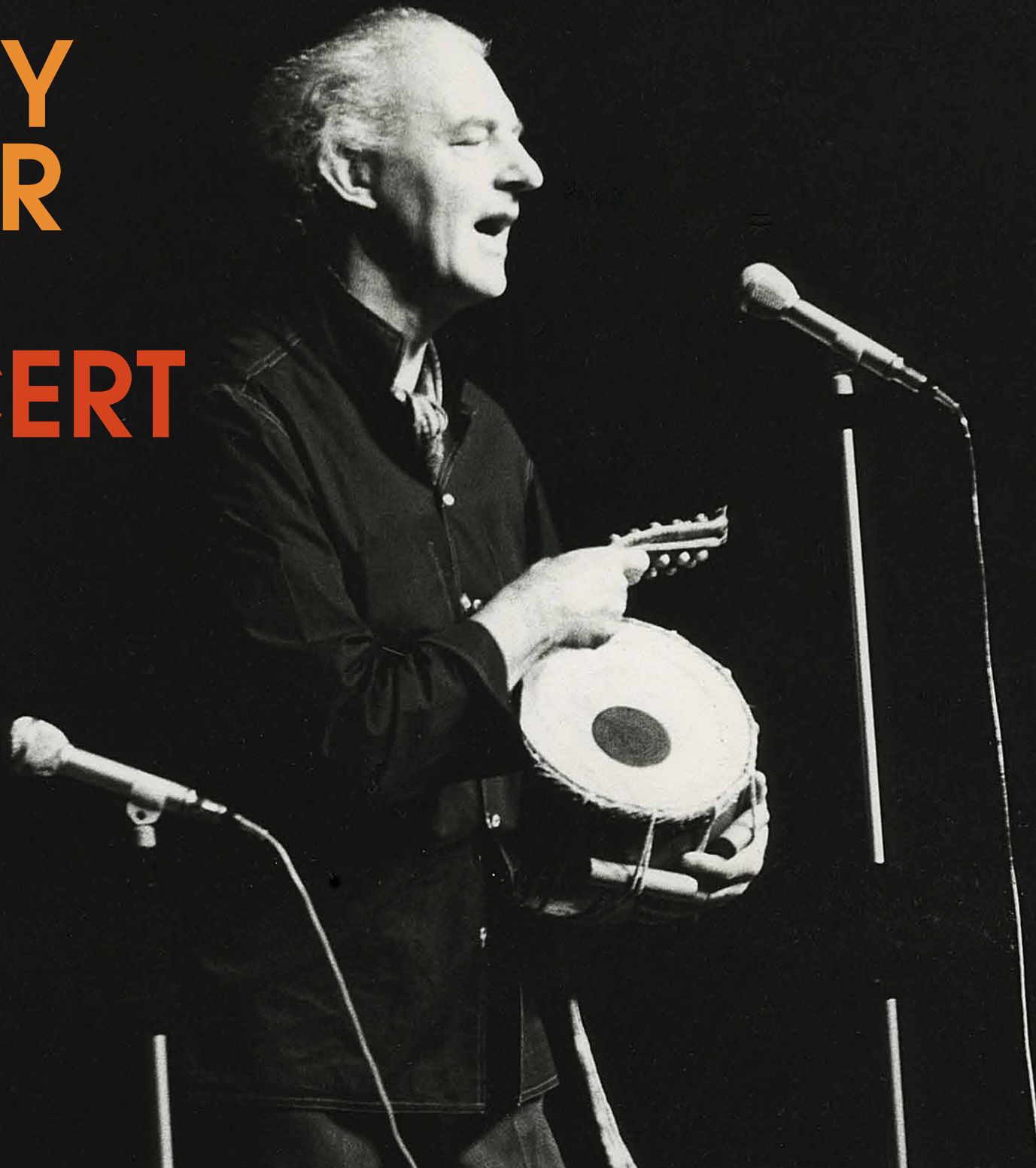


SYDNEY CARTER IN CONCERT

Material taken from the original
concert tour program booklet

1972

move



songsman TO THE revolution

Sydney Carter defies labels. He writes songs, yes — and sings them, too. But he's neither a song-writer nor a performer. Both terms are inadequate. You might call him a balladeer, but that term tends too strongly towards the romantic, the sentimental. Poetic he certainly is, but the poetry is laced with slings and arrows, clouds and thunder and lightning. The touch is sardonic, the humour ranges from purse-lipped grin to outright guffaw.

