

A Tribute To Jackie Leven

By

Frank Bangay



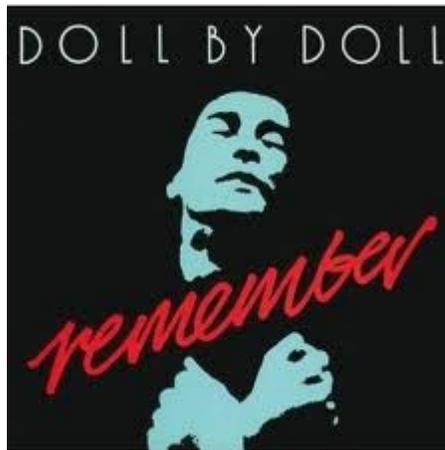
My first introduction to Jackie Leven came in 1978. At the time I was living in a mental health hostel. I was reading a copy of the N, M, E. (The New Musical Express in the old days). I read a short article about Doll By Doll, the band that Jackie was in at the time. The article talked about how they were doing benefit gigs for R, D, Lang's Philadelphia Association. I didn't know much about R, D, Lang back then. However I knew that he was offering an alternative way of thinking about mental health. I had also heard good things about the Philadelphia Association. At the time these things were starting to interest me. The article inspired to me go and see Doll by Doll live, and to buy their records.

Jackie Leven was born in Scotland in the town of Kirkcaldy. In the kingdom of Fife as he would put it. His father was an Irish Cockney from London, his Mother was from a Romany background. They had relocated to Scotland. When Jackie was growing up he felt like an outsider, and often found himself being picked on by local gangs. Jackie went to the same school as ex Labour Prime minister Gordon Brown. However their lives went in very different directions. When Jackie was fourteen he was expelled from school for taking drugs. By the time he was 16 he was married. The hostility of the local gangs then forced Jackie to leave the kingdom of Fife So he travelled round Europe sometimes working as a labourer. He then settled in Devon. He started playing in folk clubs. Around this time he released an album called Control. Unfortunately I haven't heard the album yet but I have read a favorable review of the record. While in

Devon Jackie met and befriended guitarist Jo Shaw. They moved to London moving into a squat in Maida Vale. It may be hard to believe it now but back then a part of Maida Vale was very run down and formed part of the West London squatting community. This is the area by Little Venice, and the area that runs on to the Harrow Road, the south part of Elgin Avenue. (Joe Strummer then with the 101ers was also squatting in the area at the time.) Here Jackie and Jo met up with mutual friend drummer David McIntosh and together with bass player Robin Spreafico they formed Doll By Doll. Their name came from a poem by E E Cummings, the man who invented poems with no capitals in the verse. The poem that the name Doll By Doll comes from is called (the enormous room,) I have never read any E E Cummings so I can't comment further. Doll By Doll then ventured out on to the new wave dominated music scene, playing round the pub rock circuit. They built up a fan following, but also received quite a bit of indifference and sometimes hostility. At one gig in Silvertown in London's docklands, then a rough place, they got attacked by members of the audience. The attack left members of the band with injuries. As such they were hospitalised overnight.

Doll By Doll were well known for their drug excesses, But their music was coming from a very real place. A place that can be uncomfortable. Musically they had many influences. There was the influence of American West Coast bands. They had a two guitar interplay like the Quicksilver Messenger Service, also 70s new wave band Television. Then there was the influence of the Velvet Underground. Doll By Doll liked classic rock and roll music. But underneath the surface there was a lot more going on. I could feel a little Van Morrison coming through on occasions Then there was a blues and folk influence. The band also had soulful harmonies, and Jackie had a powerful soulful voice. He sang in a baritone and sometimes his voice would slip into a falsetto. Jackie's songs came from life and experiences. Sometimes from desperate places. But the band also had a sense of humour. Jackie once described Doll By Doll as psychotic woodmen.

