

# the present tense

SONGS OF SYDNEY CARTER



*"Travel on, travel on to the flower that is growing – the flower will be with you all the way."*

To many people the songs of Sydney Carter are an enigma. They try to fit them neatly into one of the accepted categories – perhaps folk, religious, or protest, but one always feels that the analysis is superficial, that nothing worthwhile has been said. Certainly Carter's songs owe a debt to the heritage of folk music, a debt evident throughout in the integrity of the words and often in the melodic structure as well, but this is only a starting point. And to term them "religious" is even more dangerous, for we would then be using a traditional word to describe something quite new ...

Classification of Sydney Carter's songs is self-defeating. It is only when we forget our preconceived ideas about what these songs should say that we can fully experience their depth – when we allow their poetry to dig beneath our surface reactions and touch that part of us that we so often fight to hide. And it is the genius of Sydney Carter that his songs have this ability to make us face and question our innermost thoughts and conflicts.

We used the word "poetry" deliberately, for many of these songs started life as poems, and even now the powerful melodic lines that bear them along never take over from the words. **The present tense** was just such a poem and here it sets the scene for the stark contrasts in powerful emotions that follow. Not

without reason was the mushroom cloud chosen to symbolise this collection, for the irony and symbolic threat so vividly portrayed in **Crow on the cradle** are never far below the surface, even in moments of immense tenderness (**Judas and Mary**), firm faith (**Every star shall sing a carol**) or ultimate triumph (**Lord of the dance**).

Sydney Carter provides no easy answers to the vital questions posed in his songs; and the rejection of the man **Standing in the rain** or the bitterness of failure in **Bitter was the night** can only be softened by the listener's own reactions-and action.

Sydney Carter can carry a living past right into the present (**When they shouted hosanna**). With **Friday morning** he reaches the realms of genius when he introduces a novel human reaction into the most sombre moment in history. Even the comedy of **George Fox** and **The Vicar is a Beatnik** is deceptive-the derisive fingers are pointing both ways.

Reflection lived with these songs for a long time, and on this recording has tried to preserve the flavour of a man's music as they have experienced it. The cover picture reminds us of the most recent past tense, and our future now rests on the way that we react to the present tense. All we can ask of any man is his help on our way to the future. As Sydney Carter has written elsewhere:

*"To keep running with the truth – that is our destiny."*

## Christ as a dancer

Dancing has always interested me. It seems to be the most basic activity and the one most like faith and creation and everything else.

It always has seemed very religious to me, and I was very interested to find two things.

First there was a carol in the "Oxford Book of Carols" called **Tomorrow is my dancing day** which I think is a sort of holy parody. That is to say, an ordinary secular tune or song adapted to give it a religious meaning in which Christ invites somebody to come to the dance.

And then I read about the Shakers, that curious American sect who actually did dance in their worship and made some very good tunes including this one which I've used for **Lord of the dance** called **Gift to be simple**. When I first heard that played, and indeed danced to in the Albert Hall in London at a festival of the English folk dance and song society, at that point

I thought I might write my own dancing song. There was some precedent for regarding Christ as a dancer, though not nearly so much as regarding him as a soldier or a judge or shepherd or king. In any case I wasn't worried about precedent and I wrote this one bending the tune a bit to make it more the kind of tune I wanted.

The tune for **Standing in the rain** is based upon my mis-memories of a drinking song. It lay around in my mind for about ten



years, having heard it in Spain, and got Englishified, folkified and generally altered around, and it seemed to set the sort of mood for this kind of thing.

