

Ian Dury (1942-2000): a poet of the spoken word

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Last week, family and friends said farewell to singer-songwriter Ian Dury during a humanist service held at Golders Green in North London. Dury died from colon cancer on March 27 at his home in Hampstead. Annette Furley, who led the service, said of Ian, “He was one of the few original personalities in the music business. He used to write music that made you want to dance and also made you laugh.”

When I first saw Ian Dury and the Blockheads perform in Sheffield in 1978 or 1979, I came out with a rigor mortis-like grin on my face that lasted the entire journey home. My cheeks hurt for days. When I heard he had inoperable cancer over a year ago, I was obviously saddened by the news. But even then, despite its inappropriateness, I found myself smiling as I remembered just how “Very good indeed!” Mr Dury was.

Of course, I am a 30-something and you, good reader, have every right to take what follows with a pinch of salt. Every generation grows up believing that the music of their youth was just about as good as it gets, and the stuff they are churning out now is largely rubbish. I am no exception to the rule. But whatever one may think about the rose-tinted nature of any tribute by a fan, Ian Dury had so many of them, spanning generations and continents. This is no mean feat in the fickle world of popular music.

The other remarkable thing about Ian is that, long after his too-brief moment in the limelight, he continued to be regarded as something of a national treasure. As well as continuing to perform and make albums, he acted, produced a stage-musical and employed his gravel-like cockney voice for advertising voice-overs. He earned great respect for his campaigning against polio for the UN. In 1998, he and singer Robbie Williams travelled as UNICEF ambassadors to Sri Lanka to highlight efforts to vaccinate children against polio.

When he was seven, Dury himself had caught polio on a trip to a Southend swimming pool. It left him walking with a limp and he also had a shrunken arm. But his lasting popularity owed nothing to sickly sentimentalism—anyone seeking to patronise Dury would have been given short-shrift for indulging in such “a load of old bollo”.

He was that rare and wonderful thing—an original talent. He possessed a scathing wit and a beautiful way with words, while at the same time being immensely fond of his fellow man,

warts and all. There are few songs as razor-sharp in their critique of male working class social behaviour as the eponymous “Blockheads”. “You must have seen boys who’re blockheads.... Part eaten food particle in their teeth, what a horrible state they’re in. They’ve got womanly breasts under pale mauve vests ... catalogue jackets, a mouth what never closes ... who screw their poor-old Eileens, get sloshed and go berserk.... How would you like one puffing and blowing in your ear-hole?” asks Dury. Quite. Yet the song finishes by demanding identification, “Cos after all is said and done, you’re a blockhead too!”

Dury was born at Upminster, Essex, on May 12, 1942. His father was a bus driver and his mother a health visitor. Dury wrote the song “My Old Man” as a tribute to his father and to show the hardship of working class life. He spent a year at a school for disabled children in Sussex and then attended the Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe as a boarder, which he loathed for its elitism and pretentiousness. He studied at Walthamstow Art College and then at the Royal College of Art under Peter Blake. After graduating, he taught art for several years.

He is regarded as one of the progenitors of Punk Rock. His first band, Kilburn and the High Roads, discarded attempts at a mid-Atlantic accent in favour of Ian’s use of “spectacular vernacular”. This, together with their sartorial style—charity-shop chic—and a mixture of aggression and humour, was an admitted influence on the Sex Pistols (yes, Punk was meant to be funny and intelligent, not just “angry”), who played together with the Stranglers at the Kilburn’s last gig in 1976.

But the Punk movement returned the favour to Ian in more ways than mere emulation. The Blockheads, despite their talent, would probably never have become so well known without the musical doors having been so thoroughly kicked open by Punk. Ian Dury and the Blockheads could rub shoulders with the Clash, the Buzzcocks and Elvis Costello far more comfortably than with Earth, Wind and Fire, the Average White Band, Chic and the Commodores. He said of his earlier song *Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll* (“Is all my brain and body need”) that it “started as a mild admonishment and ended as a lovely anthem” and was “trying to suggest there was more to life than those three”. It had its tongue firmly in its cheek, with lyrics

such as “Grey is such a pity. See my tailor, he's called Simon, I know it's going to fit!” The BBC still chose to ban it from its play-list, but in the punk era this only earned an ever-broader audience for this pop classic.

