



Authorgraph No.57 ? Roger McGough

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Roger McGough interviewed by **Chris Powling**.

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Roger McGough's house is exactly what you'd expect: thin, not as tall as it looks, arty inside without making a show of it and with its charm and quirkiness kept carefully under wraps as if to allow you any space that's going. Very much like Roger himself, in fact. It's also part of a terrace that has one of London's most famous street markets at its far end ? a townie's house. Now that *is* Roger:

?Summertime's great

(except for the sun)

Holly and Mistletoe

make my nose run

Autumn leaves and I swoon

it's no fun

Having hay fever all the year round.?

Hence the back yard turned into a conservatory (plant-less) and a small sitting-out area at chimney-pot level noticeably lacking in leafiness. When Roger wants to get away from it all, he makes for the sea not the country. And that, too, is an aspect which goes deep:

?In my bedroom at night I used to lie

in bed (best place to lie really), I

used to lie there, especially in winter,

and listen to the foghorns being

sounded all down the river. I could

picture the ship moving its way out of

the docks into the channel and out

into the Irish Sea. It was exciting. All

those exotic places. All those

exciting adventures.?

This comes from his collection of short stories, **The Stowaways**, which draws heavily on his own childhood on Merseyside. ?The sea was always there ? it represented the Great Escape. People were always coming and going for one reason or another. Mainly, though, because it was war-time. Until I was about nine I thought that the difference between men and women was that the men wore uniform. My father worked on the docks and was one of those generations of men who were frightened of books. My mother quite liked them in a Mazo de la Roche kind of way but we weren't at all literary at home. Like most working-class parents they saw education as a chance to improve yourself ? to get on in

life which meant getting away from Liverpool. People often ask me now why I left the place. The interesting question for me is why I stayed so long!?

For a poet, his schooling was oddly un-literary too. St Mary's was a standard grammar school of the time – the arts down-graded in favour of more *serious* subjects and the staff firmly convinced that the best teaching method was carrot and stick... without the carrot. I learned French and Latin with an Irish accent – and had a year of Gaelic because the English master didn't like English very much. None of this bothered me particularly. I looked bookish because I wore glasses but wasn't at all bookish really. I enjoyed being out and about with my mates.

In fact, he failed Literature at O-Level. Somehow his preferred reading as a youngster – of **The Wizard**, **Hotspur**, **Adventure** and **The Rover** – failed to compensate for not studying the set-books. The only literature that meant anything to me when I was growing up, except for the rhymes and verses my mother used to sing me as a toddler, was the Choral Verse we were encouraged to learn to improve our elocution. I was good at this. I got a grade B in a public competition reciting 'Jabberwocky' once. Such triumphs apart, any artistic ability didn't show in my school work at all.

He went on to read French and Geography at the University of Hull. Why French and Geography? Because those were my top marks at A-Level. Why Hull? Because it was near the sea and close-ish to home. Going to Exeter, say, would have been like taking a trip up the Amazon. Besides I fancied the blue-and-gold scarf.

Ah, yes. But wasn't Hull also the workplace of rather a well-known poet called Philip Larkin? That's true. He was actually sub-warden of my Hall of Residence. But I didn't talk to him much. I wouldn't have known what to say. At the time I found contemporary poetry very daunting. To write it, I felt you had to be travelled and widely-read and put in a lot of classical references. Nevertheless, it was at Hull that the literary bug finally bit – through French verse rather than English. It was Rimbaud and Baudelaire who inspired him. I remember one night when I just started writing – right through till dawn and into the following day. It was a great outpouring to do with discovering myself – not very good but *passionate*. I decided there and then that whatever job I actually did, that was what I *was*: a poet.

But a job he still had to have. So, fortified by the poems he'd published in a student newspaper and by the encouragement he'd received when he finally managed to approach Philip Larkin, Roger entered the stick-and-carrot trade. To his surprise he greatly enjoyed teaching – first at a Kirby comprehensive school, then an F.E. college in Liverpool.

Liverpool? The place from which everyone wanted to escape? Not any more. In the city centre, which he'd hardly visited as a child, things were happening. The clubs and pubs were alive with the sound of rock music – and poetry. Along with his mates Brian Patten and Adrian Henry, Roger was soon part of that astonishing Scene that still seems synonymous with the sixties. As an offshoot from his poems, he began writing dialogue and Pinteresque sketches for a group that included John Gorman and Michael McCartney, whose brother Paul had also begun to do rather well. The group rapidly acquired a student following, visited the Edinburgh Festival, were taken up by local TV and finally, as 'The Scaffold', found we'd become famous. With Brian Epstein as their manager, wild years followed – especially after what Roger calls 'our white suit period' when songs like 'Thank you very much' and 'Lily the Pink' had converted their student audience into a national and even international one. I'd be doing gigs with Jimi Hendrix and Elton John, meeting Bob Dylan, writing the script for 'The Yellow Submarine', rushing off to places like Milan on Friday, Huddersfield on Saturday, somewhere in Belgium on Monday, and it never occurred to me to stop over anywhere and take a look. We were always rushing off to the next engagement.

