VAGABOND HOLES

DAVID McCOMB AND THE TRIFFIDS

EDITED BY

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TEMPORARY MONUMENTS

Preface

Chris Coughran

Some births are worse than murders … The present volume, a labour of love for all concerned, was conceived via transcontinental email in the early part of May 2006. Inevitably, no doubt, its gestation and delivery were fraught with complications. Most unexpected was a concurrent surge of interest in the legacy of The Triffids, buoyed by a raft of admirable initiatives: a reissued back catalogue replete with detailed liner notes and perfect-bound booklets; a series of retrospective concerts in Belgium and the Netherlands; a television documentary and plans for a feature-length film; the Sydney (and subsequently Perth) Festival showcase, *A Secret in the Shape of a Song*; and the band's induction by St Nick into the ARIA (Australian Recording Industry Association) Hall of Fame. As the misbegotten, poorer cousin of the bunch, floundering like a retard in the backwash of such illustrious forebears, this book could hardly be expected — indeed, was never intended — to be 'the last word' on David McComb and The Triffids. Even so, it is with a sense of tremendous pride and more than a little relief, that we sever at last the umbilical cord and unleash our little monster — in all its polymorphous perversity, and bearing several aspects that even a mother would be hard pressed to love — upon an unsuspecting world of noble aesthetes.

This book owes its existence, first and foremost, to the generosity and forbearance of its contributors, to whom we humbly express our gratitude. We are especially thankful for the cordial encouragement shown to us by the surviving members of The Triffids — Jill Birt, Martyn P. Casey, Graham Lee, Alsy MacDonald and Rob McComb — and for services rendered along the way by various others. Maria Barnas, Emily Bitto, Ruth Blair, Robert Briggs, Sally Collins, Maryanne Doyle, Trevor

Hogan, Sascha Jenkins, Steve Keene, Braden King, Toby Martin, Steve Mickler, Julian Miller, Negeen Nichols, Elizabeth Pippett, Max Richter, Margaret Sankey, Douglas Sheerer (Galerie Düsseldorf), Samantha Stevenson, Darren Tofts, Steven Vandervelden (STUK), Brian Waldron, McKenzie Wark and Sarah Wilson provided much-needed moral support, indulging the editors' many whims, facilitating often importunate solicitations, and countenancing all manner of recherché requests. For service above and beyond the call of duty, Georgia Richter, our consultant editor at Fremantle Press, deserves special mention. We should also like to thank Curtin University of Technology, for contributing towards travel costs associated with the book.

Finally, it would be remiss of us not to offer, in the spirit of The Triffids' album liner notes, a parting gesture acknowledging certain adversarial powers, whether real or imaginary. *No thanks*, therefore, *to you know very well who you are*.

Introduction

Niall Lucy

I am a loose strand
You may never tie nor mend
—David McComb, 'Keep Your Eyes on the Hole'

This book is not a rock biography. It doesn't feign to tell the story of David McComb's life, or to explain his music as an expression of that story. It doesn't seek to psychologize McComb by construing some eventful moment in his childhood as the talismanic source of meaning in his songs. While several pieces here are clearly biographical or historical in nature, these are no more imperative than other — fictional, poetic, speculative, critical or variously visual — inclusions.

For us, McComb's work is more than capable of sustaining — indeed, clearly warrants — such wide-ranging and varied discussion. We didn't want that discussion, therefore, to settle into a familiar style or be constrained by a single point of view. While welcoming the insights of those who knew McComb — friends and fellow musicians alike — we were equally interested in other ways of looking at the topic, which, once collected, would constitute less a work than a work in progress: loose strands 'bound', in a certain sense, but still untied. An *Exile on Main St* of a book. A vagabond collection, full of holes.

