

Singer-songwriter Scott Walker (1943-2019): A gifted and intriguing artist

By Matthew Brennan
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Scott Walker, best known as a member of the British 1960s pop trio the Walker Brothers, died on March 22 at age 76. Possessing a sincere and remarkably powerful baritone voice, he became an elusive and yet influential figure in the rock and electronic music genres in later years. Though his career spanned several very distinct periods, his intriguing and challenging approach to songcraft was largely consistent from beginning to end. At his best, he was one of the more moving singers of the last 50 years.

Born Noel Scott Engel in southwestern Ohio, 20 miles north of Cincinnati, in 1943, his family often moved around the US during his youth for his father's job as an oil company geologist. By his early teens, Scott had been deeply affected by the blues and bebop, as well as the rock 'n' roll craze embodied by figures like Buddy Holly, Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry. An interesting early recording of a 13-year-old Scott Walker (Engel) singing "When Is A Boy A Man?" captures something of his vocal talent and ambition at an early age.

After joining and leaving several blues and rock 'n' roll bands in his teens, playing bass and guitar, he eventually joined a trio in Los Angeles that became known as the Walker Brothers in 1964. Formed by drummer Gary Leeds, Scott on bass and guitarist John Maus, all took the last name Walker as part of a record company ploy to market them as an emerging "blue-eyed soul" group, rivaling the Righteous Brothers.

After initially stagnating with their first record label, the Walker Brothers signed with Phillips Records and were encouraged to relocate to London to work with skilled studio producer Johnny Franz. Franz was a key figure in British popular music in the 1950s and '60s, influenced by the Phil Spector "wall of sound" productions, featuring large ensemble arrangements intended to create dense orchestral aesthetics for standard pop songs.

The Walker Brothers' popularity in England briefly rivaled the Beatles in terms of record sales and exposure in 1965-66. Their songs often featured lively and grand harmonies, with Scott's remarkable voice on lead, and captured something of the yearning, compassion, eagerness and empathy of the music of the period.

Hit cover songs like "The Sun Ain't Gonna Shine Anymore"

and "Make It Easy On Yourself" still stand up remarkably well. Other songs like "My Ship Is Coming In" and "I Don't Want To Hear It Anymore" also showcase the power, control and sincerity of Scott Walker's voice. He was still in his early 20s but clearly already confident and mature in how he conveyed feeling and emotion.

However, the fame and artistic compromises of the Walker Brothers period quickly took their toll, and Scott broke up the band in 1967. In interviews included in the interesting documentary *Scott Walker: 30 Century Man* (Stephen Kijak), from the Walker Brothers period in the 1960s, Scott explains somewhat despondently "that I'm not in it for money, I'm in it for very different things." He largely stopped touring for his music from this period onward or giving interviews.

In 1967, Walker discovered the work of the Belgian singer-songwriter Jacques Brel, which had an enormous impact on him. The first English translations of Brel's songs, focused strongly on post-World War II class society, were becoming available in Britain. Walker was one of the first to record Brel's songs for a new audience. His first two solo albums *Scott* (1967) and *Scott 2* (1968) contain several faithful renditions of Brel, including songs like "Mathilde," "Amsterdam" and "Jackie." Covers of Burt Bacharach and Randy Newman songs appear on these records as well. The influence of classical composers such as Béla Bartok and Jean Sibelius also makes itself felt. Everything is masterfully couched in Wally Stott's string arrangements and Johnny Franz's production.

Scott 3 and especially *Scott 4* are Walker at the height of his early musical powers. Whereas the previous two albums were almost entirely cover songs, the latter two are mostly Walker originals with the same roster of musicians and producers. There is a real confidence in the musical production above all, with orchestral arrangements interwoven into rhythm-driven undertones, scattered jazz singing and supreme control of the vocal-emotional tempo of the songs.