Of course, the money was good. A bit better than I got as a teacher, he says and nods at a watercolour on his sitting-room wall. It's a picture of the small mansion, like a miniature stately home, he owned during this period. Mind you, most of it vanished by the usual routes – you give away everything or sign it away to record companies and managements. It's surprising how little there is left.

Not that this seems to bother him over-much. While all this was going on, he was still working at his poetry both as

writer and performer. I suppose the fame helped in a way but it's a bit double-edged. In some ways it was actually a hindrance because I tended to be regarded as a sort of pop-star with pretensions. People kept saying, 'I believe your hobby is writing poetry,' that kind of thing. By 1967 his 'hobby' had already led to **Summer with Monica**, his first collection of verse to be published, quickly followed by **The Mersey Sound**, **The Liverpool Scene** and seven other books of poetry to date. For adults, that is. So at what point did he start writing for children?

It's a question he can't answer. 'Because I'm not sure I ever did start at any rate consciously. It's just that all of my poetry is intended for the widest possible audience and some of it seems to be okay for kids.' This, for instance:

*'The cord of my new dressing-gown
he helps me tie*

Then on to my father's shoulder
held high

The world at night with my little eye
I spy

The moon close enough to touch
I try

Unheard of silver elephants have learned
to fly

Giants fence with searchlights
in the sky

Too soon into the magic shelter
he and I

Air raids are so much fun
I wonder why

In the bunk below, a big boy
starts to cry.'

Is 'My Little Eye' for children or adults? Well, it first appeared in his adult collection **Melting into the Foreground** (Viking 1986) but there seems no reason at all why children shouldn't share it. It's at least as accessible as the work of Geoffrey Trease, Robert Westall, Michelle Magorian or other prose-chroniclers of World War II for children.

Of course, over the last decade or so, he has become much more aware of children as a potential audience for his verse. In the mid-seventies when I was on the run from the road and a broken marriage, I took a fellowship in Creative Writing at Loughborough University. This was a sort of refuge, an oasis. The playfulness of poems like 'Mr Noselighter', which was suggested by my son Finn, came very much as a relief. This playfulness, picked up by Kestrel in books like his collection **You Tell Me** with Michael Rosen and later the magnificent **Sky in the Pie**, rapidly established him as a favourite with teachers and, more importantly, their pupils. My work for children is all about words and playing with words there's a fun element I enjoy enormously. Also kids respond so warmly. There's none of the backbiting and savagery you have to put up with when writing for the adult theatre, say, when your work can play to a packed house and still get a killing review.'

So, whether it's newly written or re-cycled from his adult verse, there's bound to be more McGough for children on the way. His sons Finn (18) and Tom (16) are on the college/GCSE trail now but his marriage to Hilary, a television producer of science programmes, has brought him a new source of inspiration: son Mattie, aged two. As always, his future poems will be written longhand, in ink, across the pages of a big, bound ledger usually kept in the large, sunny

room at the top of his house where he works at odd moments during the day. For the distractions don't get any less. We caught him between trips to Germany and Spain, his poetry readings are as popular as ever, he's much in demand for conferences and literary awards, and soon begins work on a film script of **Peter Rabbit** with the company that made **The Snowman** cartoon. Mattie needn't worry, though:

*The Writer of this poem
Never ceases to amaze
He's one in a million, billion
(or so the poem says!).?*

Photographs by **Richard Mewton**.

The Books

(published in hardback by Viking Kestrel and in paperback by Puffin unless otherwise indicated)

The Great Smile Robbery, 0 670 80021 X, £5.50; 0 14 03.1437 7, £1.50 pbk

An Imaginary Menagerie, 0 670 82330 9, £6.95

The Kingfisher Book of Comic Verse(ed.), Kingfisher, 0 86272 217 9, £6.95

Nailing the Shadow, 0 670 81801 1, £6.95; 0 14 03.2390 2, pbk (summer 1989)

Noah's Ark, with Ljiljana Rylands, Picture Lions, 0 00 663068 5, £1.75 pbk

Sky in the Pie, 0 670 81795 3, £5.95; 0 14 03.1612 4, £1.99 pbk

The Stowaways, 0 670 80135 6, £4.50; 0 14 03.1649 3, £1.75 pbk

Strictly Private(ed.), 0 670 80019 8, £7.50; 0 14 03.2831 9, £2.50 pbk

You Tell Me, with Michael Rosen, 0 7226 5548 7, £5.95; 0 14 03.1286 2, £1.75 pbk

Counting Book, 0 670 82671 5, £6.95 (October 1989)

Helen Highwater, £5.95 (October 1989)

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