

# BILL and SUE-ON HILLMAN: A 50-YEAR MUSICAL ODYSSEY

*50 Years on the Road with Bill and Sue-On Hillman*

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## English Roots

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Enter Alan Jones again. Al made periodic visits back to visit family in Northern England and during a 1996 trip he visited Burrow-Hunter, a booking agency in Middlesbrough. England's NE was a hotbed of musicians and clubs -- mainly scores of Working Man Clubs that featured nightly entertainment. He made inquiries on our behalf and before long we were booked to do nightly shows in 30 different clubs in that part of England.

Our keyboardist Kevin Pahl agreed to join us and Alan would play with us in the clubs that had a house organ. This was very exciting since my appreciation of English music went all the way back to trad jazz, Lonnie Donegan skiffle and blues, Shadows guitar numbers . . . and the British Invasion groups. . . especially the Beatles. Much of our repertoire had been learned from imported Donegan, Shadows and Beatles records. We reserved our flight.

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## Drug Lords

To pay for our flight to England we kept up a heavy schedule of bookings right up to flight time. A very demanding set of bookings. In the three days before we took a 747 out of Winnipeg airport we played across three provinces: Saskatchewan, Ontario, and Manitoba.

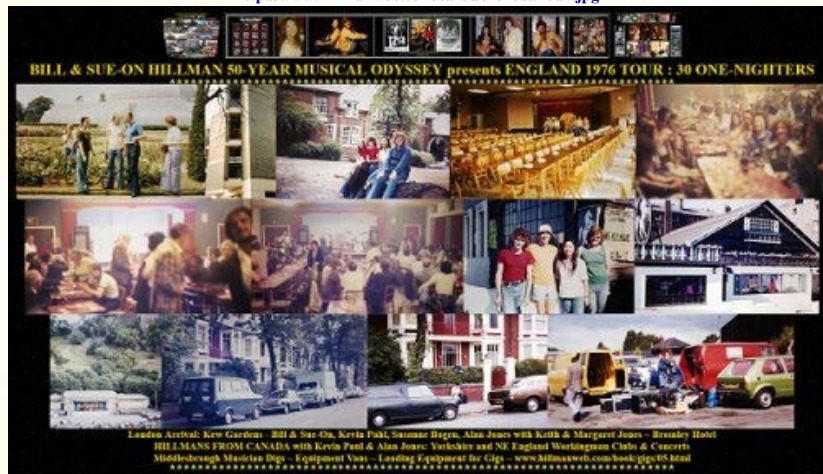
The Saskatchewan booking was our annual Grad dance in Wapella -- an upstairs hall above their library. They always expected us to play the "rain dance" during which they all tried to collapse the weakened floor into the library below by jumping up and down. The hall survived another year.

The Ontario booking was in Fort Francis after which we naively took a southern route home which looped through the USA. The Customs guys were very leery of musicians and since the three of us were also teachers they thought this must be a cover and we must be part of some drug cartel. The gung-ho Customs official made us unload all our gear for inspection. Not only that, we had to unscrew the backs of all our speaker cabinets to aid them in their search -- hundreds of screws. Eventually their search proved fruitless . . . and pointless. . . and they disappointedly waved us on to the next gig.

We played that night in St. Claude, MB -- another grad dance. We were then poised to begin our overseas adventure.

## Culture Shock

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The England we saw as our 747 set down at Heatherow wasn't quite what we expected. Where was the greenery? England was experiencing a serious drought and much of the vegetation was dry and parched. We were met by Alan's brother Keith and wife Margaret. They had rented a Commer van -- similar to the one that the Beatles took to Hamburg a decade ago. Their hospitality made our arrival and stay in this foreign country so much easier.

Before checking into a hotel they took us on a tour of Kew Gardens. We then travelled 10 miles south east of London to book rooms in Bromley Court Hotel, Bromley, Kent. These lodgings were close to Wing Music, where we were to pick up our equipment the next morning. I was thrilled to learn that Bromley was famous for three of my main interests. Science Fiction writer H. G. Wells was born there. Charles Darwin wrote his *Origin of the Species* in his Bromley home -- Downe House -- a Heritage building that is a major tourist attraction. The town is also noted for giving birth to famous entertainers, including David Bowie, Peter Frampton, Michael York, and numerous Punk musicians.



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## Taking Wings to the North

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Toronto's Traynor Amplifiers had agreed to be partial sponsors for our tour. They had contacted Wing Music in Bromley who were to supply us with amps, PA, drums and keys. Our visit to the Wing Music store was a bit of a shock. The management were very obliging, but the building was rather small, very unkept and was packed floor to ceiling with music gear.

Wing appeared to be second home to a strange group of musicians who sported extreme haircuts, garbled speech, wicked grooming and down-dressed wardrobes in the style we would later identify as Punk. Indeed, the store was home-base to a whole slate of punk artists whose appearance and music would soon be known worldwide: The Bromley Contingent, Billy Idol, Siouxi Sioux, Mick Jones of Clash, and the Sex Pistols. The Pistols were the anarchist punk band which went on to inspire a generation. Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious, Steve Jones and Paul Cook took the world and Bromley by storm in the late 1970s.

We dragged out the gear we would use almost every night for the next six weeks: Yamaha Twin for bass, two Traynor Twins, electrostatic mikes, Rogers drums, an HH PA head, and huge Traynor speaker columns with horns. There was no Fender Rhodes piano so we rented a Hohner Clavinet. After packing the equipment in the Commer, the seven of us somehow managed to squeeze into the vehicle. Our over-packed van then headed north up the M-7 Motorway to Middlesbrough where we were to play that night.

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## Rockin' and Rollin' and Reelin' in Yorkshire

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Our original song, *Reelin' in Soho*, is an account of our first recording session in London, England. As suggested in the first verse, this was the culmination of a tour in which we -- *The Hillmans From Canada* -- had played 30 one-nighters in social clubs, Legions, and military bases across Northern England. Many nights found us in the ubiquitous Workingmen Clubs where a house band opened at 7:00 pm, followed by opening acts which usually offered variety entertainment. We would then come on for a show set, after which there would be a long break for housie (bingo) -- a national addiction.

After this exciting gambling break we would return for a dance set - but by 11:00 pm the dancers would call it a night since they had to work the next day. Being so used to the long drives, long gigs and late nights back in Canada, it was hard for us to wind down so suddenly and every night found us driving around looking for some place which might still be open -- usually Greek or Indian restaurants. We met some very colourful characters on these midnight rambles.

