

Tilt by Scott Walker: A remarkable album by a serious musician

By Tony Cornwell
4 June 2002

Corporate mergers in television, radio and record industries have resulted in the coordination of “play lists” around demographics. “Pop” or “Popular” music therefore has become overwhelmingly self-referential, genre specific and backwards looking.

In this atmosphere it is unsurprising that a remarkable album released in 1995—*Tilt*—written, arranged and sung by the notoriously reclusive Scott Walker should have slipped by like a ship in the night. While Walker has only recorded three albums in the last 20 years and is barely known to the wider public, he is praised and imitated by many musicians including David Bowie, Brian Eno, Nick Cave, Marc Almond and others.

Tilt, is original, confronting and evocative and anyone interested in music—classical, modern or whatever—should take the time to listen. By itself the level of musicianship is never less than stunning. Instrumentation ranges from the London Sinfonia strings, Central Methodist Hall Pipe Organ, electric guitar bass, drums, chitarrones and hand cymbals, to name a few, with outstanding orchestrations and organ playing by Brian Gascoyne.

Even more remarkable, the album was recorded without sampling, click tracks or guide vocals. Normally, to keep constant tempo and show chord changes musicians record listening to a “click” track and a “guide vocal” through headphones. Each part is then stitched together like a quilt, sometimes almost a note at a time. More insidiously, using a sampler means “bum” notes can be “bent” to pitch. While technically exact, interactions in timing and emphasis that we call “feel” or “soul” are lost. These techniques tend to homogenise the music making nearly every contemporary pop song seem familiar—a product of the domination of *recorded music* over the *recording of music*. Walker rejects this approach, bringing spontaneous musical ideas from musicians.

“I like to do things live with the musicians... so we’re discovering together as we go along,” he explained in a rare interview. “The way I work, the top line of the song is notated, with the chords. A lot of musicians say, ‘what am I doing? Why am I making this sound? Against what? It’s against nothing. I can’t hear a vocal. I’m playing against nothing, and you’re asking me to do this.’”

“It’s hard for musicians that way, but it keeps them from grooving. I don’t want anyone playing licks or grooving; that’s not my interest... it tends to characterise the track, which is not what I’m after. I want each piece to have an intensity of its own. So it has a kind of febrile quality. Like Gil Evans—early producer of Miles Davis—I want the orchestra to breathe and to use space.”

To capture honesty in his own performance Walker records after the musicians have left and only sings each song once: “I feel it’s part of the process of living with the words so long: you should be ready. I want it fresh and tense as possible. I also don’t tend to do vocals more than once or twice, because I’m basically terrified of singing and I want my own terror to come across on the records.”

Another significant difference is in Walker’s use of lyrics. With “beat and bass over all” being the best practise in contemporary “pop”, lyrics function less as means of communicating thought or feeling and more as rhythmic measures. *Tilt*, by contrast, is so driven by lyric that some critics have described it as a “rock *lieder*”.

Walker has never written sharper, more imagistic and resonant lyrics attempting to deal with issues as diverse as South American refugees, the death of Italian filmmaker Paolo Pasolini, cockfighting, the bombing of Iraq and other questions.

“My background isn’t Dylan and folk, but the chanson singers and they’re grounded in drama. I felt I’d take the time with the words. I figured if I did that, the words would lead me, they’d tell me what to do.... If you get into their world far enough, they’ll take you where you want to go. Whatever happens in any part of the album is led by the lyric.”

Born Scott Engel in California in 1943, Walker was the only child of a wealthy oil family. His parents’ marriage broke up while he was still in high school and he moved to Hollywood with his mother. Surrounded by art, drama and music Walker explored a number of artistic fields and at the age of 15 was playing bass in pickup bands and recording with Jack Nitzche.

At 20, with Gary Leeds and John Maus, he formed the Walker Brothers and moved to the UK where his brooding baritone voice, married to lush string arrangements by Wally Stott and Reg Guest, proved very successful. The group, which had a popular soul sound, recorded top 10 singles “Make It Easy On Yourself” and “Sun Ain’t Gonna Shine” and several important albums, including *Take It Easy With The Walker Brothers*, *Portrait* and *Images* but Walker found the fan hysteria, interviews, touring, and performing intolerable. When asked what his personal ambition was by a journalist in the mid-1960s, he replied, “To become a human being.” Unable to cope with the stress he began drinking excessively and even attempted suicide.