In early 1979 Doll By Doll released their first album. It was called Remember, it met with mixed response. It is a powerful record. The opening track Butcher Boy starts off with a chorus of crashing guitars, then it strips down to David McIntosh's drumming, then comes Jackie's spine chilling vocals. then the song takes off again. Another song Sleeping Partner is a true story of an ex girlfriend who was murdered. Then there is the epic More Than Human where Jackie sings "there is a land beyond the spoken word, communication that only some have heard". Another highlight of Remember is the soulful love song Janice. The song is sung over a reggae tune and mentions the Van Morrison song Warm Love. One of the musical highlights of Remember is the guitar playing of Joe Shaw. The cover of Remember features a picture of Antonin Artaud.



Around this time Doll By Doll went on tour supporting the then popular American new wave band Devo. However for some reason they got kicked of the tour. While they made no attempts to glamorise the fact, it became known that before Doll By Doll Jackie Leven had been in prison three times. Another member of the band had spent time in a psychiatric hospital. This may help to explain why some people approached the band with caution. I read recently that one critic at the time described Jackie as a cross between Van Morrison and a psychopath. Around 1980 I went to see Doll By Doll at the Half Moon pub in Herne Hill in south London. I remember asking the person at the door what time Doll By Doll would be on. Jackie was standing near the door and he came up and said hello to me. I think I said hello back. Despite being a big man who had lived a tough life. Jackie had his share of vulnerabilities. I recently read that shortly before the release of Remember Jackie tried to commit suicide. Thankfully he was unsuccessful. In the 1990s Jackie said that during the Doll By Doll days he was unhappy and determined to make an art out his unhappiness.

After the release of Remember bass player Robin Spreafico left the band. He was replaced by Tony Waite who would stay with the band for the next few years. In the autumn of 1979 Doll By Doll released their second album Gipsy Blood. The record had a more streamlined approach but still contained the darkness and disturbance of Remember. Journalist Paul Du Noyer then with the N,M,E was one of the people who at the time sang Doll By Doll's praises. In recent years he has described Gipsy Blood as being 'probably the most neglected great rock records of its era. I share that opinion myself. In the title track Jackie sings about his Romany roots. Another track Stripshow talks about the coldness and alienation of the world of striptease. There was a time when I used to watch striptease acts in grubby pubs. As such I feel that I can identify with this song. The Human Face features quotes from Antonin Artaud, it also introduces the Haunted Valley Singers, three women backing singers. The song is something of an epic. Hey Sweetheart is a tender love song. The verses are gentle, very much folk music. On each chorus the band build up to a sonic climax only to go quiet again for the next verse. These musical extremes ran through a number of Doll By Doll songs. I also feel they were in Jackie Leven's voice. This is

something that I felt had an effect on me. The album features two Jo Shaw songs. Musically Binary Fiction is quite funky. Jo's other composition is the disturbing Endgames. Another Jackie Leven song on the album is Highland Rain, a song that harks back to Jackie's Scottish childhood. The last two verses end with the image of a Falcon searching for its prey. The album ends with a poem by Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, called When A Man Dies. The poem was translated into English by Russian translator and survivor poet Richard McKane. In When A Man Dies Jackie sings about returning from the funeral of a poet. Gipsy Blood is a truly great record.

Around the time that Gipsy Blood was released Doll By Doll went on another tour. This time they supported Hawkwind. Again they got kicked off the tour. The band had trouble fitting in with the musical climate of the day. They were a little bit older than most of the punk and new wave bands. Their hair was a bit longer. To quote from an article written by one time editor of Zigzag magazine Kris Needs. "There is no way you could call Doll By Doll a punk band in terms of what that meant at the time. But if it meant people from the street, the gutter even, being honest with themselves and playing emotionally charged music, then this was the truest punk band of all". Despite not fitting in with punk Mick Jones of the Clash was a big fan. He used to go to their gigs, and in the 1990s Jackie became friendly with David Thomas, who in the late 70s was singer with popular American punk/post punk band Pere Ube. They worked together on a few occasions. Doll By Doll sometimes got dismissed as heavy metal. However I feel this was an oversight. On stage they could be loud with Jackie's powerful voice rising over the top. I felt they were closer to the American psychedelic bands that they admired. They could be disturbing. But they had some great songs and harmonies, and they could rock.