Their spiritual affinity with Punk notwithstanding, musically the Blockheads were just as much influenced by Jazz Funk and Reggae as they were by Rock and Roll—more so on some of their best songs. To the extent that Dury can be, and often is, described as “quintessentially English”, it is not in the spirit of conservative writers, philosophers and politicians. He regarded himself as a socialist and an internationalist. He was the cultural product of Britain, yes. But Britain, and especially London, is the melting pot of the world. At its most innovative, British music takes on board the best (and the worst) the planet has to offer and gives it a tweak all its own. This was a major feature of the Punk era, with its mixture of garage-band rock with reggae rhythms and a pop sensibility. It continued with the Ska bands of the 1980s, of whom the most commercially successful, Madness, acknowledge their debt to Dury.

1977's *New Boots and Panties* is the seminal Blockheads record, so good that it haunted Dury for the rest of his career. And with every credit to Dury's wonderful lyrics and the Blockheads themselves (one of the tightest musical outfits ever assembled), it would not have been so truly great without the input of Chaz Jankel, the keyboard wizard and tunesmith. Dury's albums without Jankel do not stand up to *New Boots and Panties* or the follow-up *Do-it-Yourself*. His last album, *Mr Love Pants*, represents a return to peak form. Recorded after he found out he was dying of cancer, it brought Dury back together with the Blockheads, including Jankel, but with the exception of drummer Charlie Charles, who also died of cancer.

Dury came over like the elder-brother, or slightly naughty uncle you wished you had. He was a small but handsome man, with a large head who could look, by turns, dangerous and loveable. His songs were rich both lyrically and musically, anthemic and yet intimate. Personal favourites for me in the early years include *Wake up and make love with me*, *Cleaver Trever*, *What a waste*, *This is what we find!*, *Dance of the screamers*, *Inbetweenies*, *Sink my Boats* and *Lullaby for Francis*.

He was a poet of the spoken word, who could range between a seductive whisper, soft enough to send babies to sleep or divest a woman of her clothes, to a raging cry of anger and defiance. Dury was funny when he wanted to be, but his lyrics also explored the darker side of life. *If I was with a woman* is a disturbing account of predatory sexual obsession (“I'd make believe I loved her, but all the time I would not like her much”), the scabrous picture in his character *Billericay Dickie's* attic.

His two biggest hits will be remembered more broadly. *Hit me with your rhythm stick!* got to number one in the charts. One million people bought it in a week, and this is in the tiny island of Britain! Its driving, swirling rhythms were unlike anything

heard before or since. A song with a complex Jazz feel (including a twin sax solo by Davey Payne) had everyone from young punks to their grannies singing along. And what they were singing was a joyous hymn to world unity through music, dance and sex! “From Milan to Yakatan, Every woman's, Every man”.

Reasons to be Cheerful Part 3, another number one, was pure disco and became a staple of the New York hip-hop scene. But it had lines like, “Some of Buddy Holly, the working folly, Good Golly Miss Molly and Boats! Hammersmith Pally, the Bolshoi Ballet, Jump back in the Alley and nanny goats!” It is probably the only song written that singles out the delights to be had from wearing yellow socks.

Special mention must be made of *Spasticus Autisticus*, released in 1981 for the Year of the Disabled. Dury wrote a cross between a battle cry and an appeal for understanding—“Hello to you out there in normal land”—“Get up! Get up! Get down! Fall over! Whoah!” The BBC in its infinite wisdom deemed it offensive to polite sensibilities and denied it airplay, only confirming the validity of Dury's uncompromising lyrics.

In the Thatcherite 80s, with its pretentious celebration of cool and hip detachment, the tide of musical fashion ebbed for the Blockheads and flowed for a lot of very silly and pompous bands with blousy shirts and big fringes. Dury still recorded the occasional album, alongside his other projects, and there are delights to be found on all of them. He once said of his music, “If you're a jazz lover, which I am, you don't think of rock ‘n’ roll as something to aspire to. You don't think you're Rembrandt. When you come offstage at some dodgy pub gig, you're lucky if you think you're [Music Hall comedian] Max Miller.” Yes, it's true, Ian Dury wasn't a Rembrandt, but he was something more than his modesty gave him credit for.

An online book of remembrance for Ian Dury can be found at:
<http://www.iandury.co.uk/>



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