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### Geordie Cowboys

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The audiences attended these clubs every night of the week and had seen it all, so it was especially rewarding to be so well received. It was tremendously exciting to study the dressing room walls which were festooned with pictures, cards and stickers left by previous entertainers -- even the Beatles, early in their careers, had toured this circuit. These backstage walls were seldom refurbished since it seemed that the more 'name' acts displayed, the more prestigious the club. Perhaps the most fascinating venues though, were the Country and Western Clubs where nearly everyone showed up in full Western regalia - including boots, hats, gunbelts... and western drawls - Geordie cowboys.

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### Bombing the Order of the Buffalo

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Our first gig in England was a template for most of the 30 gigs to follow. Because of the unusual heat wave and lack of air conditioning it was a bit of a struggle to move our equipment upstairs to the RMOB club (Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes). The club seated hundreds of people sitting along rows of square tables and around small round tables just large enough to hold a ring of pints from the bar.

The show opened with the house organist, followed by a variety act, after which we did a show. There was a break for housie (90 ball bingo) after which we did a dance set and the hall was cleared out around 11. Most of the patrons came in for a pint or two, enjoyed the entertainment, played housie, danced and then headed for home for a good night's sleep -- many of them worked in factories. Everything was new and strange for us.

We met with a few setbacks setting up: no batteries for the mics, a wobbly snare stand for Sue-On, and trying to adapt to Kevin's Hohner Clavinet and keyboard bass (Wing Music couldn't supply a Fender Rhodes keyboard to augment the Clavie -- I had brought our Hohner Bass keyboard from Canada). But we soon got into the spirit of the club and were excited by the enthusiastic handclapping and footstomping reaction from the drinkers and dancers. We felt crushed when the manager exclaimed after the show that we "went down a bomb." But apparently to "bomb" had the opposite meaning there than it did back home. Whew!!!

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### Eruption at the Vipond Digs

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We were fortunate to find a short-term boarding house run by entertainers, The Viponds, that catered to musicians. It was a wonderful experience rubbing shoulders with such a steady stream of experienced English entertainers.

Al Jones shared a room with an all-black band that lived up to their name: Eruption. They later had a major hit with the re-make of *I Can't Stand the Rain*. One day I gave a Shadows-style guitar band a lift to a club where The Searchers were playing. There were musicians who had backed up early rock great Vince Eager. Others had been on shows with Lonnie Donegan and the local acapello group, Prelude, who had a major hit with Neil Young's *After the Gold Rush*. A dumpy, grouchy old man staying down the hall wasn't too approachable -- had a habit of kicking the Vipond's dog. It was only later we were shocked to learn that we had missed the opportunity of reaching out to UK rock legend, Wee Willie Harris!

But we really felt at home there -- almost everyone had a musician's mentality and sense of humour and there was constant show biz chatter and the playing of practical jokes.

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### **In Search of the Searchers**

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We have an interesting story concerning our only brush with the popular Searchers band. In our musicians digs in Middlesbrough we had some good guitar jams with a Shadows wannabe band: Gable and Clark. One day they were excited about playing at a club across town, but needed a ride since their van had broken down. Our equipment was already set up in preparation for our evening gig so I had time to drive them over to the club.

Upon arrival we walked in to a huge crowd that had already gathered. Then we noticed the marquee and posters: "Tonight: The Sensational Searchers". The guys queried management and learned that the club they were booked for had a similar name a few blocks over. A very embarrassed band then directed me to a much smaller . . . and much less exciting venue, at a Workingmans Club. Never got to meet, or even hear The Searchers. We didn't even hear Gable and Clark in action, since I had to rush away to our own gig that night.

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### **Following Dracula's Steps**

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We played a function for a football club at Whitby -- the famous port from where Captain Cook launched his voyages. It is also famous for the 199 stone steps leading up to the Abbey ruins. These were the steps described in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the ones that Drac in the shape of a hound had run up after first reaching England. We played at the Whitehorse Inn and were proud to see our "Hillmans from Canada" posters displayed all around the area.

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### **Outlaw Ramblin' Band**

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Not far from the hotel we played in Whitby was a large Country and Western club where we saw our posters displayed along with ones announcing the coming appearance of famous rocker P.J. Proby. Proby's claim to fame included a notorious trousers splitting incident that led to his being banned in certain places.

The C/W club encouraged their dance patrons to wear full western gear, complete with Stetsons, boots, spurs, chaps and gunbelts. In fact, the country seemed to show a real fascination with western lore and country music -- a thirst that hadn't been fully quenched by many of the English artists. This played to our advantage.

We specialized in a style of country rock and spoke in "American" accents. At first the audiences were leery of the accents associated with "Yanks" whom some of them loved to hate, but when we assured them we were from "the colonies" everything was OK, we were part of the family. We share some of the excitement of these performances in our song *Outlaw Ramblin' Band*.

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### **Give Me A Kiss Sweetie**

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The only hostile crowd we encountered during our many gigs in England was at a British Legion Club. Friends of a very obese retarded man, who was waddle-"dancing" in the aisles, encouraged him to go closer to the stage. They were determined that Sue-On and Kevin's girlfriend, Susanne, should allow him to stumble onto our stage and give them a kiss.

Looking down at the drooling, leering person I decided that it wouldn't be appropriate and tried to handle the situation diplomatically. We gave the man an autographed album, but the crowd was not appeased. The mob pleaded and cajoled and became very obnoxious. The "Time Gentlemen Please" call from the bar brought a sense of relief.

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### **Riding Traynors Through Scotland**

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On our first UK tour we were booked seven days a week for almost seven weeks -- a different club every night. We made the most of our day-time hours by exploring castles, museums, pubs, countryside and all the attractions the area had to offer. I did all the driving since Kevin was not yet 21 and couldn't get an International Drivers License -- even though he could fly aircraft, since he was a crop duster and had a pilot's license.

We carried our equipment with us each day so we would be prepared to drive to the clubs to set up after our all-day tourist jaunts. Another reason for carrying the equipment was that there were no seats in the back of the van and our large speaker bins doubled as seats. We were sponsored by Traynor Amps of Canada and our PA and guitar amps were gargantuan compared to the much more compact -- and more powerful -- equipment used by the local bands. Our gear was built for the larger vehicles, stages and stairways common in Canada.

We were excited to hear one weekend that we had a Sunday off. We took advantage of the free time by travelling to Scotland around Loch Ness where we waded into the water in an unsuccessful search for Nessie. The highlands which were home to my ancestors reminded us very much of Canada.

We visited the Wartime Memorial Book room at Edinburgh Castle where a different page was on view each day. By eerie coincidence the featured page that day contained the name of my Uncle Bill Campbell, whose Lancaster went down in the closing days of World War II. Years later the RAF and British Legion invited my mother and me to unveil a monument in his honour while the Memorial Lanc and Spit flew in tribute formation overhead. We spent the night in Scotland and rushed south the next day to start another round of shows.

