

JAMES VARDA - A POET IN THE WOODS

Francesco Caltagirone - Late For The Sky (Translated from Italian)

There is a lot of distance between the West Midlands, Warwickshire and the region of East Anglia, Suffolk, land of hills and plains, and the smell of the North Sea. Quite a few miles from the village of Tanworth and the valley where James lives, sheltered from the world, and the tentacles of the great metropolis where he was born. But a tenuous thread connects these bards of the countryside in some way through mysterious ties, inspired by nature and from the depth of the asperity of his own soul.

Those who live in the country and there compose, play and write poetry, know that they are exposed to the most extreme alterations of the seasons, to the exuberance of vegetation, to the presence of animals, to the voices that emanate from the earth, from the trees, from the hidden recesses of woods.

The awareness that this world can be systematically neglected and degraded by fools without a conscience puts you in a state of suffering. Drake lived in this dimension. The reference to his poetry, often quoted off the cuff in hundreds of records and by record critics, is in this case an act of duty, although there are some major differences of expression; something unfathomable, but so obvious, joins them together in some way. Maybe it is the trembling of the blades of grass, contact with little animals or that sense of happy isolation that surprises you when you are alone under a starry sky. Or it could be the heartbeat that animates poets, but Drake and Varda, I think they speak a very similar language.

James is not a prolific author, not in the sense of the frequency of composition, but only as regards publication. For reasons unknown to me, from the debut of "Hunger" in 1988, through "In the Valley" in 2003, up to the recent "The River and the Stars," released this year, there hasn't been anything else. Twenty five years ago I bought a rare vinyl copy of 'Hunger' and I was flabbergasted. I had read an article about it in a specialist magazine and then there was silence. The wonderful record, rich with heartfelt poetry ended up on the shelf. I ventured onto the Web and I discovered that in 2003 a second record had come out. This also was stamped by the sensibility of its author.

Then for a long time silence again. I researched on the internet and wrote to James and told him how much I was touched by his albums and he informed me there would a new work; this is his masterpiece, even superior to the previous albums that had so much enchanted me. We are in the territory of laying bare souls, of gentle troubadours, before the microcosm of Roy Harper; Bert Jansch and other lesser known greats that graced the numerous clubs.

The strange career of James begins in the 80's. He lived in the outskirts of London, a place to which he didn't belong, that suffocated him. He began to perform at Bunjies and other clubs in the capital. At Clapham Folk Club he met Roy Harper, one of the luminous stars of folk music in Britain. James supported Roy on tour and was introduced to John Leckie who would produce his first

record. On the back of his fortunate partnership with Harper, the promising folk singer sometimes went solo and on other occasions played support to better known artists.

He went on to participate in the Cambridge Folk Festival in 1989, The Reading Festival and various appearances on TV and radio. This brilliant start was followed by a long break in the middle, so much so that you suspected inactivity and to date he has only created 3 albums.

His style, his repertoire, the way he arranges his songs, exclusively composed by him, make him an original. There isn't any traditional material in the songs. He doesn't fish from the great pool of British folk song. It's all his own material filtered into the light of musical passion, crossing over from folk, straight through to country and punk, leaving only shades and seeds.

The young composer turned his attention to American music, especially from the South, with Townes Van Zandt; Guy Clark; and Lyle Lovett. The way he composes and interprets music and even the way he plays the guitar is however, completely different. I dare anyone not to think about Drake when you listen to the ballad of James, but it is not only this famous English singer-songwriter to influence him. The charismatic figure of Patti Smith also surfaces in his songs often transferring itself into poetic force, and a propensity to anti-conformist lyrics. There are flickers of elegiac introspection, glances of complicity at different types of music. The knowledge of the poetic world, of the son of Buckley or Van Morrison, can be traced here and there with little effort.

James' voice is thin, a little suffering or doleful. He has warm touches, but he reveals an interior sense of unease that filters through each song. It appears that beauty, not always contaminated in nature, quietens the tempest that agitates his blood. His lyrics talk of rivers and trees, uncrowded areas, wilderness, clearings and paths, of elements that threaten danger but more often subside in apparent tranquillity. Varda picked up the guitar in his pre-teens. His technique is refined over the years.