The devil here is in the mix. Why this piece, alongside that one? Why this photograph, and not another? In most but not all cases our response would be that, where possible, we've sought to avoid familiar, obvious or predictable associations. We didn't want the visual pieces, for example, to serve merely as 'illustrations,' marking them as supplementary to the primacy of words. We didn't want the more speculative or theoretical pieces grouped together, marking them as different for

being 'academic' and therefore out of place in a music book. This is not to say that, as editors, we are in full control of the book's possible meanings, uses and effects, or that the order in which we've assembled the pieces is sacrosanct. Far from it. Readers who, for whatever reason or none at all, elect to shuffle back and forth among the book's contents will hardly have violated our intentions by doing so. The vagabond, after all, the very figure of aimless wandering, may assume any number of forms but inevitably travels an idiosyncratic route, often beating an inscrutable path to who knows where.

When it came to assembling this eclectic 'mix tape' of a book, we loosely arranged the various fragments under three headings that could easily be mistaken for a beginning, middle and end. The first of these, 'Suburban Stories', is perhaps in little need of explanation, comprising pieces either set in suburbia or which have something to say about the suburban experience. Jon Stratton's essay, for example, tells the story of a serial killer who, in 1962, the year McComb was born, terrorized the good citizens of Perth, Western Australia, with the perverse effect of 'modernizing' that city. In Richard Gunning's painting *Crucifixion*, encroaching shadows darken a sun-scorched suburban tableau, deserted but for the dominating Christ-figure who hangs suspended, if unbloodied, from what appears to be one of three inexplicably wireless electricity poles. (As a kind of companion piece, the Thomas Hoareau painting in section two, *Lovers (Business as Usual)*, positions an imagined statue outside of Perth Railway Station at night, the coldness of the scene ironically warmed by the intimacy of the lifeless figures' embrace.) It was in the suburbs, too, that a young boy won a Divinity prize at school and later, in an apparent act of renunciation, became a martyr of Perth punk, a tale recounted here by Andrew McGowan.

Section two, 'Temporary Monuments', turns to questions of legacy, inheritance and commemoration. McComb himself, after all, was no less a *fan* than a composer of music, and often sought to explain the sound or atmosphere of his own songs with reference to records by his favourite artists (Springsteen, Van Morrison, Tom Waits … the list was long). He also wore his literary influences on his sleeve, along with his taste in movies and other cultural forms. 'Didn't McComb's fiery

energy,' Jean Bernard Koeman asks here, 'spring from his self-proclaimed adoration of Dylan and Leadbelly and the poets Les Murray and Marina Tsevetaeva?' To these could be added, among countless others, musicians as diverse as Kraftwerk, The Velvet Underground and Laura Nyro, and the writers F. Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor and T.S. Eliot. Accordingly, Koeman continues, isn't McComb's music imbued not only with grand, ahistorical themes and sentiments ('loss, rage, the empty landscape'), but also with 'the dustbowls of Woody Guthrie, the melodies of The Byrds and The Stooges, the poetic voice of Joseph Brodsky, the agitated, inventive energy of the "Post" Wave?'

In a sense — in what might be called a postmodern sense — McComb made music from materials to hand, and not simply from the depths of his 'soul.' Borrowing a line or an image from Murray or Fitzgerald here, a musical phrase from Van Morrison or Television there, McComb's is an art of assemblage: piratical, nomadic, vagabond. But … as if there were any other way, as if an art could be the pure, unmediated expression of an artist's 'interiority.' Art doesn't express; it invents. It invents new possible ways of imagining a world and of relating to it: *art* does this, and not artists. *Art* invents, and we fail to respond to that invention when we see art purely as the product of an artist's self-expression. To the extent, then, that McComb's music is a pastiche of sonorous and verbal elements and larger narrative and thematic structures that are not in themselves unprecedented or unique, it is not essentially different from the art of Chuck Berry or Elvis. Its distinctiveness lies not in the naïve assertion of an absolute originality, but in its own peculiar borrowings and combinatory styles. James Paterson refers to some of these in his piece (in section one) on collaborating with McComb, while something of the eclecticism of McComb's musical taste is revealed in Nick Cave's commemoration of a drunken sing-along between the two.