In spite of his influence, I would guess that Sydney Carter's name is not widely known in Australia outside the rarefied ranks of avant-garde Christian educators, "new hymn" buffs, and those who have been introduced to some of his work through Donald Swann's record, 'Sing Round The Year.' He's well known, of course, in his native Britain from frequent appearances on radio and television, in folk-song clubs, concert halls, church crypts, and even, on occasion from the middle of an Ice Rink.

"I was in a pulpit, lit by ghastly lighting, looking rather stark and grizzly . . . I just stood up there and started away, and people applauded if they felt like it and we invited them to boo if they felt like it. We said, 'Try and forget you're in church', whereupon a man neatly lit a large pipe in the back row."

The anecdote, and the relish with which it was told to me, communicates something essential about

Sydney Carter: the total lack of pretension, the slight note of self-deprecation, the hint of warm malevolence, the indication that, for him, anything goes.

One of my first encounters with him took place in a large room over a pub called "The Fox" in the Islington area of London. It was a Sunday morning and he was being filmed for Canadian television. The room we were in served as a folk-song club much of the time. On this particular Sunday it was our church. Carter sees little difference between them. They're the two places, he feels, where almost anything goes in music:

"Elsewhere people are liable to say 'oh, that's religious' or 'oh, that's filthy' or 'that's political' or something."

Sydney Carter, was born in London. He read Modern History at Balliol College, Oxford, and taught for a brief period before the outbreak of war. He joined the Friends' Ambulance Unit in 1940 and served in London, Newcastle, Egypt, Palestine and Greece. (This latter experience, paralleling that of his long-time friend and collaborator, Donald Swann, has been a lasting influence on his work.) After the war he served a three-year stint with the Education Department of the British Council, and for the past two decades has free-lanced his way through radio and television scripts, revue material, criticism and

what we'll call (avoiding labels) writing and performing songs of social significance.

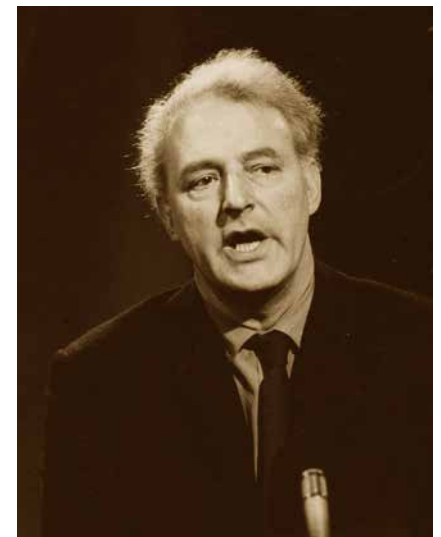
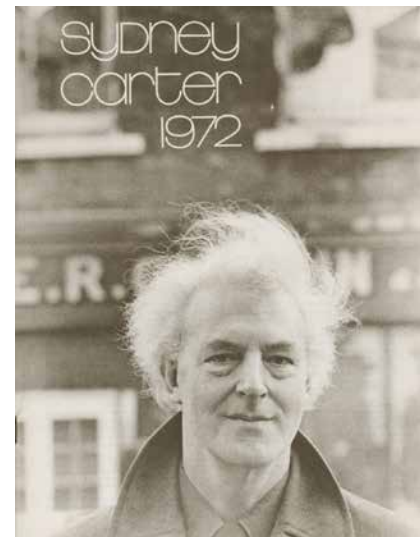
The present commentary will, of necessity, be limited to these songs which could be classified as "roughly religious". But I hope that this won't deter anyone from examining Carter's "secular" side — the revue songs, the bits of fluff, the ballads. Fortunately this mission has been rendered painless by the recent publication of the 'Songs of Sydney Carter in the Present Tense', a comprehensive collection in three slim volumes (with music). The chaff is proffered right along with the wheat.

In discussing Carter, it's difficult to separate his songs from the changing worship patterns he has helped to pioneer. Surely there are few churches in our land that have yet to echo to the strumming, or driving chords, of a guitar. Some critics of this phenomenon feel it's a gimmick. The pews may be packed with youngsters for a jazz mass or a folk concert, but what happens to them when the real stuff comes along — the half-hour sermonic monologue, the 19th-century hymns? Real to the critics, perhaps, but to the kids?

Carter and his like certainly are. He sees the sanctuary as an auditorium through which the church can serve the people, even when the people will not serve the church. Perhaps this demands a wider view of what is Christian, or even religious, than some church-goers are prepared to take. But if one starts from the premise that there is more than one way of looking at Jesus; if one agrees that, to some extent, each person is the vessel of a revelation; if one believes that God has a special relationship to each and every creature in the universe; if all these "ifs" are satisfied — then, surely, our concept of worship will include poets, playwrights, composers, and performers of every variety. Perhaps, in the end, every knee will bow to the fact of Jesus — to the

essential truth that he proclaimed — but those who bow may know it by another name, and they may come to it by other means than baptism in a Christian church. By the mere fact of having so many buildings, so many concert halls, the churches are in a good position to advance this dialogue.