His use of Stott's strings on songs like "It's Raining Today" create an almost noir-like tension to the opening of *Scott 3*—something he would pursue much more aggressively in his "experimental" albums decades later. The songs often underscore a growing unease and anxiety. The youthful,

lovelorn quality of earlier songs start to give way to world-weary songs like “On Your Own Again.”

The strongest songs are undoubtedly on *Scott 4*, likely his best overall album. For instance, there is the energetic guitar and string-based song “Hero of the War,” a subtly disguised and moving antiwar song, with opening lyrics like:

*He’s a hero of the war, all the neighborhood is talking
‘bout your son.
Mrs Riley get his medals hand them ‘round to everyone,
Show his gun to all the children in the street,
It’s too bad he can’t shake hands or move his feet.*

A song like “The Old Man’s Back Again (Dedicated to the Neo-Stalinist Regime),” a denunciation of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia, also stands out, with its memorable bass playing and choral undertones, as well Stott’s strings and Walker’s scat singing. But *Scott 4* (1970) was a commercial failure. The record company began to pressure Walker into producing “hits” and attempted to capitalize on his early appeal. By all accounts, Walker was miserable in this period, struggling with alcoholism. He considered most of the decade a lost period artistically. He made a string of albums between 1970 and 1978 which he refused to reissue in later years.

However, a brief reunion with the Walker Brothers in the late 1970s produced one final group record, *Nite Flights* (1978), where each member produced his own songs. Walker’s four songs were a sea change of sorts—he had discovered the synthesizer and the organ and began manipulating his vocals and song space to create intense and eerie atmospheres.

The subject matter became intensely dark, often based on ongoing political developments, historical episodes or literary vignettes. The songs took on a cinematic quality, and rarely spelled things out, either lyrically or emotionally. The images grew closer to Francisco Goya’s *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1797-99) or Otto Dix’s *Shock Troops Advance Under Gas* (1924) and distanced themselves from Brel’s “Mathilde” or Bacharach’s “Joanna.”

Indicative of this period is “The Electrician,” a song allegedly from the perspective of a Latin American torture chamber operator under one of the Operation Condor military dictatorships, where tens of thousands of left-wing students and workers were imprisoned and tortured and where many perished. The song—sounding like very little else at the end of the 1970s—slowly draws the audience in before one understands the depth of the nightmare one has entered.

It is not unreasonable to argue that this dark turn is something that Walker would pursue for the rest of his career, for reasons that have more to do with the political climate and increasingly rotten state of the music industry than Walker’s own personal

outlook or condition. There was, to be sure, always evidence of a growing pessimism or despondency in his music—but this was often overwhelmed by the warmth of his voice and music, and an element of hopefulness. The contradiction between these two elements never left his music, but the gloomier element began to win out in the later decades.

The next four important albums—*Climate of Hunter* (1984), *Tilt* (1995), *The Drift* (2006), and *Bish Bosch* (2012)—all have interesting elements to them, particularly *Tilt*. None are entirely rewarding, but each shows great craft and stands apart from much of the music of the era in which it was produced.

Some of the stronger, even if grim, songs in the latter period do capture one’s attention quite powerfully, and are hard to forget: the soft and somber rising quality of “Farmer In The City” about the murder of leftist filmmaker and poet Pier Pasolini, or the nightmarish refrains of “Cossacks Are” set to drums structured to evoke galloping horses (“Cossacks are charging in! Charging in the fields of white roses! ... Medieval savagery, calculated cruelty. It’s hard to pick the worst moment.”).

As he grew older, Walker became something of a mythic figure among subsequent generations of artists, particularly in England. Musicians and singers like David Bowie, Brian Eno, Alison Goldfrapp, Radiohead and Jarvis Cocker all consistently cited him as a major influence. While many of his 1960s pop music contemporaries became rich or artistically stagnant, Walker remained something of an outsider. He continued to produce challenging music, including film scores, very much on his own terms. A review of his music, particularly the early material, will produce much that is rewarding.

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