From a different perspective, written as a kind of diary entry on his experience of singing with The Triffids at the 2008 Sydney Festival, Steve Kilbey underscores the necessity of sonority (hitting the right notes) in the production of rock's most valued effect, sincerity: a 'sincere' performance rests on the manipulation of a certain *technique*, the peculiar 'grain' or sonic characteristics of the voice notwithstanding.

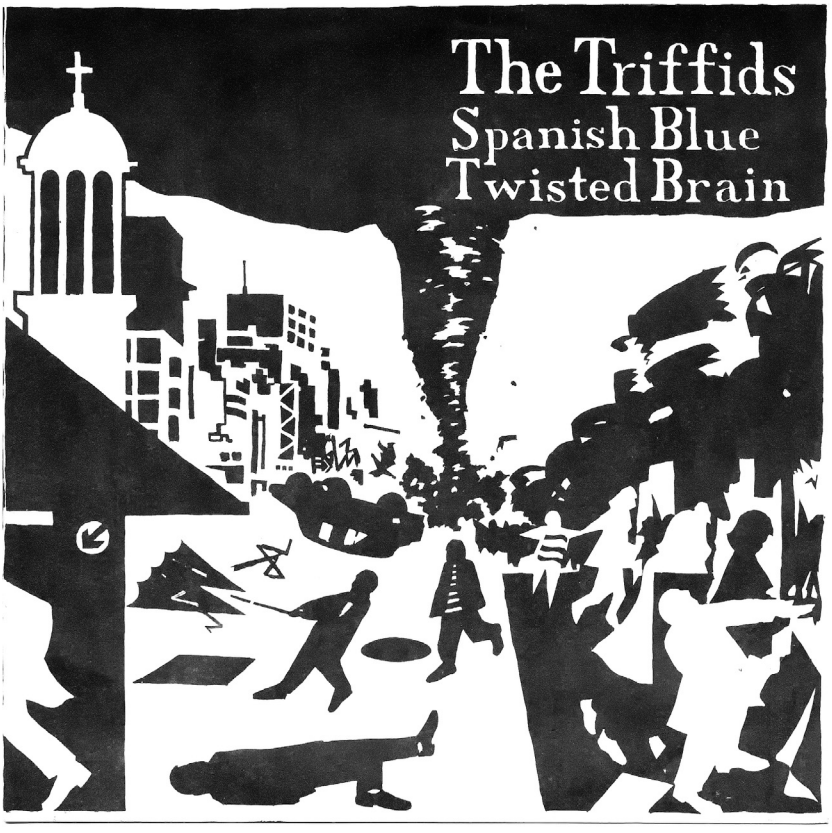
This explains why McComb, like every singer before or since, recorded several versions of a song before settling on a particular vocal performance, just as John Lennon is famously supposed to have achieved the right cut for 'Revolution' by lying supine on the floor of Abbey Road Studios while he sang. The romantic quest for a kind of sublime monumentality is always tinged, in other words, with a sense of that quest's futility, since all art is inseparable from the historical, material, cultural and other forms of contingency surrounding and infusing its possible meanings, uses and effects. Yet still we feel compelled, as here in the Sean Whelan poem, 'How to Climb Inside a Song and Disappear Completely', to celebrate what moves us, however fleetingly, if only in the recollection of 'a stage adorned with electric tulips' at a Triffids' gig at The Old Greek Theatre in Melbourne, one night long ago … or of a few boozy days spent with The Triffids, as Gavin Martin recalls (albeit from Bangor, Northern Ireland), in the Perth summer of 1989.

In the final section, 'Unmarked Tracks', which takes its name from one of McComb's alternative titles for *Born Sandy Devotional*, we detour off the wide, open road through secret, bonus pathways. As always, our guiding star in these parting perambulations (or, indeed, depending on where you came in, these initial forays) is the aimless wanderer, and like the chance meanderings of the vagabond or that figure's well-heeled equivalent, the *flaneur*, the point is not to have one. The point is not to arrive at a destination or a *telos* but to affirm the heterogeneous and supplementary pleasures of meandering for the sake of it, without contriving an outcome. Here, then, we go circuitously back to a time when letters and phone calls were the only means of keeping in touch with loved ones far away (Megan Heyward); forward, to a bathroom in Singapore and recollections of youthful nights in London pubs spent listening to The Triffids in the 1980s (John Dyer); and elsewhere, to a way of thinking about The Triffids as an occasion or inspiration for a 'people to come' (Claire Colebrook). All of which gets us somewhere past the middle, but nowhere near anything as definitive as an end.