Doll by Doll

In 1980 the band left their record label (Automatic.) They signed a contract with Magnet records. In 1981 they released their third album. The record is simply called Doll By Doll, it features a psychedelic cover. The record contains some fine songs. There is the autobiographical Main Travelled Roads. The story of a son that Jackie had lost contact with. The song is a beautiful piece of Celtic soul, a few years before the term Celtic soul became popular. For a little while it looked

like Main Travelled Roads would be a hit. Sadly the hit never happened. Another song The Perfect Romance is about an attempted suicide that thankfully failed, with Jackie taking some good advice from a friend. The album also contains some lighter songs. For example Soon New Life is about a baby being born. On another song Up Jackie sings "I want to be up, Don't want to be down again. I seem to remember this record getting the most favourable reviews of the Doll By Doll albums. I played it a lot at the time. Sadly despite this new commercial approach the record failed to take off. By 1982 Jackie was the only founder member left in the band. But with all the disappointments that the band had, you can understand them getting fed up with it. Jackie carried on with Doll By Doll. His then new girlfriend Helen Turner shared the vocals and played keyboards. The rest of the band was made up of session musicians. They made one last album The Grand Passion. It was a pleasant album with nice songs. But Doll By Doll made up mostly of session musicians [Including Dave Gilmour – Ed] somehow didn't seem like Doll By Doll. In early 1983 the band finally split up. Before we move on I just want to say that Nick Mobs the man who signed Doll By Doll to their first label (Automatic records) Was also the man who signed the Sex Pistols to E. M. I.

After Doll By Doll Jackie started a solo career. However the career was cut short in 1984 when he was mugged. One of the muggers kicked Jackie in the throat, he couldn't talk or sing for a year afterwards. Understandably Jackie felt awful and tried to do himself in with heroin. However he started to cure himself with a holistic cure. This involved homeopathy and acupuncture. When Jackie had cured himself with help from a lady called Carol Wolf he set up the CORE Trust. A charity that helps people come off heroin through holistic cures. Princess Diana used to be a patron of the CORE Trust. She also encouraged Jackie to start singing again.



Jackie Leven and Princess Diana

He then met up with his old mates Jo Shaw and David McIntosh from Doll By Doll. Together with ex Sex Pistols/ Rich Kids bassist Glen Matlock, they formed Concrete, Bullet-proof Invisible. However the band was short lived, It would be interesting to hear what they sounded like. Did they make any recordings? [A 3 track single released in 1988 Frank from what I can see – Big Tears written by

Matlock and released on Radioactive which I seem to recall was a move by MCA (?) to look credible to the indie market? Goodbye Mr MacKenzie were also signed to Radioactive. The single was released in US as a 4 track 12 inch on Dimension Records, the extra track having been rejected for inclusion in the soundtrack to the 'Sid and Nancy' film – Ed again]

I did read that after Concrete, Bullet-proof, Invisible split up Jackie went up to Scotland to get some peace of mind. Around this time Jackie became friends with American poet Robert Bly. Mr Bly is a part of the Men's Movement. Jackie became a part of the British branch of the Men's Movement. I don't know much about the Men's Movement, but if it gives men a chance to understand themselves better, then it is a good thing.

