug-in radio set downstairs. Unlike me, William was born with a gift for fixing and building things, undaunted by any challenge to his resourcefulness. If you gave him all the tools and laid out all the parts, he could probably work out how to build a car. I am exaggerating only a little. He was so good with his hands, no one was surprised that he ended up becoming a fine sculptor, potter and painter.

He finished assembling the radio kit in no time, and then we waited, all sleepy innocence, for Mum and Dad to put their heads around the door to say goodnight. Once the lights were out and they were safely back downstairs, he pulled his secret contraption from under the bed and plugged in the headphones. This was pretty well the height of mischief for ten- and eleven-year-old boys in the late fifties. To listen to American rhythm and blues music when we should have been getting our sleep in for school was to break an

Copyrighted Material

unwritten commandment. This degenerate music from across the Atlantic was regarded as seriously damaging to the development of the nation's moral health. In the court of parental opinion, this was William's crime, but I was a willing accessory to it, the lookout.

A little nervous, I kept my eyes on the door handle, ready to throw a slipper at William, but hearing the tinny buzz from my bed, I was soon filled with curiosity and envy. I think William must have picked up on my restlessness and excitement because after a while he said, 'Hey, come and listen to this. It's Radio Luxembourg. We'll take it in turns, one song each.' He's a good bloke, my big brother.

I lay down next to him, both of us staring at the ceiling — and my adventure in music began. Luxembourg was an independent station they were all talking about at his school, playing music you could hear nowhere else at the time. From the moment the sound erupted into my eardrum, it was obvious the songs being played were a very far cry from *Family Favourites* — and strictly not for grown-ups, especially ones who smoked pipes and polished their cars in the driveway on Sundays.

By the time I crept back to my own bed an hour or two later, I was unable to sleep, my head buzzing with the rasping rebel voices of Little Richard and Elvis Presley and heaven knows who else. I have tried to explain the utter, heart-thumping thrill of that moment to my children, who are plugged into their music of choice all day long. It's very hard for anyone born after 1960 to understand there was ever a world of virtually no media, least of all for the younger generation, no connection to a world beyond the playground, the street and the fields in which you played.

Until I was about ten, the *Eagle* comic, *Children's Hour* on the radio at five o'clock, featuring *Dick Barton Special Agent*, and *Family Favourites* — these were the frontiers of fun for a British child inside the home. On *Family Favourites*, mums, dads and the kids sat around the house radio and rang in their song requests. Most of the tunes

Copyrighted Material

played were crooning love ballads and big-band jazz, the kind of music that has young boys and girls staring at the clock, wondering when they might be released to go and do something fun, like build an Airfix model aeroplane. Tommy Steele and Max Bygraves were about as funky as it got.

In the mid- to late fifties, Lonnie Donegan, the 'King of Skiffle', was probably the coolest and most original act in Britain, with great appeal among the younger audience, but even he would have been considered far too racy for *Family Favourites*. That was until Cliff Richard and his backing band, The Shadows, turned up on the scene with 'Move It', probably the best rock 'n' roll song ever to come out of Britain. I'm serious. It was so good, so raw, that the older generation were seriously worried by its shameless lustfulness – all that sexual lip-curling and hip-swaying. It's a cracking piece of music, and it's a great shame that, very soon after its release and the minor scandal it triggered, Cliff retreated from the edge and took the safer path so readily. The Shadows were a highly talented band and guitarist Hank Marvin one of the greats.

The BBC was very much part of the traditional establishment, the voice of the older generation and by far the most powerful cultural 'influencer' of the day. The Corporation's efforts to thwart the young by controlling their tastes, feeding them homely and harmless fare and shielding them from dangerous American trends, was soon to prove futile. If anything, their effort to control and brainwash kids into liking the same music as Mummy and Daddy fuelled a powerful counterculture, as represented by Radio Luxembourg. What was emerging in the late fifties and early sixties – with the kids plugged into their little radio sets after the curfew – a few years down the line was going to lead to the unchaining of youth culture and a wild reinvention of popular music. Everything that the powers at the BBC and the wider establishment feared most.

The television wasn't much more exciting than BBC radio, once

Copyrighted Material

the space-age thrill of it had worn off. For a start, it only had two channels, BBC and ITV, and most of the programming was aimed at an adult audience, the schedule full of cookery programmes, *Hancock's Half Hour* and Westerns. The fate of the music programme *Six-Five Special* was proof that the BBC was hostile to catering for the tastes of the young. When it was launched in early 1957, it enjoyed instant success and was watched by millions, but the men in suits found all that swaying and strumming less appealing and soon began to interfere, putting pressure on producer Jack Good to include educational and information elements to the show. Good resigned in protest after a year and when ITV produced their own music show, *Oh Boy!*, playing non-stop music, as Good had wanted, the ratings for *Six-Five Special* plunged and the BBC pulled the plug on the programme at the end of 1958, making the disingenuous claim that its fall in popularity vindicated their decision.

With the BBC seen as the moral authority over culture, television was still regarded in many middle-class households as mildly corrupting, especially ITV, with its vulgar gameshows. I was never allowed to watch ITV – 'the other channel' – and I was strictly banned from watching *Coronation Street* because the characters didn't speak properly. Like most kids, I lived in a bubble, a perfectly happy bubble, but a very small one, in which most of the fun stopped as soon as I was called in from outside to get washed up for supper.

But Will's tinny little radio, the cheapest of gadgets, changed all that, wiping out the boundaries of my imagination and allowing me to dream. Until that night, I used to save up my pocket money for a bag of sweets, a comic like *Eagle* or *Victor* or maybe a new Matchbox car. Now all I wanted was a radio and some headphones of my own. I took on as many chores in the garden and around the house as my mother could find for me, and in a few weeks I was the proud owner of my own. My parents were fine about Will and me listening to the radio during the evenings, possibly because it freed up the television

Copyrighted Material

for them, but they trusted us to switch them off at night. I'm afraid we failed there, and we'd head off to school puffy-eyed and foggy-headed. That crystal radio might well explain why I was no scholar. The signal was not the most reliable and I spent a fair amount of time walking around the bedroom or dozing off in the corner in an effort get it back.

The radio became my portal into another dimension, a secret door to open every night that would allow me to float away into a fantasy world, whisking me from my bedroom in the English shires across the Atlantic and into the more vibrant and colourful world of the United States. It was a world constructed in my mind in sound and voices, not in visuals, because there were very few images of the place in circulation, no media to convey them. Watching *Gunsmoke* hardly gave you an insight into the life of ordinary Americans. My impressions of the country were built on the songs I heard coming out of that little radio set. I was never going to stay and settle down in Leicestershire. Radio Luxembourg had put an emphatic end to that possibility.

Rock music, rhythm music, rhythm 'n' blues, the new popular music, beat music . . . no one really knew what to call the new sounds emerging; they only knew that they were not jazz, not folk, not ballads, not big band, not even rock 'n' roll because, by 1958, the Teddy Boys had cleared off and that revolutionary movement had already passed. These were new sounds in search of an identity and an audience — and they found a very willing one in me and Will, and in virtually everyone under the age of about twenty. There was nothing unique about my experience. Far from it. We were part of a huge nationwide movement. We just didn't know it yet. We were biding our time in our bedrooms.

This is possibly going to sound far-fetched, but I have always believed it to be true: pop music, rock music — whatever you want to call it — filled the great emotional void in young people's lives at a

Copyrighted Material