Endings, even sudden deaths, are never as final as they seem. A book no more ends at a last word than a song ends on a conclusive

note. When something intrigues us — a life, a work of art — it goes on intriguing us, long past the point at which it might officially be said to have passed away. There are always loose strands, or else only neat packages; mysteries, or else only facts.

This is art's elusive essence: to remind us, dear reader, to keep our eyes on the hole.



Two faces of suburbia: 'Spanish Blue' backed with 'Twisted Brain' (1982). Artwork by Thomas Hoareau.

Suburban Stories

Alsy MacDonald and David McComb, near Devil's Elbow, Peppermint Grove, c. 1979.

1969

Alsy MacDonald

I was not brought up in a religious family. My family never went to church or observed any religious rituals, except for the familiar, commercially driven ones at Christmas and Easter. The McCombs did go to church, although I wouldn't have described Harold and Athel, Dave's parents, as overtly religious.

If I stayed the night at Dave's house on a Saturday, which I did every few weeks, he and I would have to go to church with his family on Sunday morning. Of the children, only Dave, and possibly Rob, was required to go. John had been let off the hook by this stage and I think Peter had moved out of home.

We were both seven years old. Maybe I had already turned eight. As Dave got older, and bolder, he would eventually succeed in getting out of having to go, but at that time, we just accepted it. Anyway, leaving us behind was not an option.

So, at around nine o'clock, we would drive in Harold's Holden HR Premier to an unassuming, neo-gothic, Presbyterian church in Kingsway, Nedlands. Nedlands, where I grew up, was, and is, a conservative suburb that seemed to exist more in the 1930s than the 1960s. This was still the era of horn-rimmed spectacles, hair nets, and shorts worn with long socks, and all were usually present in abundance. Upon arrival, and after pleasantries, we would take our place amongst the faithful.

Dave and I would pretend to sing the hymns, although I had no idea how the tunes went, and wondered how everyone else knew them. At some point, the minister would stop the service, and the children were 'invited' to attend Sunday school, which was conducted in an added-on area at the back of the church. The children then filed out and were led down to the Sunday school. The school was conducted by

two or three 'young adults,' friendly and casually dressed. They were probably older kids who had volunteered to be teachers so they could get out of having to sit through the whole service, but I can't really say.

Activities included drawing scenes from the Bible, listening to fables, and discussing the deeds of Jesus and his disciples. Nothing wrong with that, I suppose, except that Dave and I were not exactly the most conscientious of students. I remember an occasion when both of us drew a depiction of the crusades, broadswords hacking into limbs, viscera spilling out of gaping wounds, and shields smeared with blood. We knew it was probably not what the teachers had in mind but it made the whole thing bearable for us.

It was on one of these Sunday mornings that something happened to make me realize that not only did Dave regard society and its conventions in quite a different way to most other people — which I already knew — but that he wasn't afraid to say so, even at such a tender age.

We were asked by a teacher, a young woman, who had a sixties-student look about her, to sit in a circle on the floor. She told us she was going to ask us some questions on a Bible-related topic, I can't remember what. She then produced a portable reel-to-reel tape recorder and placed it in the middle of the circle. Perhaps she was doing some research. Whatever her background, everyone was impressed with the technology.

The teacher went around the group of kids, all about our age, getting them to speak into the microphone. I vaguely remember Dave and I discussing what we might say or do when it was our turn. We had been joking around a bit, so a mood of subversion was building up like static electricity. When the teacher got to us, she placed the microphone in front of our faces, and asked a question about Jesus. There was a brief pause.

