

STRUGGLE AND FAILURE

When my one and only book was published, a dozen years ago, I was surprised by the number of people who said, 'That's great! Now, when are you going to write Part Two?!' It seemed pretty clear to me that it wasn't Part One of anything; it was meant to stand alone, as the coming-of-age story of a musician intertwined with a series of reflections on the art itself. But a lot of people, apparently, took it to be the first instalment of an autobiography.

I should add that most of these people liked the book very much, and when someone tells you they've enjoyed something you've created, it seems churlish to then say: that's all very well, but you've missed the point. If anything, I wondered if it was me who was missing the point. I'd chosen, very deliberately, to write about my years of struggle, failure, and obscurity, rather than success. Twelve years on, though, I'm more sure than ever that I got it right, and anyone who's still waiting for Part Two is nursing a mistaken idea. That idea is that success must be interesting. It isn't.

Take as an example these three anecdotes about an old song of mine which, to my own great surprise, became a hit. See which you find the most interesting.

(a) I heard the phrase 'Is she really going out with him?' somewhere and thought it could be a song title. At this point I was still struggling to write lyrics, but I knew I was tired of stringing together clichés, or just trying to write the kind of things I thought songwriters were supposed to write. Why couldn't a lyric just be a droll observation, something funny, like part of a conversation you had in a pub? OK then, a song about attractive girls inexplicably dating hideous guys. I would cast myself as the observer (rather than the hideous guy) and the line 'pretty women out walking with gorillas' came to me immediately. I thought: I can't start a song with that. Then I thought: why not?

After that, I struggled to find a rhyme for 'she's married now or engaged or something so I'm told'. After a lot of thought, I came up with 'from my window I'm staring while my coffee goes cold'. The reason it took a lot of thought is that I've never, no matter how many times I've tried, managed to develop a taste for coffee. I just can't stand the stuff. So the line didn't come to me until I'd realised that the observer in the song didn't have to be me. I think that was when I finally figured out that a song is not a 'true confession'. It's both personal and impersonal. What's important is not to give a true account of yourself, but to take things from your own experience and use them to build something which works on its own terms, and has something about it which is universal enough to communicate to other people.

My mother didn't really get this. When I played her my first single (feeling, as far as I remember, both nervous and defiant) her eyes widened when she heard the 'coffee goes cold' line. She turned to me with a baffled expression and said, 'But you don't drink coffee!'

(b) 'Is She Really Going Out With Him' was released by A&M Records in the UK in September 1978. It made little impression, but was re-released in the summer of 1979, after the album for which it was recorded, 'Look Sharp', had been released (in January 1979) and started to attract attention. This time around, the single made it to No. 13 in the UK singles charts, and then to No. 21 in the US charts. It also appeared in the charts in Canada, Australia, and the Netherlands. To date, seven cover versions have been released, and the song has also been used in one film and two TV shows.

(c) Some years after the release of the single, I was walking down the street in London, when a rather unfriendly-looking black man approached me and asked if I was 'that Joe Jackson'. I said I was, and he accused me of being a racist. I was so astonished that I barely knew what to say; I think I told him that not only did I hate racism, and love black music, but I'd recently been married to a black woman (unsuccessfully, as it turned out, but not because she was black). Nothing I said made any difference; he scowled and rolled his eyes and finally produced his evidence: 'Pretty women out walking with gorillas', he said. 'Obvious, innit? Black guys with white chicks. Don't try to deny it, I know what you meant'. At this point I think I just stood with my mouth hanging open while he walked off, muttering and shaking his head.

If you answered (b) to the above, then frankly, you're a bit weird. The fact is that although success is very nice in some ways, it's boring. Or more precisely, boring to write and read about. Struggle and failure are much more interesting. My early-teenage hero, Beethoven, was so much more heroic to me because he had to struggle so much. I remember too being fascinated, around the same time, by 'Scott of the Antarctic', an epic tale of struggle and failure. Captain Scott was a British hero, but not just for patriotic reasons. Who cared about his rival Amundsen, who so tediously did everything right and safely got to the South Pole first?

When I wrote my book, I'd been pretty successful; at any rate, much more successful than I ever expected. But I didn't really have anything to say about it. It was nowhere near as compelling a subject as the quirky, funny, weird and poignant stuff that had gone before.

It's not that I don't still enjoy what I do. I still love being onstage, for instance, and I hope I do a thousand more gigs. But trying just once to describe how it *feels* to be onstage, as I did in the book, was quite enough. That's another reason I'm not

planning a Part Two: music – as opposed to the human stories that revolve around it – is damn hard to write about. I think I just about got away with it.

Some people might point out that I haven't had a hit in a long time, and that my audience has shrunk quite a bit since then. Therefore, I might once again be in a position to write about struggle and failure. I've considered this, but somehow haven't been able to convince myself. I admit that there are days when the glass seems half-empty rather than half-full. I start to feel underrated. But I can't keep it up for long, because by now I know that almost everyone feels that way. Even the biggest stars think they could, or should, have done better. And I've never envied someone like Michael Jackson, who had the biggest-selling album in history, only to look like a failure when his follow-up sold a mere 30 million.

As a friend of mine says, it doesn't matter if the glass is half-full or half-empty so long as there's whisky in it. Rather than compare my current 'status' to that of whoever's at No. 1 in the charts – or even to my own as it once was – I find it healthier and more realistic to remind myself that very few people even manage to make a living playing music. I'm still doing what I love, I'm still having fun, and I still have enough money to live pretty well. What's not successful about that?

It looks like I'll just have to find something else to write about. Meanwhile, I won't give up my day job.

Joe Jackson
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