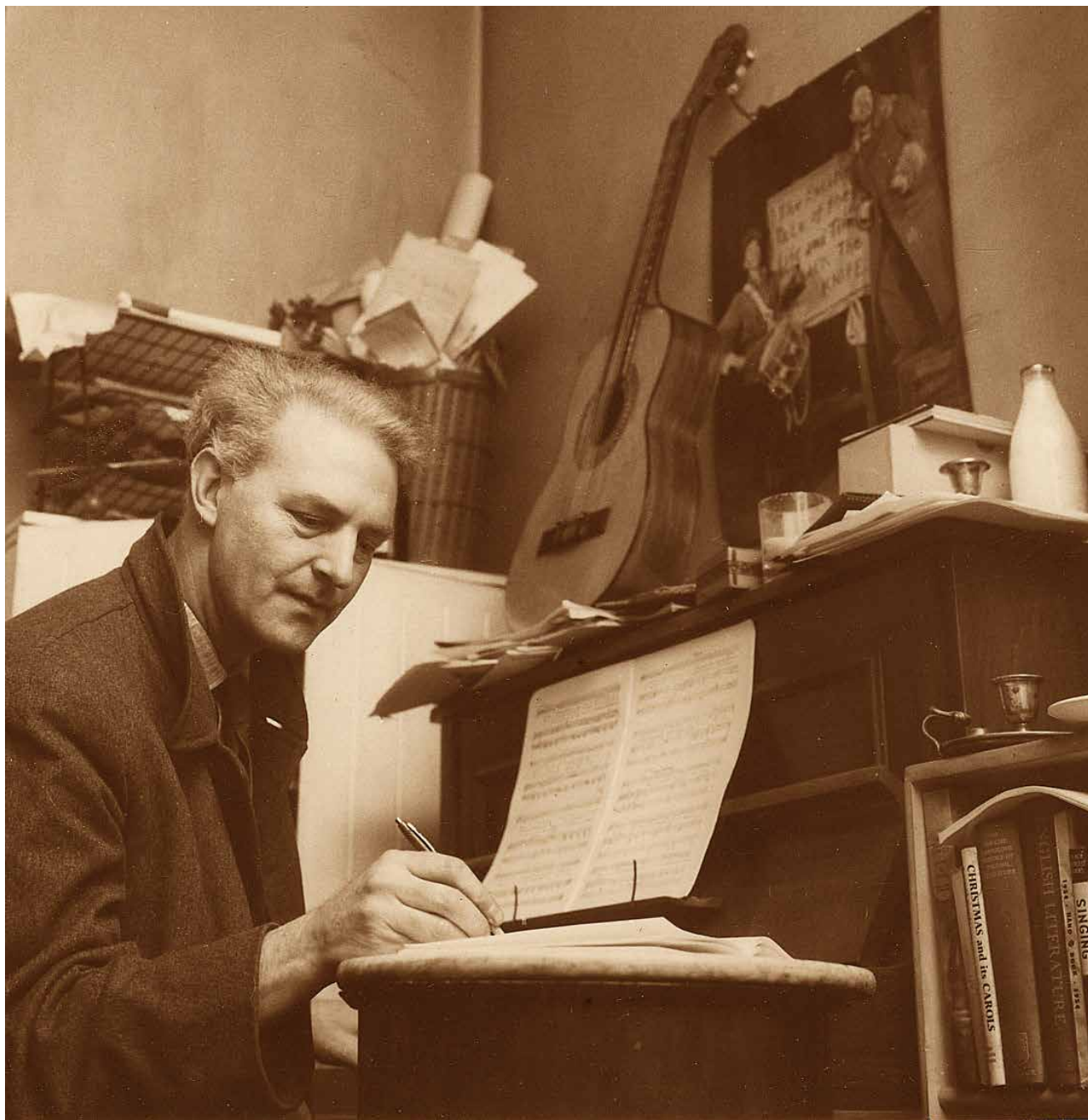
**When I needed a neighbour** was written for Christian Aid, but I couldn't have written it unless I'd had those ideas floating around in my head anyway. I've written a number of topical songs for topical events, but again nearly always the songs were waiting for the event to happen.

**Judas and Mary** was a song I might have written any time, but in fact I wrote it when Donald Swann and Michael Flanders were doing an Easter week on television and were short of one song. And this was the one I wrote for that.