The band split in the late 60s and Walker embarked on a solo career translating and recording songs by Jacques Brel and some of his own material. John Franz, the house producer at Philips

provided a backdrop of orchestral splendour for Walker to deliver big beltters, intelligent readings and gentle grace notes with technical ease and emotional conviction in collaboration with top arrangers Wally Stott, Peter Knight and Reg Guest.

Scott, *Scott 2* and *Scott 3* albums were released between 1967 and 1969, to much critical acclaim, but Walker's increasing hatred of live performance made him miserable and fuelled his alcoholism. Unwilling to tour, the fourth album, logically enough titled *Scott 4*, was a critical success but a sales disaster.

Walker's manager tried to encouraged a straightforward show business career with regular television appearances and cabaret but Walker would not let Brel's music or his own be treated like a commodity. Unable to resolve this contradiction he retreated into semi-retirement to concentrate on recording. A series of albums were released, including *'Til The Band Comes* (1970) and *The Moviegoer* (1972) and a brief Walker Brothers reunion in 1975 with a top selling single "No Regrets". Three Walker Brothers' albums—*No Regrets*, *Lines* and *Nite Flites*—followed but these were not successful and the band broke up again.

Walker declined offers for musical collaboration from Brian Eno and David Bowie at this time and virtually disappeared from public view until the critically acclaimed *Climate of Hunger* in 1984, which included "Blanket Roll Blues," from the Tennessee Williams-scripted movie *The Fugitive Kind*. Walker's next album, *Tilt*, was produced only after another 11 years.

The opening track on *Tilt*—"Farmer in the City (Remembering Pasolini)"—is the most accessible song on the album. Against a backdrop of grim horrors, wry humour, beauty and grief, it lights the last hours of Pasolini's life with musical and lyrical strobe.

The lyrics are fragmentary and presented as images on a moving pathway. You barely focus and the next lot of images close in: fragments of voices, Pasolini's and his killers; neighbourhood cries and noise. Pasolini is seen from a distance—geographically and biographically—but the overall effect is a portrait that words alone can't sufficiently express. Walker's disquieting and restless tenor sobs and surges, bringing colour and movement to the scene but without offering any explanation. A high point is where Walker cries:

*And I used to be a citizen
I never felt the pressure
I knew nothing of the horses
nothing of the thresher.*

And the string section of the London Sinfonia heaves upward in a monstrous crescendo to echo and cradle the lyric. It is a most moving and unsettling moment.

The emotional intensity created in this extraordinary song is not eased by the next track, entitled "The Cockfighter". In fact, some admirers have described this song as a "nightmarish piece". It begins with two minutes of psychotic ambience before a series of clanking, metallic rhythms—reminiscent of Nine Inch Nails, one of Walker's favourite bands—explodes. Over this Walker describes a cockfight, interposing transcripts of trials involving Queen Caroline of England and Nazi Adolph Eichmann. Walker creates a resonant horror from seemingly banal statements:

*Do you swear that the breastbone was bare?
I saw it, and made my escape.*

*Do you remember what happened to most of the children?
You were in charge of the rolling stock.*

For many listeners this is new ground but if one is prepared to listen with both heart and mind, there is a feast of sounds and rhythms to enjoy: the haunting "show theme", minor/major chords played by David Rhodes on guitar, swelling rich tones from the Central Methodist Hall Pipe Organ and much more.

While Walker is able create some real emotional intensity, the album does have some weaknesses. The lyrics at times become too obscure and in some places descend into gnomic utterance. That is, lines or couplets, which, while frequently sounding profound, function as separate parts and aren't part of a united structure.

Some of this is connected to Walker's adaptation to a post-modernist vision of a fragmented, alienated and unchangeable world. A world run by "unalterable armies of law", as he sings at one point, controlled by hidden preordainment and without much sense or joy in human connection.

Walker elaborated on this approach in one of his rare interviews. "If I'm using politics, I'll use it to talk about an inner state rather than a political state. They're related. It's a way to break out of the [traditional] songwriting format. I'm looking inward—that's why you get a solitary feel from the music. I'm composing something of myself through fragments," he said.

While there's a lot to differ with here the main point is this. It is impossible to understand human society without looking outwards—to find one's historical/political longitude and latitude. Without this approach it is impossible for anyone—let alone a serious artist—to be orientated: let alone be giving others directions. I feel this lack to be behind Walker's obscurity, overly neat phrases and catchy paradoxes.

The importance of *Tilt* lies, however, not in Walker's artistic confusion but in the world of musical possibility he has revealed. His attempt to convey emotion and sense through pure sound makes most of the music dominating the today's airwaves rather redundant. Those prepared to embrace this beautiful and confronting work will be rewarded.

To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

<http://www.wsws.org>