These new songs, though, these new hymns. How do we know there's truth in them if they haven't withstood the onslaught of the years? Most of them, after all, are being written by the un-ordained — even (ssshhh) the un-baptized. Well, let's not be too alarmed. At the heart of it all is a revolt against the outworn, the phoney and the second-rate. There's an obvious thirst for truth, life and sincerity in this music that can only come from God and which, conversely, can only lead to God. Carter admits, however, that it may not lead there so quickly, so accurately, or, at any rate, so recognizably as some Christians would like. This new music doesn't demand an "Amen" at the end, it doesn't tell you what you ought to feel. It serves the truth more indirectly: raising questions that demand answers, making statements that demand contradiction.



Let's relate this concept, briefly, to 'Friday Morning' — a song of Carter's that has become something of a "cause célèbre". It first became available in Australia through publication in '9 Carols or Ballads'. The words nominally convey an accusation that God was responsible for Christ's death. They're delivered by a thief on an adjacent cross:

"It's God they ought to crucify, instead of you and me,"

I said to the carpenter, a-hanging on the tree.

The song raises a question which demands an answer. It's designed to provoke discussion. Its function is dramatic. If, as Christians believe, the God embodied in Jesus is the real God, then God, in a sense, was being crucified (and also, in a sense, the world was made by a carpenter). In which case he wasn't the kind of God the thief imagined. The "God" he consigned to hell ("To hell with Jehovah!" to the carpenter I said) simply didn't exist.

This could have been said in the song, but wasn't. It was left deliberately incomplete — a one-sided dialogue which forces the listener to complete it himself. It poses the question, "Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?" Surely the device is justified.



Yet an unholy campaign of vilification against the song, and particularly against the World Council of Churches, has been waged through segments of the American press. One release distributed by the vilifiers wound up verbatim on a surprising number of editorial pages. The words of the song (4 stanzas plus chorus) were printed along with the following comments:

"We print it not to offend anyone, but rather because we believe our readers will want to know about it, and whether any monies collected at their church are going to the World Council of Churches . . . Would you look forward to having your children or grandchildren sing this blasphemy at a church camp or conference?"

Suitably outraged readers were then directed to write to the World Council and set it back on the "right" path. I find it fascinating that these readers were allowed to escape a personal decision. The question is not "Would you look forward to singing it?" but, rather, "your children or grandchildren aren't intelligent enough to think through and discuss what they're singing. And I have a feeling that if these critics would examine their own hymn books (and that includes ours) they'd find great dollops of blasphemy that they sing, unthinking, each Sunday.

No illustration is completely useless; it can always serve as a horrible example. So be it with the above. It does, however inadvertently, point out a couple of things about the songs of Sydney Carter and his confreres. The first is that a song isn't a song until it's sung. A good performance lifts a song from the page and gives it a life that transcends the literal print. The second has to do with the intent of the song and the context in which it's performed. Yeast — the yellowish, frothy, viscous substance — is pretty dreadful stuff when consumed by itself; it's an essential ingredient, however, in the making of both bread and wine.

Another Carter song 'Every Star Shall Sing A Carol',

has a melody so beautiful that we might ignore the words; and that would be a most unfortunate loss. 'The Devil Wore A Crucifix' and 'Standing In The Rain', two of the more overt "message" songs in this collection, force us (most uncomfortably) to face the gap between our Christian profession and practice.

The 'Songs Of Sydney Carter In The Present Tense' includes these and makes others available for the first time. In one of them, Carter gently scoffs at the phenomenon he has done much to bring about:

"God morning," said the Vicar,
with banjo round his neck.
"We're digging up the crypt," he said,
"To make a discotheque."

So we're writing to the bishop
To say that we are shocked.
The Vicar is a beatnik
And he ought to be defrocked.

Another sets up a dialogue between the minister (pre-New Curriculum style) and his questing flock:

They won't believe in the Bible now,
They want to touch and to see;
But Matthew, Mark and Luke and John
Were good enough for me.

They're good enough for the Pope of Rome
And Billy Graham and you.
But you can't believe what you can't believe,
So what are we to do?

This song is somewhat the reverse of a much broader treatment Carter gave to the "Honest to God" debate. As performed on the late, lamented BBC—version of "That Was The Week That Was," the

dialogue went this way:

Half the things the Bible says
I don't believe are true,
And maybe I'm a bishop but
I think the same as you.