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### **All Creatures Great and Small**

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A memorable gig was in Thirsk -- which actually served as the fictional Darrowby in the popular James Herriot *All Creatures Great and Small* books and TV series. We arrived early enough to visit the Alf Wight (aka James Herriot) Surgery and to tour a small museum down the street which displayed instruments and treatments used by vets through the years. We eventually found Thirsk-Sowerby -- a country club outside of the village surrounded by a meadow.

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### **What a Honeymoon**

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[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/herriotall.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/70/herriotall.jpg)





An entertainer hired as our opening act in Thirsk had been married up north that afternoon and the whole wedding party showed up at the club. The gig turned very festive. We did our show and dance and by the usual closing time the party had just begun. The manager locked the doors so we wouldn't be bothered by the local Bobbies and the party carried on.

The groom and even our booking agent took turns pounding Sue-On's drums. The dancers pranced and sang. We played into the wee hours -- probably the most exciting wedding party we've ever played -- certainly the most unusual.

Thirty years later, while making a stop on our return from attending the Phil Collins' *Tarzan Musical* premiere in Holland, our friends the Sandbrooks took us back to Thirsk for old times sake. The large house that had been the location of James Herriot's surgery -- the famous *All Creatures Great and Small* veterinarian, had been converted into a wonderful museum honouring the life and accomplishments of the now deceased Alf Wight. We spent many hours exploring the rooms and exhibits and featured most of the photos we took on our Website.

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### Whatcha Say Yank?

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We have many fond memories of the colourful people we've met on our English tours -- and we formed many wonderful friendships. While giving a very friendly gentleman a ride home after a show we learned that he, like so many men of his age, was a WWII veteran. He had been part of an air force mission to drop a tin leg to RAF ace Douglas Bader in a German POW camp.

During a show at New Marske a very friendly pretty young girl in the audience became quite excited when she learned we were Canadian and all through the night we heard constant shouts of "I'm CanAAYdYan too. I'm from CheeAtum!" Some time after our return to Canada we couldn't believe it when we heard the same voice and exclamation on a Canadian CTV game show from Toronto: "I'm from Cheeatum. . . I'm from Cheeatum!" (Chatham, ON) -- it was the same girl.

We sometimes ran into a language problem. Many of the accents of the locals seemed to change every 10 miles or so. These accents, coupled with regional colloquialisms and spoken by patrons who had downed a few drinks too many, often made conversation difficult. At the Excelsior Club in High Spen we were shocked to hear what had to be a Cajun accent. It came from a guy from Southern Louisiana, who had moved here after marrying a Geordie girl many years



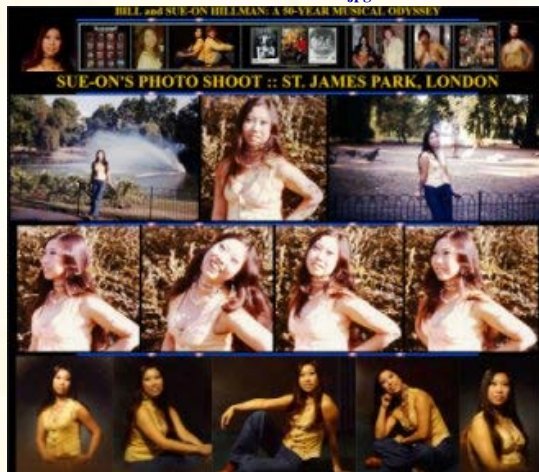
ago. Even after all those years surrounded by all-things-English, he managed to hold on to his accent from the swamps and bayous of Louisiana.

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## London Blitz

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[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/sue-on/sue-onukall.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/sue-on/sue-onukall.jpg)



We met English musician Mick Sandbrook near the end of our first 30-day tour of Northern England clubs. Mick was to become a true friend and a major help in our future UK tours and recording sessions. He and his wife Margaret visited us a few years later and Mick played bass with us on some of our Manitoba gigs. Mick and a buddy volunteered to drive us and our gear down to the South, where we had to return the instruments to Wing Music in Bromley, Kent.

We booked rooms for a week at Mrs. Meanie's guest house in Bromley from where we rode trains into London each day. There was a small fish 'n' chips shop near Bromley Station and it became a regular routine to munch these newspaper-wrapped greasy delights as we rode the train into Charing Cross Station. Al Jones had lived in London during his physiotherapy training and, despite being blind, he knew the city and the tube system perhaps better than most London natives. He was an excellent tour guide and we hit all the famous spots, exploring music and book shops along the way.

Thanks to the Beatles and British Music boom of the '60s so many of the London place names were magic in our minds and we visited them all: Carnaby, Hyde Park, Palladium, Baker Street, Soho, Chelsea, Pettycoat Lane, Ronnie Scott's, Thames tours, *Mousetrap*, Tower of London, Buckingham Palace, HMS Belfast, Tower Bridge, Big Ben . . . and we ate at many Chinese restaurants that were owned by Chinese people from Sue-On's village in Southern China.

When we mentioned to my dad that we had toured HMS Belfast docked in the Thames he recalled that this same ship had been in the UK/US/Canadian convoy that his ship HMCS Prince Robert was part of in WWII. Their mission was to free Canadian POWs and accept the Jap surrender at Hong Kong. Photos and description of dad's experiences are presented on our Website.

We took many photos on these jaunts around London -- many of them we hoped to use for our UK albums and for various promotions back home. We found unusual leather vests and jackets in a little specialty shop off Oxford Street. They were actually made of patches of chamois sewn together. These unique outfits became our stage favourites for a number of years. Sue-On even wore the vest for a photo shoot in St. James Park -- a beautiful spot close to Buckingham Palace.

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## Picking Gooseberries in Chinatown

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When not exploring London's famous landmarks I scouted the famed Denmark Street area's thriving music production scene. While asking about recording rates I was given tours of the famous recording studios that had hosted unforgettable sessions by the Stones, Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Donovan, and many more. The studio layouts and equipment were very different from what we were used to in Canada.

Some of the guys in the studios knew, or had heard of, Abbey Road Studio's John Smith, who had engineered our last session back in Winnipeg. Smith's claim to fame was having worked on The Beatles' *White Album* -- and his name is included in the album credits.

Just as interesting were the record company execs I had meetings with in various offices scattered around the area. Alan Jones had sent a demo tape to David Barnes of Essex Music who met with us two times. He made some intriguing offers, but eventually we decided not to follow up on them. We were left with many decisions to make -- the most difficult involved leaving our day-job, teaching careers back in Canada.