**Crow on the cradle** is one of the oldest songs on this record. I wrote it about 12 years ago. Various people looked at it and said "well of

course it's too poetical to sing in a folk song club". In fact it got round to folk song clubs in the end. Most people sang it: Pete Seeger recorded it, and Judy Collins.

It's had two tunes. The first tune I didn't like much and so I changed it in mid-stream. Some people sing one tune and some the other.



There are lots of sermons and songs, protest and otherwise, that make noble statements and tell you what to do, and make you want to go and do the opposite. Now the important thing is what they make you do. They can sometimes make it by raising a question. Sometimes perhaps by irony. Sometimes by telling you to do one thing and making you do another. There are thousands of ways of making you do something.

SYDNEY CARTER 1970



## Sydney Carter writes about songs on The Present Tense

There are two kinds of song: those after which you say 'Amen' and those after which you don't. The 'Amen' kind of song, whether it is a hymn, a national anthem or whatever, has to unite people who are singing it. Any song in dialogue which presents two or more points of view without indicating clearly which is 'right' has to be disqualified. Any irony, any ambiguity, is dangerous. There must be no doubt about what you have said 'Amen' to.

This rules out nearly all the songs I write, including those upon this record. But that does not mean that they are not religious.

Most religious songs are hymns — even though you call them psalms or anthems — and therefore they are Amen songs. That does not make them worse or better than any other kind of song. It merely means that they have a special function, like a work-song or a lullaby. The function of a hymn is to unite the singers in an act of worship.

What kind of song (it may be asked) can be religious, which does not do this? The kind of song which I would call 'dramatic'. And drama is essentially ambiguous in that it presents more than a single point of view. The audience can take sides and identify with one view-point or another. But the drama — as drama — cannot say 'this is right, and that is wrong'. That must be left to the audience. It is possible to make one character so attractive that the audience is pretty sure to back him up and agree that what he says or does is right.

When songs by people like myself are sung in church some ministers have taken the precaution to provide a prologue or an epilogue. **Friday Morning** is an extreme example of what I call 'dramatic'. It is really a dialogue, a one-sided dialogue, for Jesus does not answer. The listener must provide the other half — in silence while the song is sung, or vocally when it is over. As it stands, you could never say 'Amen' to this: not in church, at any rate. Yet it has been used in a religious service, to pose a question. The context has provided the reply.

Another song which could never be used as a hymn is **The Vicar is a Beatnik**. In fact, I wonder if any song on this record could command a safe 'Amen'. They need a context — and this, perhaps, is true of hymns as well — for it is the time and place, the tone of voice, the singer, the listener — the total context — which can make a performance religious or otherwise: not what is printed on a piece of paper.





- 1 The present tense 0'55
  - 2 Standing in the rain 3'20
  - 3 George Fox 1'49
  - 4 When they shouted hosanna 1'49
  - 5 Lord of the dance 2'28
  - 6 The crow on the cradle 2'22
  - 7 Every star shall sing a carol 3'04
  - 8 I want to have a little bomb like you 1'42
  - 9 Bird of heaven 1'42
  - 10 Travel on 1'42
  - 11 Judas and Mary 3'05
  - 12 Friday morning 2'18
  - 13 Bitter was the night 2'17
  - 14 The Vicar is a beatnik 2'13
  - 15 The mask I wore 2'08
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*Solo vocals:* Sue McHaffie, Mo Brown, Richard Spence, Jonathan Jones, Michael Campbell, Stuart Yeates

*Guitar:* James Etheridge, Michael Campbell

*Organ/piano:* Colin Wright, Michael Campbell, James Etheridge

*Bass guitar:* Lionel Browne, James Etheridge

*Drums/percussion:* Nik Knight, Lionel Browne

*Celeste:* Sue McHaffie

*Vibes:* James Etheridge

*'Cello:* Stuart Yeates

*Oboe:* Lesley Bateson

*Flute:* Marion Banks

Produced by Michael Lehr at the Jackson Recording Studios

*Sound Engineer:* Malcolm Jackson

*Cover:* John F. Bond

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