'Mary's a bitch.'

Dave uttered the statement directly into the microphone, without hesitation or aggression. He then looked at me with a grin, and we both started laughing. I can't remember what the teacher said or if she asked us any more questions. I doubt it. No amount of lay psychology would have assisted her. She didn't tell us off, but I'm sure she moved on to someone more compliant. Of course, we didn't tell Athel or

Harold about it, and, as far as I'm aware, nothing was reported back to them. On the other hand, it got our day off to a great start.

This episode represents my earliest appreciation of Dave's adherence to non-conformity as a guiding principle, fashioned through a keen sense of the profane. I shared his view of things (most of the time), and we urged each other on. I knew that he hadn't set out to deliberately cause offence as an end in itself, although maybe there was an element of that. And I don't think it had anything really to do with Jesus or Mary or religion. I doubt Dave had seriously formed a view about such things at that stage. He was simply making the point that he didn't have to go along with, or like, what everyone else was doing, a notion he was driven to express many times again.

It was an aspect of Dave's character that others came to experience in the years to come, not always to their advantage. His assessment of other people's opinions and motives could be cruel and unfair. Ironically, it was New Age mysticism, not mainstream religion, that Dave came to loathe. Back then, however, he was just finding out how easy it was to get a reaction.

Country Gentleman: David McComb with newly acquired (vintage) Gretsch guitar, 1981.

Three Songs

Robert Forster

What a lucky city Sydney was on this pale blue morning to see two tall charismatic young men such as David McComb and myself walking towards each other. I had been back in town for under a week, returning with my band The Go-Betweens from our current home in London to start a tour to promote our latest album. It was the early eighties and both David and I were walking the fresh morning streets of Darlinghurst alone — he coming down the hill on one side, me going up the hill on the other, when I saw him.

We knew each other of course. The Go-Betweens and The Triffids had played gigs together before we'd gone to London and, through this and the crossover of certain people we had in common, both bands had become friends. We also shared the fate of being outsider musicians from far-off places, Brisbane and Perth, and that meant both of us had already done some travelling and were going to have to do a whole lot more to fulfil the ambitions of our respective bands.

We talked on the street and I told him that I had just heard the latest recordings that The Triffids had done; that in my rambling about Sydney over the previous days someone had played me their new record and that I had liked it a great deal — especially a song called 'Red Pony'. What I didn't tell him but felt in my bones was that it was a breakthrough song and that if a songwriter can write one great song then they will certainly write more. This seemed a little too much to say and phrase without sounding condescending. But I praised 'Red Pony' heavily. I also said to him that if he had a spare moment over the next days and he was around, could he possibly show me how to play the song on guitar. He smiled, said he would, and we parted.

I must explain why I asked David this. I'm not a natural musician (David was) and music had always been a mystery to me. It was

hard to decode. I learnt other people's songs primarily from songbooks. Very basic songs I could work out from records — Ramones songs say. But anything more complicated I didn't trust or believe in myself enough to learn. I remember someone playing me a song from Television's *Marquee Moon* once, and it seemed wondrous and impossible that I was seeing someone's hands move on a guitar and a Television song come to life. So when I asked David to show me 'Red Pony' I wasn't being cute. It was because I thought 'Red Pony' was a great song and I wanted to know great songs and it just popped into my head at that particular moment to ask him.

Two days later I was in Darlinghurst in a friend's house. I was alone and there was a sudden knock at the door and I wondered if I should answer it. I did and standing in the doorway with a big semi-acoustic guitar in his hand was David. I invited him in and walked him through to the back of this small workers' cottage where there was a tiny kitchen with a wooden table and chairs. We sat down, he settled himself, and then he began to play me 'Red Pony'. My eyes burnt on his fingers. The song started in A-minor and I watched the chords descend, holding as they did, the beautiful melody he'd created and now sang. His voice was strong and dignified over the metallic clang of the guitar. When the song ended I thanked him for finding me and playing me the song, and I offered him the only thing I had in return, a cup of tea, which he accepted.