In 1994 Jackie released his first solo album. "The Mystery Of Love Is Greater Than The Mystery Of Death" it shows Jackie on fine creative form. His voice is still strong. The mugging cruelly robbed Jackie of his falsetto but his voice continued to be a strong instrument. The opening track Clay Jug features the recently mentioned Robert Bly and Mike Scott from the Waterboys reading the cosmic poetry that opens and closes the track. In the middle Jackie sings the song. Shadow In My Eye is a song that relates to Jackie's prison experiences, The Crazy Song reminds me of the Patsy Cline song Crazy, the grand Call Mother A Lonely Field and the autobiographical Farm Boy are two songs that wouldn't be out of place being performed by Doll By Doll. Heartsick Land carries on the theme of Main Travelled Roads but is more desperate. Jackie sings about staggering drunkenly through the pouring rain. I think that after the album was released Jackie's son got in contact with him. The album also includes a version of I Say A Little Prayer. A song made famous by Dionne Warwick and Aretha Franklin. Jackie sings the song from a feminine perspective. The moment I wake up before I put on my make up. While combing my hair now, and wondering which dress to wear now. It's not easy to imagine Jackie in a dress and make up. But it sounds great hearing him sing about it. I feel that the song could have been a hit, had it been released as a single. The Mystery Of Love got good reviews.

In 1995 Jackie released his second solo album Forbidden Songs Of The Dying West. The production wasn't quite as strong as on The Mystery Of Love but the record has some fine songs on it. For example Some Ancient Misty Morning, or Men In Prison, another song relating to Jackie's prison experience. Another of Jackie's albums from the 1990s is called Fairytales For Hardmen. As the title suggests this album contains a number of songs about being a man. Songs that look at the struggles a man has with himself. On Extremely Violent Man Jackie sings about a man who is unable to control his violence, until the violence takes him over. A frightening song. Another song Boy Trapped In A Mans Life carries a similar theme. Here however the man is asking, how can he move on from here? The other side of the coin is a song called A Fear Of Women. Here as the title suggests Jackie sings about a man being frightened of women, and unable to form a relationship. Jackie dealt in depth with the issues of being a man. What he was singing about here was extremely important. I could hear a little of this in the

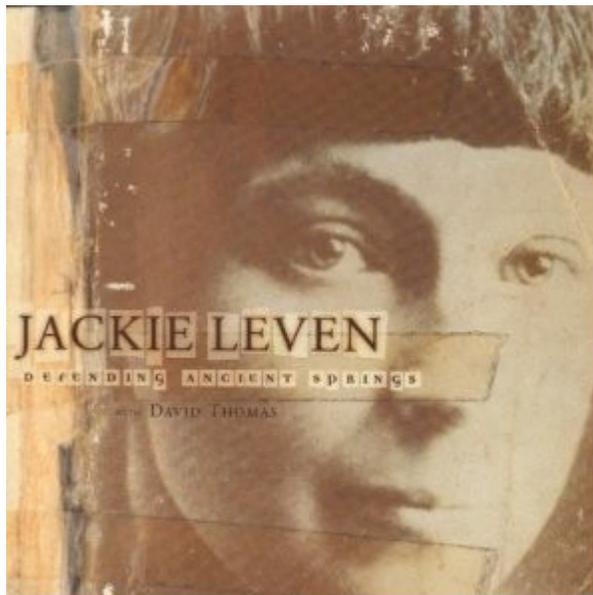
Doll By Doll days. For example in The Human Face he sings about “ sad men in leather, who fight over girls”, In Stripshow he sings about “two drunken playboys trying hard to be pals”. Since the end of the 1970s Jackie songs have been an influence on my poetry, and have inspired me to in my own way write about some of the men’s issues that affect me. Also on Fairy Tales For Hardmen is a song called Poortown, about the town in the Kingdom of Fife where he grew up. He portrays the town as a place of closed down industry and desperate people. He sings about his mother grieving the loss of his younger brother who died from taking Heroin, and how he left Poortown to live in sorrow, on the run. On this moving song Jackie accompanies himself on acoustic guitar. Another acoustic song on this album is Desolation Blues. In the first verse Jackie sings about a relationship coming to an end. In the second verse he sings about walking alone through the Scottish highlands. In the third verse he is at a friend’s funeral and wondering if his friend would be able to help him were he still alive. Writing this has made me think of a song by blues artist Bukka White called “Strange Place Blues” Here Bukka is sitting by his mother’s graveside wishing he could see her face again.