Number one on our list was to do some recording. I had difficulty in choosing a recording studio until at the end of the second day, back in our guest house, I saw a promising ad in Melody Maker magazine. Any studio with a name like Gooseberry and was located in Soho's Chinatown would have to have something unique to offer! I phoned them next day -- they were cheap, had a 16-track board, and could provide a couple of experienced session guys. The studio had produced some reggae and dance hits -- and had recently recorded The Sex Pistols ("God Save the Queen", "Anarchy in the UK", etc.). It was time to rehearse.

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### **Shameless Name-Dropping:**

**Dick James, Robin Hood, George Martin, The Beatles and Elton John**

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The most interesting meetings I had in London's "Tin Pan Alley" around Denmark Street came from a chance meeting with music mogul Dick James. Passing by what I thought was a bank building, I noticed a sign that made mention of EMI -- a company well known to any Beatles fan. I brazenly and naively entered and was directed to an office on the third floor. I explained to the receptionist that I was a songwriter/musician and my wife and I had done much performing and recording in Canada and USA.

Almost immediately I was invited into the office of Dick James. I gave my spiel, he played a few songs, we chatted, I left our records with him, and he invited me to come back the next day. I obviously hadn't done my homework, since I learned later just how important this man was. In his early days James had sung the theme for the '50s TV hit, Robin Hood, which was produced by George Martin. Martin later introduced him to the Beatles and he notoriously set up and took control of most of the Lennon-McCartney catalogue through Northern Songs. He later discovered Elton John, but by the time of our meeting Elton had formed Rocket Records and was suing James to get out of his contract.

Dick James Music was probably the most powerful music company in England, but many of his acts were trying to go elsewhere, being unhappy with their contracts and about his complete control of their publishing. This probably was what made it so easy for me to make contact with him as he was looking for a string of eclectic acts to fill the vacuum created by the acrimonious departure of Elton John and his numerous other acts. Unfortunately, by the next day's meeting, Mr. James had decided that his UK market probably wasn't quite ready for our Canadian brand of country schlock. It was a great experience, but now I could turn all my time and energies to planning our recording session.

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### **Following the Sex Pistols into the Depths**

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In the morning of our first recording session at Soho's Gooseberry Studios, we carried the gear we had rented from Wing Music in Bromley to the train, which took us in to Charing Cross Station. Then we started off in search of a cab carrying my Fender Telecaster, a Traynor amp, Fender acoustic, Hohner Clavinet, and accessories.

We hailed a cab to take us to Gooseberry Studios on Gerrard Street, but accents got in the way and the cabbie took us to a number of wrong locations with similar sounding street names. This seemed like a legitimate mistake but some London cabbies are known for padding their fares by taking the longest out-of-the-way routes. We still weren't sure we were in the right spot when we were finally dropped off on Gerrard. It t'weren't no Abbey Road.

The entrance to the studio was via a steel fold-up delivery door in the sidewalk. We started to carry our gear through this opening, down a ladder into a converted store room and coal bin. Into the depths of the unknown.

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**Gooseberry Studios:  
Cavern Studio Below and Tong Wars Above**

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After descending into the Gooseberry Studio we saw a 16-track board that had seen better days. Later we found that it had only 13 working tracks and most of these were useable only with the help of chewing gum, rubber bands, and constant spraying and banging. Through the glass we saw an old piano in the main studio and a set of drums set up in the adjacent coal bin beyond. Stained mattresses were fastened to the walls for baffling.

I had brought four rather hurriedly written songs to the session, two ballads for Sue-On and two uptempo bluesy things for myself. Alan Jones had one original to record. Gooseberry engineer, Mark Lusardi, had arranged for two session guys to join us: Joe Fagin on bass and Lloyd Ryan on drums. In later years we often saw their names in many film and TV credits. In fact, Joe Fagin sang the theme for popular Judy Dench TV series, *As Time Goes By*, seen regularly on PBS in North America.

I played acoustic on some of the bed tracks and to get sound separation I decided to squeeze into a small dark closet with guitar and mic. Kevin Pahl played piano on most of the songs, I overdubbed leads on my Tele, and Al played piano on his original number which Sue-On sang. The session guys were hot and by the end of the day we had recorded five unmixed songs. Later, studio time was booked to complete the mix down to 1/4" tape, which we would take back for release in Canada.

We were in the studio well into the evening and almost missed the last train back to Bromley. Mark warned us to be careful because there were some serious Tong Wars going on in the Soho streets above. We were a strange looking lot



on our frantic run through Chinatown, three guys running behind a Chinese gal with two of the guys taking turns guiding their blind buddy over curbs and around the late-night drunks sprawled on the sidewalks. We described this session in our song *Reelin' in Soho* which we recorded during a future UK session.

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### **Stompin' at the American Song Contest**

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Before we left on our first England tour I had entered four of my original songs in the American Song contest in California. It was a bit of an after thought, but there were quite a number of categories and there was substantial prize money offered -- so we thought, why not. We were still trying to find a songwriting niche and recording style so we entered four completely different songs -- songs that we had often played on our stage shows: *Memory Take Me Back*, *In Sadness*, *Massacre*, and *Cajun Stomp*.

Partway through our tour my mom, who was monitoring our mail back home, called to tell me that *Cajun Stomp* had reached a higher level and the judges wanted the lyrics before they made their final decisions. We were staying at Vipond's musicians' digs in Middlesbrough so I rushed down to their lounge to write out the lyrics with covering letter. The next morning we rushed the letter off to the US.

We had never entered this type of contest -- in fact, during all our years of playing we had never asked for, or received grants or any outside financial help. After we returned home we were thrilled to learn that the song had received a "Runner Up" cash prize and good publicity. The song was fun to do, so we found a spot for it on our next album and later performed it on a number of national television specials and award shows.

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### **Sail On 747**

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When it came time to prepare for our flight home, we found that our luggage was way overweight. Our solution to this problem was to purchase duffel bags and load them with our two-inch master tapes, records, UK Tarzan comics, and some of the heavier souvenirs. These we arranged to have sent to Canada in a cargo ship.

Our feelings on flying home after so many weeks I described in a song we recorded on a later tour of the UK: *Sail On 747* -- a song that has received much airplay over the years. We had a full slate of fall gigs waiting for us back home as my mother had monitored our mail and phone calls and passed along info on potential new bookings which we then confirmed by phone and mail.

We arrived home in time to prepare for another year of teaching. During my 40 years as a full-time educator, teaching high school and university courses, I've usually tried to keep my two careers separate: "What did you do over summer holidays, Mr. Hillman." "Oh, not too much. We travelled a bit." The following year's UK tour, delivered even greater culture shocks, as later GIG NOTES and journal entries in the MEDIA section will reveal.