Glory Laud and Honour to
I really don't know who,
But keep on swinging the censer round
The way you used to do.

Say what you like about Carter, you can't deny his provocative nature. And the effects are still largely to be felt on this continent. He forces us to face the sham and the pretence and to ask the right questions.

In a short poem he pleads:

So shut the Bible up
and show me how
the Christ you talk about
is living now.

It's irrelevant, I think, to debate the status of Carter's music in a church context — or to label his songs as hymns, or whatever. The important consideration is that there's a time and place (and it may be in a church) for self-examination, for dialogue; even, it may be, for doubt. Carter, himself, says:

"One role I see is that of Devil's Advocate or God's Loyal Opposition. Against this demon bowler the parson must defend the Christian wicket. If he doubts his batsmanship, he can settle for a boy or girl with a guitar singing something securely Christian to a folksey melody. Even this may do some good, but he may have missed the greater opportunity."

Sydney Carter, demon bowler. There's his label.

“You write a song and you sing a song and people stick the labels on afterwards saying it’s ‘religious’ or it’s ‘anti-religious’ or it’s a ‘carol’ or it’s ‘folk’ or ‘pop’ or something. When you write a song and think a song and feel a song, you don’t care what it is.”

waiting

Most of your life you spend waiting for one thing or another. What are we waiting for? A lot of girls (not so many boys perhaps) are waiting for the day when they’ll be married. Some people are waiting for a house or even a room to live in. Some are waiting for the day when they’ll be allowed to vote. When you can work for the thing you’re waiting for . . . whether it’s freedom or money . . . you can wait in hope and sing about it. But there are times when there is nothing you can do except sit and wait and see your life go slipping through your fingers. In prison it can be like that, or even in the army. What can you do with all the years you spend waiting in a queue or washing dishes? Most of your life you spend waiting. What you do when you are waiting is what you do with your life, or most of it. Waiting is a part of life.

satire

There is plenty to fight against and protest about. One thing is war. Some people don’t like songs of protest. They say they’re depressing. Songs, they feel, are meant to cheer us up . . . singers ought to keep out of politics. Satire is one form of protest . . . it attacks evil by making it look ridiculous. But it’s a two-edged weapon: you can attack good too, and make it look ridiculous. Not all protest is progressive. Hitler protested . . . so did the Ku Klux Klan. Jesus protested about scribes and pharisees and moneychangers in the temple. Song and protest go together in the life and words of Jesus: but the joy is uppermost. A joyless protester is a sinister object. Anyone who dares to laugh and sing and praise life in the face of bullying, or scorn, or pity, helps to liberate us all.

bookshops
Theatres
&
churches
are
in
trouble!

They try to justify the fact that they exist. They are worried by the fact that most people do not seem to care if they exist or not. Most people seem to get along without.

How can people bear to live without a book? Most people can endure it if they have radio and television. Newspapers and magazines give more than they have time for reading anyway. Serious expensive books can easily be borrowed from a library. Paperbacks can be bought at a station bookstall, a supermarket; even from a slot machine. What is so indispensable about a book? Poetry, history and story telling are much older than the book. Books are really only a substitute for voices. Now we have the voices back: on radio, on record, on tv. A book is useful still for reference: but computers may take over that function too, in the end. The printed and the written word will always serve a purpose: they have young and energetic rivals. It is cheaper and easier to telephone your London friends than write a letter. It is also quicker.

How can people live without a theatre? Very easily. Drama is indispensable: but you can get that, not only at the cinema, but on tv or the radio. You

can get it in the streets. Going to the theatre has never been a habit of the great majority. It is (in Britain anyway) a habit of the upper classes or educated: except, perhaps, for music hall and pantomime. There was drama, too: church, weddings, funerals and hell-fire sermons. Once there were public executions. Now there are pickets, processions, demonstrations. You can get them all on television.

How can people live without a place to worship: how can they do without a church? Only too easily. A church, essentially, is not a building, but a group of people, a community. They have to have a place to meet: hence the building with a steeple. But they can meet in a pub, the open air, or in a private room. And that, today, is where most real community is to be found; and there, no doubt, they worship. They worship what they would not call a god. They see no need to go to church, where they do not meet their kind of people. Their own worship rises from their private or communal activity — sport, music, politics, sailing boats or making love. You cannot do these things in church.