Just before leaving the metropolis and before taking refuge in a bucolic retreat, James bursts on to the scene with the amazing 'Hunger'. Now he has been writing songs for some years, he feels ready to bring his compositions to the world with an urgency and confidence that seem immediately obvious. An independent label Murmur releases the debut album. You can still notice in the folds of the record, something of the London districts but also an anxiety to free himself from the ghostly spectres of the city and its restless inhabitants. Simply London has never felt like home, whilst the countryside is a source of direct inspiration. Not only are there acoustic guitars on 'Hunger' but also harmonicas, an instrument that he continues to use. It comes naturally to compare him to Dylan, an author that without doubt has influenced him, but his manner of approach to the instrument is different. He is not an epic troubadour, but rather a young hungry man. Also contributing to the record was the son of Roy, Nick Harper, John Smith on bass, Steven Smith on drums. All the texts are written by hand. What a pain! We have never got used to the caprices of Neil Young and even in that particular case it wasn't a very easy interpretation. Luckily in the following records James will give up this idea and will introduce printed typefaces.

Hunger is an album that speaks of solitude, of moons suspended above rooftops, of streets that are permeated with sadness, gloomy low skies, visions that appear from the window of the Belle View Hotel, which features in one of his ballads. This is a desolate view with little hope on the surface between the fog and the wind. A stranger looks down on the streets, exiled from the world, battling with the grief of existence, from an obvious existential malaise made bearable by the beauty of the countryside.

James was given the task of taking care of electric and acoustic guitars and harmonica. The moral presence of Harper is seen throughout the record in its broken, impulsive sounds. As is that of Patti Smith an acknowledged influence. He is not a story-teller. He is a singer of intimate and personal ballads, entwined in the intricate hardships of life. The loner of the English countryside, he is the ideal inheritor of Drake. This is at once noticeable in 'Just A Beginning' and also the following song 'From The Belle Vue Hotel'. It is also notable in the rhythms of 'I Can't Stand It'. He surrounds himself in the melancholy of 'Strange Weather'. He looks towards Dylan (and why not?) in 'Crawl In the Pen', goes back to Patti in the rainy vision of 'In My House'. The eyes are dark, always beyond the window, beyond the apparent monotony of everyday life. "Black on Black", suggests the first writing of Barrett era Floyd. Hunger" is more than a very interesting album, which I think deserved a wider circulation.

It is not known why fifteen years pass before James Varda releases another disk. There must be some deep motivation, possibly painful or not. There are musicians who while writing a lot, publish very little. We respect your privacy; on the occasion of a future interview, but we will try to dissect this peculiarity. Like a bolt from the blue, so long after, when "Hunger" was dozing on the shelves and sometimes was played to friends curious about little known artists of great talent, in 2004, a surprise, "In The Valley", released by Small Things Records. Providentially, the texts are now printed. You can immerse yours self in the lyrics without banging your head against the wall.

We are always behind the window or walking along the footpaths in the countryside, through the long grass, gnarled trees and church bells that punctuate life amidst the incessant cries of crickets. There are reflections on life, on the harshness of time, on what we could have become and haven't managed to and the certainty of being as meaningful as a stone in the stream.

There is a continuous necessity to purify oneself. Cold water could do it. Nature is also observed through the filters and debris left by mankind. The abandonment of a rustic gate, the anxiety of having overlooked something that you could have done and didn't. The lyrics of 'I'm The One' proceed as a denial of one Dylan's best known songs 'It Ain't me Babe' (I'm not the lighthouse, shining in the night...I'm the one who drives you mad, I'm the one who makes you sad). The bed of a dry river, a burnt out car, the graffiti of a racist who writes on bridges correlates to uncontaminated nature and is confronted by its own systematic desecration. There is a continuous parallel between James seeing things both before his eyes and inside himself. The lyrics possess a great attraction. In every instance you can catch something particular that may seem insignificant at first, but that contains deep reflection

He never pursued success for himself, this traveller of the countryside, but as he writes to me, he would like his songs to be better known. In this album he appears to lean towards composition in a calmer and more sedate manner. The chords are light and sweet, small waves like ripples of wind through grass in the song "Message To Playwright". Voice and guitar suffuse the air. When you listen to "Down Here" with the progression of descending chords you think of California and David Crosby. James is a very careful observer. His ears are alert to the musical sirens that come from every part of the world. Sometimes it appears that Varda sings only one song, articulated in different forms. The minor key is not an absolute necessity. "Something Fell" uses this. The arpeggio is dense, a misty sadness surrounds each note. Performed all in one breath, "In The Valley" is more extrovert. We remain captivated by the beautiful guitar playing that radiates from "Inside The Volcano". Nick smiles from the heaven of singer-songwriters. They are twin inspirations that have lived apart. Sometimes you think that the music is just an excuse to say certain things, but almost at once you realise the melody and words are born one from the other, surging from the same font, a spring to which they inevitably return. A song, soft and solitary that fits our own personal solitude, that is often inexpressible. This is an important album outside the rigid laws of the market place, a sequence of personal and unrepeatable songs. A guitar that you must listen to as if it was meant for you alone, and a voice, fragile and tender, that contains so many small sufferings that evaporate and then bloom again almost as if they were your own. "In The Valley" is an album that captures these feelings from the very first bars that open a door to hazy Arcadia. A secret door enclosed in a wall, to the green enchantment and brilliance of the English countryside that reveals itself only if it wants to. It is an experience that makes your heart skip a beat as much as, or even more than the debut album. And you ask yourself inevitably, how many will be aware of it?