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### **Impulse Recording at Wallsend -- A Gamble**

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On our return to Canada we immediately started planning a second tour of England for the following summer. Throughout the coming year we kept up correspondence with Mick Sandbrook and he lined up session musicians and studio time. Tracks which were to make up our seventh album was recorded at Dave Wood's Impulse Studios at Wallsend (Newcastle-On-Tyne). It was a small 8-track studio on the third floor above a theatre and bingo hall in a

large heritage building that had showcased countless shows and famous entertainers over the decades. In fact, local star-to-be, Stan Laurel, had honed his comedic chops here before heading to Hollywood. Impulse studios had recorded a respectable lineup of acts, from folk (Lindisfarne) to a multitude of rock and heavy metal bands from the North East (Sting, Last Exit, etc.) -- and Dave also claimed to have recorded The Chieftains.

I played guitars, buddy Mick Sandbrook from Middlesbrough played bass, and we brought in drummer Alan Studholme and pianist Bernie Watson. Local musician John Ashcroft eked out amazing sounds from his early model ARP Odyssey and Vox string synths: strings, clavinet, brass, jews harp, and SFX such as bubbles, flanging and wind.

The session guys learned all 12 songs in the studio as we recorded them. Between sessions we had some good photo shoots at Tyne Mouth, the Priory, WWII sites, and along Hadrian's Wall. We used a few of these photos on the album insert sheet, but the photos for covers one and two were taken at Terrence Fowler's studio back in Brandon. Kevin joined us for the studio photos for which we all wore our ragged patch-chamois costumes.

While I was busy mixing the tracks with engineer Mickey Sweeney on the final night, Sue-On decided to help pay for some of the studio time. She went out to the local casino with the Jones family and won 38 pounds playing black jack -- not bad for a novice gambler. The dealers obviously under-estimated her -- thinking she was the Jones's *au pair*.

As we had done on Album No. 6, we planned No. 7 to be a double concept package: Side One: *Sue-On - The Newcastle Sessions* which featured some of Sue-On's favourite solos and Side Two: *Road Songs: On Tour In England* for which I wrote songs inspired by our experiences on the road, both in North America and in England.

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## I. SUE-ON: The Newcastle Sessions

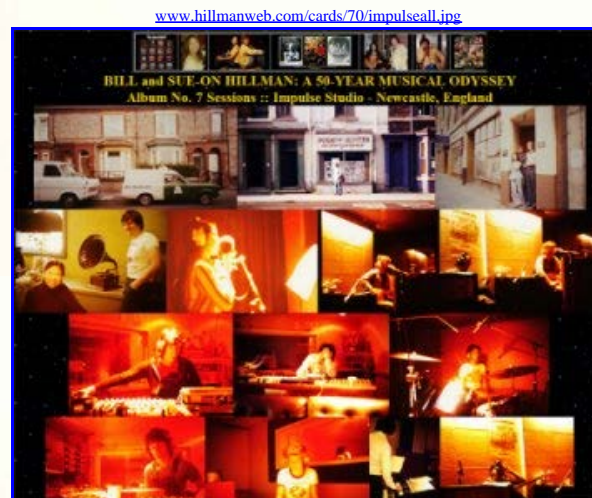
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As with most of our albums we chose a number of cover versions of songs that would appeal to our record-buying fan base who always look for familiar titles. This allowed us to mix in an equal number of originals which would get us more radio play and media coverage. We had done a less than spectacular version of *Tiny Bubbles* on our first album. Since that time we had combined it with *Paper Roses* in our stage shows. Sue-On was anxious to hear how this medley would sound from a more acceptable studio. We had a ball doing this one in a shuffle rhythm and then used the synth to add some "bubble" sound effects to it. She also did a new version of *Silver Threads and Golden Needles*. It turned out to be a much more driving version than the previous album No. 1 effort.

Another fan favourite at our shows and dances has been *Please, Release Me*. For this one I set the rhythm by using a drumstick to beat out a percussive sound from my guitar. We have a number of Neil Diamond songs in our repertoire and we finally settled on his *Song Sung Blue*. When we contacted Neil Diamond to pay royalties for the release of his composition he requested that we send album covers/inserts. They were to be added to the display of covers on the walls of his Nashville office.



We sing the gospel great, *Why Me, Lord?* as a duet on stage. For the studio session, however, Sue-On sang a fantastic solo and overdubbed harmony parts, a la Mary Ford and Patti Page. Impulse owner Dave Wood was at the studio while we recorded *Why Me Lord?* and was so impressed with it that he immediately took a dub down to the local radio station. One of the jocks flipped over it and played it three times on his show. I couldn't help but think back to the memorable event in Memphis when Sun studio producer Sam Phillips rushed the acetate of his newly recorded singer, Elvis Presley, over to the local radio station. DJ Dewey Phillips played the song over and over for listeners who thought the new singer was black and were surprised when Dewey hinted that the kid was white. In our case the enthusiastic DJ surprised listeners by revealing that the singer was a young Chinese girl from Canada. They later featured the song as a regular on their Sunday religious programmes, as well. We were pleasantly surprised when *Why Me, Lord?* went on to receive a nice bit of airplay across the UK and Germany.

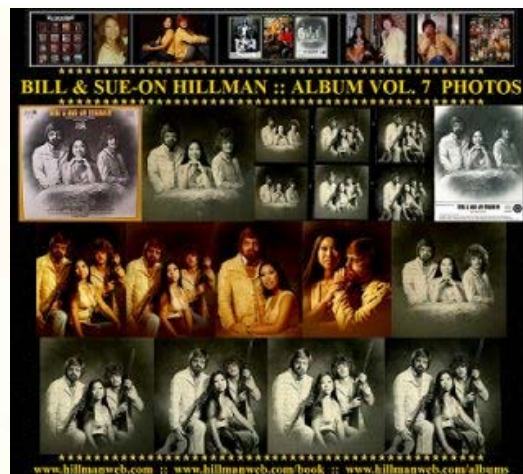
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## II. ROAD SONGS: On Tour In England

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Side Two featured seven more of our originals - two of them written by Al Jones who had organized and accompanied us on our first UK tour. Sue-On had recorded the ballad, *While You're Away*, the year before in London's Gooseberry Studios. *Boogie Woogie Band* had come out of the Free Spirit sessions we had done the year before.

*Outlaw Ramblin' Band* narrates the events of the first tour: the rather scary decision to leave the Canadian prairies to embark on a 30-night tour of English clubs, our first flight in a 747, the hectic confusion of Heathrow Airport, the crazy London traffic, the long commute to Northern England in a packed Commer van, and the challenge of playing for packed Workingman Clubs every night. This involved adapting to taking the stage after a warm-up variety act and house band intro, playing a show set, getting off stage while the audience indulged in Housie (Bingo), and then going on for a dance set, and shutting the whole thing down by 11 o'clock. It also gave us the experience of working with musicians we had heard about and admired for so long, exploring dressing rooms that the Beatles had used a few years before, playing up the novelty of our "American" accents and country/rock-based music, being typical tourists through the day, and suddenly adapting to Canada again after being immersed in British culture for seven weeks.