The bookshops, the theatres, the churches were built to serve a real purpose: but the scene has changed. They are like abandoned harbours, from which the sea has long receded or where the river has silted up, or is too narrow or too shallow for the shipping of today. The ships keep sailing but they now go somewhere else. Bookshops, theatres and churches fail to serve the need that brought them into being. The chief purpose they now serve is the perpetuation of their own existence: the upkeep of their buildings and the livelihood of those who work there for a public which is rapidly diminishing. The public can now get the same thing, or something similar, more cheaply, more easily and better somewhere else. And quicker.

are folk songs our new hymns?

“Folk songs are our new hymns”. I don’t know who said this first, but I keep on hearing it. Does it mean anything? And if so, what?

“Folk”, like “God”, has become a loaded word. Which way the bias goes will depend upon your background. What it means to you it may not mean to someone else. The International Folk-Music Council said in 1954 that: “. . . it is the re-fashioning and re-creation of the music by the community which gives it its folk-character . . .”

This means that no one man can write a folk song any more than he can make an antique chair. It takes time and corruption (creative or otherwise) to make a folk song what it is.

But words change their meaning through misuse, and “folk” has changed a lot since 1954. The folk revival is the rediscovery, not only of folk song, but of a way of making and of using song. Over the last 50 years, song has become more and more a cheerful, soothing, titillating or tear-jerking kind of sound. Meaning has counted for less and less. While novels, films and plays have been used to widen and deepen our experience, to explore new ideas, to promote

changes, to discuss (often in a way that causes pain to some) the problems of our daily life, song has been regarded as a kind of lollipop.

Some are crudely sentimental or commercial in their motivation. The same is true of some who are singing them. But commercial success in itself is not a thing of bad art or insincerity. Shakespeare, after all, did pretty well for himself. Neither Bob Dylan nor Ewan MacColl is starving in a garret, yet both, in widely different ways, have written songs with some of the qualities of the folk song of the past.

The older songs include carols, spirituals and gospel music. Using these should raise no problem in a church, except the problem of doing them properly. Can we use the new songs which, rightly or wrongly, are described as “folk”? I think we can: but only if we face the fact that most of them, and usually the best, are not Christian in the commonly accepted sense. They bear witness to the truth as seen from a non-religious angle. This is precisely why they can be so useful. They raise, in a powerful and often painful form, questions which a Christian ought to face; and to ask a question clearly and honestly can be a better service to the truth than to come up with a glib or phoney answer.

Whether such songs should be described as “hymns” I doubt. But are hymns the only kind of song we ought to sing in church? There is a time and place (and it may be in a church) for self-examination, for dialogue; even, it may be, for doubt. One role I see for folk song (ancient or modern) is that of Devil’s Advocate or God’s Loyal Opposition. Against this demon bowler the parson must defend the Christian wicket. If he doubts his batsmanship, he can settle for a boy or girl with a guitar singing something securely Christian to a folky melody. Even this may do some good, but he may have missed the greater opportunity.

change

We come from nowhere and we go to nowhere: that is what it looks like. But if life is such a brief and broken thing, who's idea was it that we should be born at all? That's the hardest thing to account for . . . that we exist. Why should anything exist?

That we exist is a wonder which we take for granted: and there's another. While we exist we are changing all the time. The tadpole grows into a frog, the child becomes a man, the young man gets older. We're on a moving staircase all the time . . . we cannot stop it. In all this change, is there nothing that stays put? We feel there is. We feel that under all the changes and disguises there is one part of oneself that stays the same: a part nobody can see.

This part of you that doesn't seem to change, even though your body changes . . . what happens to it when you die? If you're religious, you might say it goes to heaven or to hell: but if you're asked to prove it scientifically, I don't see how you can. Science deals with what can happen in this world of time and space. When you're dead you're out of it. Before you're born you're out of it. In between you're passing through it.

Don't know where I was before
don't know where I'll be tomorrow
Don't know where I was before
but here I am today.

RUN THE FILM BACKWARDS

When I was 87
they took me from my coffin:
they found a flannel nightshirt
for me to travel off in.

All innocent and toothless
I used to lie in bed,
still trailing clouds of glory
from the time when I was dead.

The cruel age of 65
put paid to my enjoyment:
I had to wear a bowler hat
and go to my employment.

But at the age of 60
I found I had a wife,
And that explains the children.
(I'd wondered all my life).

I kept on growing younger
and randier and stronger
till at the age of twenty-one
I had a wife no longer.

With mini-skirted milkmaids
I frolicked in the clover:
the cuckoo kept on calling me
until my teens were over.

Then algebra and cricket
and sausages a-cooking,
and puffing at a cigarette
when teacher wasn't looking.

The trees are getting taller,
the streets are getting wider.
My mother is the world to me:
and soon I'll be inside her.

And now, it is so early,
There's nothing I can see.
Before the world, or after?
Wherever can I

sed

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