I saw Jackie perform shortly after Fairytale came out. He said how after calling his first album The Mystery Of Love Is Greater Than The Mystery Of Death, and calling the second album Forbidden Songs Of The Dying West, he wanted to call the new album “It’s Always Better When Rigor Mortis Sets In,” but the record company disapproved. Jackie had a great sense of humour. On stage he often worked on his own. Sometimes he was accompanied by a couple of other musicians, for example keyboard player Michael Cosgrave. In-between his songs he would tell stories. Sometimes they would be a bit over the top, but they would always be funny. On record Jackie liked experimenting with different sounds. While the folk and blues influences would be at the base of his music, there would be a lot of other things going on.

Jackie was very much a storyteller. One song Marble City Bar is about a time when he went to Ireland with Doll By Doll . They were in the bar of a hotel where they were staying and Jackie felt that he needed to get out and get some fresh air. He was walking along and saw a man playing with his children. As Jackie walked past the man said Hello. Jackie ignored him, thinking to himself why is the man saying hello to me when I don’t know him. He went down to a nearby river then came back again. As he walked back he passed the man who again said Hello. Still Jackie said nothing. Then he thought to himself, you’re a man from the Kingdom of Fife and you cant even accept a greeting from a stranger. On youtube there is a live performance of another song called My Philosophy. Jackie introduces it by saying this song is about how two London policemen helped me out of the worst depression that I have ever been in, God bless those men.

Another Jackie Leven record Defending Ancient Springs features three collaborations with the previously mentioned David Thomas. These include a

version of You've Lost That Loving Feeling. A song that was a big hit for the Righteous Brothers in the mid 1960s. The album also features collaborations with his wife Deborah Greenwood and features some fine songs by Jackie. For example Single Father and Keys To The Forest. There is also a translation of a poem called His Hands Are Pale With Holy Kisses by a Russian poet called Marina Tsvetayeva. Her photograph appears on the front cover of the CD. On the back cover is a picture of Jackie taken during the Doll By Doll days.



As well as Jackie's official albums he released records through his fan club, The Haunted Valley. These included several live albums, I have three of them. One was recorded at the Twelve Bar Club in Denmark Street in London's West End. One was recorded at different venues around the world. One was recorded in a men's prison in Norway.

Around 2005 and 2006 I had a little contact with Jackie. He took part in a Mad Pride gig. Mad Pride being a survivor run mental health organisation that I am involved with. I had a little chat with Jackie and he seemed like a nice bloke. The organiser wanted to put me on at the end of the evening. I was performing with guitarist Tunde Busari who I sometimes work with. He is a good friend of mine, and I suggested to him that it would be difficult to follow Jackie. However my friend said that nobody is the star at this gig. This was a nice idea. Sadly after Jackie had finished people started to leave. But Jackie stayed around to cheer us on. At the gig I told Jackie about the Kevin Coyne tribute album that I was involved with putting together. Jackie said he was interested in contributing to the record. He also suggested me asking Kevin Hewick to contribute. Kevin Hewick is an underrated singer songwriter. In the early 1980s he worked alongside another underrated singer songwriter Patrick Fitzgerald. Kevin would also sometimes open the show for Doll By Doll. Jackie helped to put me in touch with Kevin Hewick. Kevin's contribution is one of my favourite tracks on the album.

Jackie was also interested in fellow Mad Pride artist DJ Unfit For Work. Jackie wanted to include a track from DJ Unfit For Work's CD on his next album. I put DJ Unfit For Work in touch with Jackie. As such we spent a while communicating with each other by email. Jackie then asked me if he could write a song about Kevin Coyne, I said yes. Jackie then sent me a song called Here Come The Urban Ravens. It is a soulful banjo driven song. In the song Jackie sings about Kevin Coyne coming back as a raven. When he sent me the disc he sent me a card . In the card he wrote here is my song about Kevin, (and by extension all of us.). On the front of the card is a photograph titled Rock Shelf, Bamburg Castle. It is a view along a beach with some huge rocks on one side. In the distance is Bamburg Castle bathed in a haze at the dawning of the day. I imagine this is in Northumberland. Also inside the card Jackie wrote, On this card - my dear departed mother's favourite place in the world. Here Comes The Urban Ravens also appeared on Jackie's album Oh What A Blow The Phantom Dealt Me, along with Mellow My Madness by DJ Unfit For Work.