*One Night Stand* is a sort of wistful reflection on our many years of performing one-night shows for just about every venue imaginable. This duet opened many doors for us as it became a Top Ten hit on many stations and we performed it on network television, the national Big Country Awards Show, the Opry North Show and shows in various Concert Halls. It was also instrumental in our receiving the Manitoba Entertainers of the Year Award, which led to media coverage on the CBC National, newspapers, magazines and TV/Radio interviews.

*Swamp Romp* is a bit of a screamer but its main theme is that we were open to all musical genres and gigs. Over the years we have performed just about every type of music for all kinds of functions: military bases, TV/Radio, fairs and rodeos, outdoor festivals, arena shows and dances, auditoriums, penitentiaries, barn dances, high school proms, hoedowns, film soundtracks, commercials, churches, weddings, socials, Indian pow-wows, and festivals: folk, Celtic, blues, cowboy poetry, gospel rock, bluegrass, etc. ... we love 'em all.

*Montana* shares the experiences we had while performing on grandstand shows in US state and county fairs. All of our tours have been summer tours, taken during our summer break from teaching high school -- and university classes in our more recent years. Our backgrounds as geography majors and educators always influenced our appreciation of the geography and local colour of the places we toured. This fascination is quite evident in this song.

*Good Time Jamboree* is a novelty song about our stage exploits and the experience of performing many decades of one-

nighters. Newcastle's Impulse studio, like so many of the places we played in England, was inaccessible in the extreme. We had to pull our gear up many flights of stairs and through a seemingly endless number of doors because the facility was situated on the upper level of a large bingo hall and theatre complex. After surviving this ordeal, which anyone in his right mind would have left to roadies, I returned to re-park our Ford Transit van only to find that the meter maid had decorated it with a parking ticket - to add infuriation to fatigue.

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### James Bond Out - Superman In

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We had a few free days before returning to complete our recording session with additional vocals and mix, so Mick generously let us take his small van to the South. We returned to Mrs. Meanie's guest house in Bromley for our stay. By chance we heard that there was a rare open-house day at the famed Pinewood Movie Studios. We rushed over by train and bus and toured the main soundstage where they had just wound up a James Bond shoot and were bringing in truckloads of white styrofoam to create a North Pole set for the upcoming Superman movie.

I couldn't resist posing for a photo under the studio's towering Superman sign. I pulled open my shirt to reveal my maple leaf T-shirt and assumed a heroic Captain Canuck pose. My hopes of being signed as a stand-in for Christopher Reeve never materialized : )

This gigantic studio burned down soon after -- but was rebuilt -- even bigger and better. We had a great time prowling around the Pinewood backlot and finding many of the props used for the just-completed James Bond film, including the mock-up shell of his submarine Lotus. For this Bond film, *The Spy Who Loved Me*, a giant 007 soundstage had been built to replicate the inside of a tanker, at a cost of \$1.8 million. Also impressive was the mammoth water tank that stored 4.5 million litres.

Another highlight was touring the Avengers offices and grounds -- locations where Patrick McNee and Diana Rigg had spent so much film time playing John Steed and Emma Peel.

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### Whaaa? You Say The Cavern Club Is Now A Parking Lot?

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We had a chance to explore Liverpool -- home of the Beatles and the Mersey Beat -- during our break between sessions.

After being so bombarded by Beatles lore over the years this was a bit like taking a pilgrimage to Mecca.

We were in for a bit of a letdown, however, during our search for the legendary Cavern Club. All we found was an empty lot. We asked around and interpreted enough words from the Merseyside Scouse accents to realize that the building above the Cavern cellar club had been razed to make way for a much more important parking lot and subway project. A few years later, realizing their mistake, the city authorized the conversion of the basement of a similar building nearby to simulate the original Cavern.

We happened upon one of the few Macdonalds restaurants we had seen in England at that time and were surprised by the subtle differences in the food, such as the sweet pickles instead of dills and the sweet buns they used in the Macs. True to form though, they offered stringy, greasy little potato things they called "french fries" -- certainly no match for the wonderful British chips we had lived on almost daily.

Looking around the restaurant we were in for another shock. The look of the Sex Pistols, who had recorded at our Gooseberry studio and who had been such a presence at Wing Music, seemed to be catching on. All around us were kids who had adopted a look that soon would become known as Punk: strange haircuts, shaved heads, tattoos, piercings, grungy baggy clothing, etc. -- it reminded us of sort of a biker gang wannabe crowd. We never guessed that the punk movement was poised to infect the whole Western world. One final shock before making our way back to London was seeing a poster advertising an appearance of a new artist who had adopted a bit of a punk look and style, and who had partially adopted a famous name: Elvis Costello.

Liverpool seemed to want to bury all references to the Beatles. I never dreamed, though, that I would have a chance to trace the Beatles trail in Hamburg a few decades later -- their early 1960s experiences in Hamburg's infamous Reeperbahn district was the training gauntlet that prepared them for their future successes in Liverpool, London. . . and beyond. But that's another story - a story we've documented on our Website.

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### Shadows' Jet Harris and the Diamonds . . . and Kenny Rogers

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I've been an avid fan of England's Shadows pretty much since they began in the '50s. It was a thrill to finally see a one-time Shadows bass player at the Fiesta Club in Stockton. A good house band, MC and C/W singer played to a full house in this huge show/dance and disco club. The feature act was early Shadows favourite, Jet Harris, along with his band, The Diamonds.

Disappointingly, Jet turned out to be a small balding, spaced out and tipsy bass player, while his lead guitar player did all the Shadows and Ventures instrumentals. Eventually, Jet ended the set by playing his hits, *Diamonds* and *Rhythm & Greens* on a terribly out-of-tune guitar. Frightful and very disappointing.

Amusingly, I attracted many stares and questions from the crowd who were asking if this stranger to the club was Kenny Rogers from America. They were fooled by my accent, long hair and red beard.

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### The King is Dead!

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At the end of our second tour we spent a few days roaming London: Picadilly, Knightsbridge, Harrods, British and Natural History Museums (75 Years of Recorded Sound Exhibit), Royal Albert Hall, Chinese restaurants, Palladium, West End plays ("Godspell" and a Glynis Johns play), Agatha Christie's record-running *Mousetrap*, and the new Edgar Rice Burroughs movie in Leicester Square.

