

THE BALLAD OF SYD & MORGAN by Haydn Middleton (Propolis, UK; 2018; 185 pages)

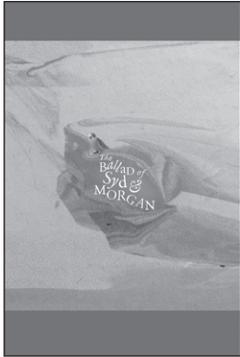
In 1968 author EM Forster was 89 years old and living out his twilight years in rooms at King's College, Cambridge. The novels that had earned him a reputation as one of England's great writers and social commentators—*A Room With a View*, *Howards End*, *Passage to India*—had been published more than a half century earlier. Meanwhile, 22 year-old Syd Barrett was living less than two miles away, and struggling to move forward with his life after parting company with Pink Floyd.

For his novel *The Ballad of Syd & Morgan*, author Haydn Middleton came up with a fanciful but intriguing premise: what if these two eccentric, quintessentially English artists and social outsiders had met? And so it came to pass that in the autumn of 1968, a young man in a crushed velvet jacket and Cuban heels climbs the stairs to Forster's rooms and knocks. The old man, it seems, had purchased one of Syd's paintings some years earlier, and the artist wants to ask him to return it. That transaction was the first time Syd had received money for his art, and he now believes that was what set his life on "the wrong path." By retrieving the painting and returning the money, maybe he can somehow put things right again.

What follows is a fireside conversation between the two men that lasts through the evening—and the duration of the book. They discuss their lives, their work, their families, their struggles, their losses, and the purpose of their existence. Their conversation has an easy, almost musical flow, and the effect is mesmerizing. "I have felt today with you, often, that my speech is being prompted from without, but by one who knows what I need to say," remarks Forster at one point. That really sums up what Middleton has accomplished with this remarkable book, channeling the voices of these two artistic giants in an authentic and compelling way, in the process providing unexpected new insights into their characters and their work.

By the end of the book, they have each gained some new wisdom, having bridged a vast generational chasm to discover that they have much in common. "It is our calling, Roger, to bring a little gaiety to the nation," Forster advises Barrett in parting. "Somewhere along the line there must be a selection, a setting apart of the goats from the sheep. We flit in and out. Like Bede's sparrow. Like the mayfly. Strutting and fretting our hour upon the stage. We poor things may be of the moment, but the work shines on."

If you're a fan of Barrett, Forster or both, I have no doubt this book will move you, as it did me. Through it, their work shines on. (Mike Stax)



English accent too. At college in the early '70s, post-Syd Pink Floyd were ubiquitous, with Syd's solo work far less familiar, but it was the latter to which I was drawn. I didn't fully engage with it all until I was in my forties, though, and a bit worn down by the world. Personally I still don't think the solo work is really a young man's music. Or not exclusively so. I don't even really think of it as music a lot of the time.

And how about Forster's books?

I read the short stories first at school and as a sci-fi buff was very taken with *The Machine Stops*. I came properly to the novels in my early twenties, being gobsmacked by the achievement of *Howards End* but finding *The Longest Journey*, Forster's own favorite, the one that moved me most. As with Syd's music, I'd be hard put to say quite why. I like the kind of unvarnished way Forster communicates with the reader, conversational and so funny, yet with such perfect linguistic poise. Subliminally I must have felt that I could trust in the artistic voices of both Syd Barrett and EM Forster. If you trust in the voice, you're more willing to be told where to go.

The book has an easy, almost musical flow. Did you find it easy to write or was it hard going?

I wrote it basically in two goes. After that initial "What If?" moment in 2015, I spent six months or so writing an uncommissioned draft (alongside my paid work). It didn't just feature Syd and Morgan at that point, but had cameos from four others who were in or around Cambridge in autumn 1968: Jane Hawking, Germaine Greer, Antony Gormley, and Prince Charles. The draft was titled *The King's Caboodle*, which I still rather like, and it was great fun to write, but probably not very marketable. I set it aside until the middle of 2017, then decided to redraft it as a two-hander, but with the god Pan as a hovering third presence. (Pan would doubtless say that it was he who facilitated that decision.) That took another six months or so, again alongside other work. I have to say it came easily, and I much appreciated having so much 'source material' to hand, to guide me through the characters' encounter. To the extent that I finally felt I was providing a transcript, not making stuff up.

What has been the response so far from Barrett and/or Forster fans?

I have to say I'd expected brickbats. Fans can be very protective of 'their' icons, and the internet can be a sorry testimony to how far they're prepared to go to assert the primacy of their own views. In the blog section of my website (www.haydnmiddleton.com) I refer to some of what has been said in reviews, and slightly surprisingly it has mostly so far been positive. There are also some appreciative comments there from fans themselves. At the events I've done, many people have introduced themselves as a fan of one man or the other, or both,

An interview with Haydn Middleton

What inspired the idea of putting Syd Barrett and EM Forster together? Did you feel there were certain attributes they shared in their work or their personalities?

This is something I can be very explicit about. I've loved Syd's music and Forster's fiction since my teens, and in the autumn of 2015 I was re-reading *A Room with a View* while listening to a playlist of my own on shuffle, and just as I finished the book "Interstellar Overdrive" began to play. My partner was that day in Cambridge, so I put the three things together and thought: what if Syd Barrett had happened to cross paths with EM Forster in Cambridge, where they'd been near neighbours for a couple of decades? Before that moment, I'd never considered they might have anything in common (and nor, I'd hazard, had anyone else), but the more I then looked into it, the more I started to find. Most particularly, they both seemed to me to be artistic subversives "opening the gates of the establishment from within," as I have one of them say in the novel.

How did you go about finding an authentic voice for each of them? What kind of research was involved?

Mainly I tried to build up their voices from what I'd gleaned about them from their work. I read the relevant biographies, all of which were good in their own ways, and also many accounts written by people who knew either of the two men, but I was more concerned with their creative impulses, or lack of them, than their personalities as such. To that end, I have them delivering lines about the making of art which they may never actually have delivered, but which seemed at least defensible in light of what they produced. In terms of how their voices actually sounded, I found the few YouTube clips of either Syd or Forster in conversation to be incredibly useful. I tried very hard to follow the cadences.

When and how did you discover the music of Syd Barrett, and why do you feel it connected so deeply with you?

A very good school friend who died tragically young lent me his single of "See Emily Play" a couple of years after it was released (I'd missed it on *Top of the Pops*) and I couldn't get enough of it. I think the song's textures captivated me as much as anything. It still does. As a huge Kinks fan in my boyhood, I loved Syd's