The second song happened two years later. This was a very different scene. It was at a party in London, in a flat The Triffids rented near the centre of the city. Everyone was there — Triffids, Moodists, Go-Betweens, photographers, journalists, girlfriends, boyfriends, London friends, Perth people, all cramped into a couple of rooms drinking and smoking and yakking. Parties of this time had a particular pitch. It was brought on by the fact that it was impossible to buy alcohol in London after eleven o'clock at night and that all public transport closed down soon after. Friends who seldom saw each other, locked as they were into lives in a foreign city, drank and talked at a pace quicker than usual. Everything had to be said and done within three hours. I was happily weaving my way through the party when I came across David in the kitchen. 'Wide Open Road' had just come out and after some initial conversation I asked him if he would play

me the song sometime. He looked at me with an indulgent smile. I was helpless for a second and then he surprised me by saying he'd play it to me now.

The guitar he held was the same from Sydney, a big Gretsch semi-acoustic. David sat on the edge of his bed and I sat on my haunches on the floor. He started to play. My eyes burnt on his fingers again. 'Wide Open Road' started in G-major. I watched him peel off the chords. They were simple and majestic. It was a classic song and I followed it round as he played. His voice was similar to the way it had been in Sydney, perhaps a little grander, because the song was a little bigger. When it was over the volume of the party rose up again. I looked out the window of his room and there was a railway track, ghostlike and quiet. I thanked him and we both stepped out of this world back into the bright lights of the party.

The final song happens ten years later. The Triffids and The Go-Betweens are no more and I am performing a solo acoustic show at The Continental in Melbourne. I am backstage in the large dressing room with waiter service that the venue provides to its performers. I am going on in twenty minutes and there is the fear in the pit of the stomach that only really hits hard when performing alone. I am pacing the room doing what I always do before such shows — thinking of passably witty or informative things to say between songs. These few sentences are especially needed when the only thing between yourself and the audience is an acoustic guitar.

David is at The Continental too. He is out in the room deejaying — entertaining people and establishing a mood for me to walk out into. I am just about to go on, at the curtain, when I hear the familiar opening strains of 'Mississippi' by John Phillips. This is a song that I know. John Phillips was in The Mamas & the Papas. He wrote 'California Dreamin'','Monday, Monday' and most of the band's other hits. He also recorded a solo album in 1970 called *The Wolf King of LA* which has a small cult following among singer-songwriters such as David and I. So at this particular moment when I am about to step out on stage I know David is sending a message to me through this song. It is support. It is good luck. It is a pat on the back as I walk out to the microphone.

After the show the crowd slowly thins and as I pack up to leave there seems to be just two other people around — David collecting up his records, and Jo his long-time partner and friend standing by the door. I'm asking the owners of the club to get me a cab when David and Jo offer to drive me to my hotel in town. We walk out of the club to the car and we drive into town. The hotel is up at the far end of the city centre near Parliament House and the theatres. We pull up there. I'm in the back seat and I thank them for the lift and tell them I can get my suitcase and guitar from the boot of the car by myself. I open my car door and walk around to the back. David is suddenly standing there. It is after midnight and no one else is on the streets. I get my stuff from the car and look at him. We are the same height. He smiles at me the way he always did, with the sides of his mouth curled. What do I read into it? Patience, a lingering suspicion he may have of me, and a lot of affection. It is a warm goodbye. He gets back into the car and they drive off. It's the last time I will see him.

Soon after I move to Regensburg, Germany with my wife and we start a family. I am cut off from the immediate music world and the Australian scene in particular. In 1999, in the middle of the five years I will spend there, I hear that David has died. It is distant news but brought into sharp relief through encounters and times with him. I think of the meeting on the Darlinghurst street, 'Red Pony', the London party and sitting low to hear 'Wide Open Road', the farewell in Melbourne — and other moments too. I also weigh these encounters trying to find a ledger in my heart and mind of what he gave to me and what I gave in return. You do this when people die. And I find myself in debt to David.