On the last night we returned to our B&B room just as a terrific storm hit which coincided at 10:30 with shocking news on the radio -- the death of Elvis Presley. A surreal evening: the hotel keeper and roomers were crying in grief, thunder and lightning crashed, the storm flooded the streets and even closed down much of the tube system. To add to the solemnity of the evening, BBC-TV reverently signed off with Elvis' *How Great Thou Art*.

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### **Fly Away**

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On the morning after the news of Elvis' death we hit the streets of London early. Every newspaper displayed, "King is Dead" headlines. We bought papers and all the English-pressed Elvis records I could find before we took a train to Gatwick Airport.

Amazingly, there were three sets of people from Manitoba in the airport queues who had been to our dances back home. We arrived home in time to play an outdoor gig at the Rossburn Indian Reserve. There had been heavy rain all day and the low, makeshift stage was covered with and surrounded by mud.

We played to a very responsive crowd in fog and wet and cold. It was fun backing local singers, including the chief who played fiddle songs. A surreal contrast to the English scene we had left the day before.

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### **The Maple Leaf / Union Jack Project**

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The recording project that came out of our third tour of the UK was unique. Bassist Mick Sandbrook, who had played such an important role in our two previous tours, set up a joint session that would integrate us with his show band, *Desperado*.

Before moving on to super stardom with *Free* and *Bad Company*, Paul Rodgers had gotten his start with the guys in this band. Each member of *Desperado* sang and the band featured Mick, John Whittingham and Colon Bradley on

bass/guitars, Paul Druckers on drums and Alun Edwards on percussion.

Both Sue-On and I and Desperado wrote original songs for the session and we then chose some popular cover songs from our mutual set lists. Our plan was for all of us to work on the backing tracks and then for each of us to add our own vocals to two separate mixes, resulting in almost 20 songs for each group. I wrote five originals and Desperado wrote three for the session. The material was rehearsed at Workingman Clubs in the area.

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## Pity Me

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Terry Gavaghan, a former guitar player for the *Carpenters*, built his 24-track Guardian recording studio in two adjoining row houses in the village of Pity Me, County Durham. On Terry's recommendation, I hired Alan Clark, one of the top musicians in the NE, to join us on keys and he arrived with Arp synths, Fender Rhodes 63 and Hohner Clavinet. Alan was a health food freak and filled the studio with acrid fumes from the strange organic mixtures he smoked. A super musician.

Terry had bought an upright grand piano from the studio at Château D'Hierouville, France -- the one that Elton John had used for songs on the *Honky Chateau* and *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* albums. The drums were the battered remains of Keith Moon's Premier Resonator kit, which Terry had bought at a London auction. Terry and Moon had been buddies in London and had survived some pretty wild adventures together.

I led the recording of our bed tracks, while playing my Telecaster Thinline through a Vox practice amp. Paul had trouble finding the rhythms for many of our songs so Sue-On took over Moon's drums for her songs. Desperado's instrumentals and back-up vocals were first class. I conveyed head arrangements to Alan Clark who did a great job translating them into full sounds of strings, horns, flutes, saxes, synth effects, piano and clavinet: a few examples were Creole Horns for *Promised Land* and for the *Take It Easy* ending I even had him work on a 5-string banjo sound -- demonstrating the rolls and droning fifth string to him.

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## Local Hero Hits Dire Straits

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[www.hillmanweb.com/cards/uk/clarkall.jpg](http://www.hillmanweb.com/cards/uk/clarkall.jpg)



On our many previous recording sessions I had played all the guitars - multi-tracking acoustic and electric rhythms and guitar leads. It was a treat then to play with the two hot Desperado guitarists. It was an even greater thrill to work with Alan Clark who brought an arsenal of keyboards and a superb knack for laying down arrangements to augment our bed tracks. For our stage shows we had relied heavily on a Fender Rhodes piano (an 88-keys model that we split so as to play the bass keys through bass amp) and a Clavinet, so we requested that Alan bring these instruments for the session. But he also brought ARP synths which he used to great effect to add punch and sweetening to the backing tracks and to augment our triple guitar arrangements.

We weren't surprised when we heard a few months later that he had joined Mark Knopfer's *Dire Straits* - the start of a long career with that band, until Knopfer went on to a solo career. His playing became an important element and helped transform the band into the huge group they then became with albums such as "Brothers In Arms." Alan was responsible for the lush, melodic arrangements on the Knopfer soundtrack for the film LOCAL HERO -- one of our all-time favourite films and albums. He also appeared in this highly acclaimed Burt Lancaster film. There was a scene where a local Scottish band played for a country dance. If you look carefully you'll see Alan on stage playing piano with the band.

Alan Clark also did production, session and touring work with many of the greats such as George Harrison, Sting, Van Morrison, Elton John, Phil Collins, Bob Dylan and Tina Turner and was on many of their hits. We had the pleasure of seeing him on two shows many years later in Canada with *Dire Straits* and also playing a stack of synths and Hammond B3 organ in Eric Clapton's band. In recent times he has recruited many of the former *Dire Straits* musicians and has formed *The Straits*. The band travels worldwide thrilling huge crowds with all the *Dire Straits* hits.

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### **The Studio Ghost. . . She's Back!?!**

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We had booked Guardian Studios for five days with unlimited hours recording time. As a result I spent very long days and worked well into the wee hours. One night we moved Keith Moon's drums out of the isolation booth, which also doubled as a vocal booth.



I had just finished double tracking *Lady Luck*, *Chuck Berry's R&R Medley* and *Promised Land* and was in the middle of my *Take It Easy* vocals. Sue-On had gone across the street to make a long phone call at the pay phone, so I was alone at the mic. Terry and Mick were working the board behind the glass.

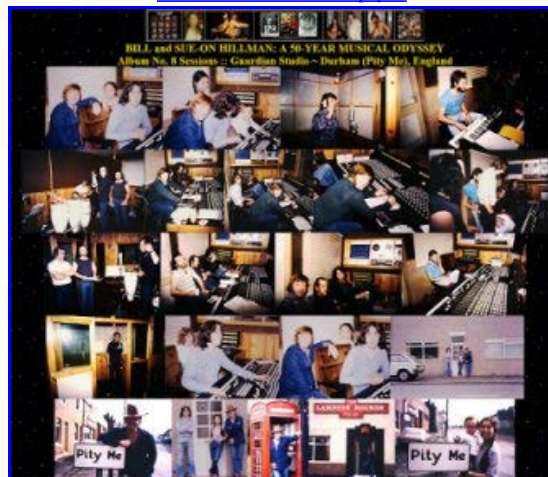
I had just started the song when a brilliant light flashed behind me. The guys at the board appeared startled and stopped the tape. I assumed that some piece of equipment had blown up. Terry motioned me into the control room and phoned his assistant, Keith, who lived upstairs above one of the row houses. The guy rushed in saying, "She's back!?!"