Then in 2013 "The River And The Stars" arrives, ten years after the second album, the album that recalls the Dedham Vale. Time stretches for James. His songs are decanted like good wine, or even better a fine malt whisky. I knew it would come sooner or later. He himself spoke to me about it, but that precision, that meticulousness that are part of his character, have stretched the time between his work. It was well worth the wait. The album is a masterpiece, a perfect record and as always the compositions belong to the author. The accompanying booklet also takes you to the countryside and wooded area that represents the typical scenery which he inhabits. They are rooted in the quintessential pastoral scene, the scenography of an intimate world, in direct contact with the innocence of creation. James hopes that the beauty of the countryside can be found in his music, by immersing yourself in the words, in the magical forest of candid emotion and bitter disillusion. Life is a dream and James knows it. It is a leaf that falls, a short journey but unknown, the willows that sing the sad refrain of time. 'There is nothing you can count on', he writes in the magnificent "Seven days Rain", a flaming page in his memoirs. 'All of my problems come from inside my head' he confesses in "The Plan Is Unfolding". And then there comes fog and mist on the field, moonlight in the trees, a heron in the reeds. Every word transforms itself into an image you can actually see.

James Varda is inseparable from the universe that surrounds him. They are one. Inhabitants of obscurity, we are exposed to the light, knowing that we cannot last long. 'Beauty has left us and the hypocrites thrive'. The things to which we attach to will never be ours to own. James questions himself about the fluidity of life. The acoustic guitar knows how to translate this mixture of sparse sensation, the voice makes the words universal. Musically, "The River and the Stars" is a gorgeous disc. Mick Hutton is on bass, Fliss Jones on piano and harp, Robin Ashwell the viola and Bugs percussion, but often we surprise James alone with his acoustic guitar.

In "These Times" the sound of the guitar endears itself to us. The other instruments are carefully introduced, without altering the crystalline beauty. It is a mature song rich in fragrance. It illustrates how gradually the sound of James has evolved and honours the demigods of English folk. A perfect beginning. The project to renew the scene is confirmed in the simpler "The Plan is Unfolding", arranged with grace and tenderness. The piece evolves with a delicate tone. It is as if you are listening to an album from long ago. The viola adds in to "Along The River" a poignant patina. The fading of the night is almost silent. James gives shape to solitude and to the forever changing elations of the soul. The album is proudly sailing high. "The Well" with its accordion is like air suspended, a heartbeat that dwells only in the heart of a poet. Every word is glued together with measured lyricism. "Seven Days Rain" has no need to announce itself. I'm petrified, speechless, by a classic that is destined to appeal to the elect few. A wonderful song, as if happy days for the genre had unexpectedly returned. Donovan? The great David Blue? The sound of the guitar makes you tremble. This is without doubt the high point of the album. "Stay Awhile" in minor tone is a disconcerting song which, as we have already said contains something of Floyd. With "Back To The House" the guitar captures us in its spell. It is a brilliant emotional spider's web that words cannot translate. But what does James do when he doesn't write songs? He answered to me truthfully, "I write songs". One poignant arpeggio reminiscent of Drake takes us along the way of "The Path Is Growing Deep". Every song is a small masterpiece. The arrangement is fantastic. Harmonica, viola and accordion appear with measured grace and lightness. Another piece that grows right through you. Soft arpeggios at the start of "When The Soft Night Falls" introduce yet another precious song. It was worth the ten years wait, so that we could be struck, as if by lightning. "The River And The Stars" closes one of the albums that I believe is one of the most essential folk albums to be heard in decades. James Varda is one of the most luxuriant plants of song writing. Now he seems to be changing direction and making up for lost time. Already a new album is in production and could be with us in a few months. We will be there waiting for him as if for a shooting star.