By this time Jackie was married, and had settled down in the village of Botley in Hampshire. However he continued to create and perform. In the last two decades Jackie was extremely prolific. It is hard to keep up with all the records he made. In February last year Jackie's brother died from an alcohol related illness. This made Jackie stop drinking. Jackie liked a drink, and there were times when it got out of hand for him. Debora Greenwood said how he looked fine at first, but then started to lose a lot of weight. Last August Jackie got diagnosed with cancer. He carried on performing for a while but then became too ill and had to cancel gigs. Then last November he lost the fight. It was unexpected, but to quote a song by the Reverend Garry Davis "Death Don't Have No Mercy In This Land" Sadly sometimes that is how it seems. I last saw Jackie live in January of last year. He was doing a free gig at a pub in Leytonstone East London. It was a good gig I never got to speak to Jackie, partly because the venue was very crowded, partly because I felt a bit shy. It is an old problem with me to lose my bottle like this. In later years Kevin Coyne got to recognise me. I was nearly always at his London gigs. He started to say hello to me, I would say hello back, but I never felt able to get into a conversation with him. Then in 2004 I interviewed Kevin, at the time not knowing about his illness. Sadly Kevin died before the interview was published. I wish now that I had made the effort to go up to Jackie at that gig and say hello.

Jackie's death came as a shock. .But it is also a miracle what he did survive in his life. In particular the 1980s when he survived that mugging and the heroin addiction that followed. To come back in the 1990s as a extremely prolific songwriter. Often sounding like a man coming through. Jackie has left behind a lot of things for us to value. The CORE trust continues to help people, Jackie has also left behind many records for us to discover. I will miss the stories he told at his gigs. But from time to time I will remember some of the stories that I heard.

If you are investigating Jackie's work for the first time it is hard to know where to start. He has made so many records. For Doll By Doll I would recommend

Remember and Gipsy Blood. In terms of his solo career I would recommend The Mystery Of Love Is Greater Than The Mystery Of Death, and Fairy Tales For Hardmen. While I haven't heard it yet a number of people have spoke highly of one of his later records Lovers At The Gun Club. You will probably find some Jackie Leven records in your local library. There is also quite a bit of Jackie up on you tube. For now I would just like to say God Bless you Jackie, and thanks for the music and memories that you have left behind for us to value.

Frank Bangay
March 2012.



There is a website for Jackie at
www.jackieleven.co.uk

There are also some obituaries to Jackie here are a few of them

www.telegraph.co.uk

www.gardian.co.uk

www.louderthanwar.com/Jackie-Leven-an-obituary-by--Kevin-Hewick

Here Kevin talks fondly about the Doll By Doll days and his friendship with Jackie and the other members of the band.

At www.bbc.co.uk you can read about some of the tributes that have been made to Jackie

At s159645853.websitehome.co.uk you can read a review of a Jackie Leven gig.

There is also

En.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jackie_Leven

For Doll By Doll visit

www.trakmarx.com

Here Kris Needs writes an excellent article on Doll By Doll and his friendship with

the band. The article is titled Night Of The Psychotic Woodmen.
At www.viciousriff.com there is a review of a Doll By Doll gig
At www.telegraph.co.uk/British-rocks-lost-masterpiece by Neil McCormick. Here he writes about Doll By Doll and their album Gipsy Blood.

For the CORE trust visit www.coretrust.co.uk

Blessings from Frank Bangay
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Jackie Leven played Rugfest every year, helping it go from an evening of acoustic music in a tent to a full on Festival of Fun. Last year I, *Ed*, had the privilege of sharing the stage on a rainy Friday with Jackie Leven and Mick Ralphs Band. Rain? What rain? I texted Untidy Clive Product in Berlin "I'm sat on a bale of straw in a wet field in Oxfordshire watching Jackie Leven"