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### The Haunted Studio

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[www.hillmanweb.com/slides/pityme](http://www.hillmanweb.com/slides/pityme)



Apparently Mick and Terry had seen the negative image of a short figure in the brilliant flash of light that had lit up the room behind me. Terry went on to relay the story of the ghost of an 8-year-old girl who had been struck by a lorry in the street 30 years ago. Bystanders had brought her in and laid her on a couch that was situated where the drum booth now stood. It was there that she died.

The girl's ghost was a bit of a legend in the town. There was even a picture of her in the pub down the street. The legend was that she usually appeared before a disaster of some sort happened. She must have been listening to my vocals. Strangely, a few weeks back, in the middle of the night, Terry and his wife had heard a cry from someone falling down the stairs from their upstairs suite. The only other person in the suite was their young son, John, who slept in another room. They raced out, but found their son still fast asleep in his bed.

On another occasion they awoke to see the glowing figure of a young girl standing at the foot of their bed. They learned the next morning that a close relative had died that night. I am not at all superstitious and have still to be convinced about the validity of the supernatural... and I didn't see a ghost girl... but there certainly was a brilliant light behind me that night. We had a good story to tell Sue-On when she returned from her long phone call.

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### The Guardian Legend

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Terry Gavaghan was a well-known studio engineer in the North East, a bit of a local legend. He had worked on very many of the definitive early punk/new wave releases that came out of that area in the 1970s and 1980s. He also did a

lot of work for local television.

Terry's Guardian studio was rather small, occupying just the two ground-floor rooms of the centre terrace house. The live room had a compact drum booth and upright piano. The control room was smaller, containing a Studer mixing console and 24-track recording machine, Terry's studio engineer's chair and an uncomfortable wooden bench fixed to the back wall, for clients' 'listening-back'. A rear extension contained a small kitchen and toilet facilities, and an access door opening directly into the back lane outside, where most loading-in was done by visiting bands.

Terry's many claims to fame and his stories, anecdotes and sayings have passed into local music folklore.

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### Keith Moon and 'The Gabardine Trousers'

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Terry took pleasure in sharing some of the tall tales that he and *The Who* wildman, Keith Moon had experienced in years past. One day between takes he told us a story of how he, Keith Moon and Vivian Stanshall (of *The Bonzo Dog Band*), played outrageous Pythonesque practical jokes in London during the early 1970s.

One such tale, 'The Gabardine Trousers' involved Gavaghan entering the premises of an upmarket Oxford Street tailor, asking to see a pair of Gabardine trousers. After these were produced, Stanshall entered, exclaiming "Ah, Gabardine trousers, I must have them!" and a fight would then ensue between the two, resulting in the pair of trousers being torn completely in two.

At this point, with the salesman apoplectic, Moon entered the shop on crutches, with one leg strapped up under his long coat and a wooden leg. "Ah, one-legged Gabardines!" he cried. "I'll take them both!"

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### Bringing Home the Good Times

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After completing close to 40 songs in five days of almost-around-the-clock sessions at Guardian Studios I had run out of steam and didn't have the time or energy to learn the third Desperado original, *Bring Back the Good Times*. The band had already completed their version. This actually worked out for the best.

Mick brought the 2-inch, 24-track master to Canada when he visited us the next year. We went to work on it. Sue-On and I spent some time at adapting *Good Times* to our style. We turned this original Desperado solo song into a very powerful, but bitter sweet and melancholy duet, which we recorded at Century 21 Studios in Winnipeg.

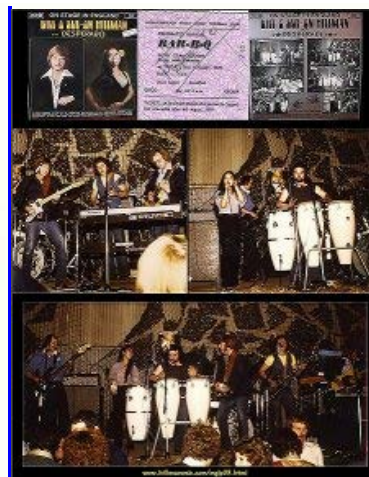
After mixing the song to 1/4 master we decided that the original song was way long for a planned single release. I went back to the studio and did a razor blade edit, taking a verse and chorus out of the master. Somewhere along the way the master tapes were sent to Edmonton for conversion from Dolby. The single release got good air play and charted.

The song eventually saw album release about 15 years later on our *CD Album No. 10: 24 Original Songs* that we collated in Del Clark's Brandon studio, Century One. The CD was mastered in Toronto and we took the photos and designed the inserts that were printed locally. Whew! The beast has a long and involved history.

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### On the Road Again

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Our final live performance in England was ironically a good ole Western-style barbeque and barn dance near a military base at Stokesly. The stage in the huge building was decorated with military camouflage netting from the nearby base. The performance was for a large lively crowd -- well fueled with steaks and beer.

Sue-On and I and Desperado rocked out many of the songs we had just recorded. We added some old time rock 'n' roll to the sets: *Memphis*, *Baby What You Want Me To Do*, *Lawdy Miss Clawdy*, *It's So Easy* ~ *Summertime*, and a whole lot of heavy blues.

We were soon homeward bound. England beckoned two more times, but we would not see the guys in the band till over 30 years later. Back home we had another album to release, a Manitoba gig schedule to resume and were about to go through many surprising turns in life and career.



NEXT: 6. [What A Ride!](#)

*Gig Notes V: England Tours: 1976-1979*  
**SUPPLEMENTARY RESOURCES**

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[The Hillman / UK Connection](#)

[Tour Diary I: The Clubs](#)

[Photos: Tour I - The Clubs](#)

[Tour Diary II: London Adventures - Recording Sessions](#)

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[Tribute to my Dad and his RCN WWII ship, HMCS Prince Robert](#)

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[Tour Diary III: Album 7 Sessions](#)  
[Photos: Impulse Studio Sessions: Wallsend/Newcastle](#)  
[Tour Diary IV: Album 9 Sessions](#)  
[Guardian Studio Photos of Album 9 Session](#)  
[England 1979 Tour Scrapbook](#)  
[Album 7: The Newcastle Sessions](#)  
[Album 9: On Stage In England](#)  
[Return to James Herriot's Thirsk](#)  
[Off-Site Ref: Alan Clark in Wikipedia](#)

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6. [What a Ride!](#)
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### **BILL and SUE-ON HILLMAN: A 50-YEAR MUSICAL ODYSSEY**



[BOOK COVER](#)

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