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# “At the heart of it there’s a melody”: The Astonishing Renaissance of Bill Fay

Christoph Reinfandt

Christoph Reinfandt (Tübingen) untersucht Bill Fays Status als Vertreter des Liedermacher-Paradigmas.

Surveying the British music scene in *Hard Times* 93 in spring 2013, Peter Bennett came to the conclusion that there was (despite a tentative question mark in his title) “Nothing New Under the Sun”, with both the prominent soul and indie/alternative rock acts of the day being stuck in what the critic Simon Reynolds had two years earlier dubbed *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to Its Own Past*. Besides younger musicians ‘looking to the past’ (87), however, there was one musician making a splash in 2012 by embodying the past: North London-based singer-songwriter Bill Fay. After an absence of 41 (!) years from the music business, the then 69-year-old Fay recorded his comeback album *Life Is People*, which at last won him “universal acclaim”.<sup>1</sup> And then, in 2015 and to the surprise of many, Fay added *Who Is the Sender?* to his catalogue, “which effectively doubles his recorded output and moves him from the category of a curiosity who returned after a four-decade absence to make a third great album to someone perhaps capable of doing so in perpetuity.”<sup>2</sup> So what is the story and how does it reflect on Fay’s latest effort? What is Bill Fay’s exact status in the pantheon of singer-songwriters?

## The Bill Fay Story

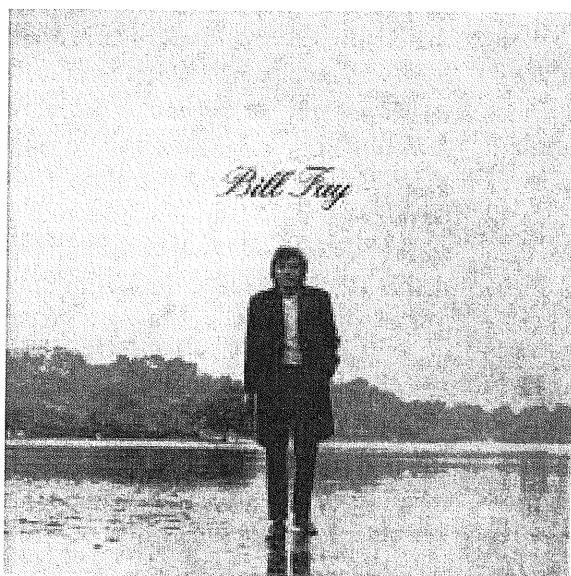
After having been rehearsed in nearly every review of *Life Is People*, the Bill Fay Story has found its way to refer-

ence tools like Wikipedia or allmusic.com and is now at least alluded to in the reviews of *Who Is the Sender?* It goes like this: In 1967, a first single by Bill Fay was issued on the Deram label (“Some Good Advice” / “Screams in the Ears”, now featured as bonus tracks on the 2005 Elektra reissue of *Bill Fay*). He went on to produce two albums for Deram, the self-titled *Bill Fay* (1970) and *Time of the Last Persecution* (1971). Due to lack of success, Fay was dropped from the label and retired from the music business, taking on various jobs and continuing to write songs at home. A tentative rediscovery by other musicians such as Nick Cave and Wilco’s Jeff Tweedy resulted in Fay’s cult status from the mid-1990s onwards. This in turn led to reissues of his two albums in 1998, the release of a collection of demos recorded between 1966 and 1970 under the title *From the Bottom of an Old Grandfather Clock* by British independent label Wooden Hill in 2004, the first release of his recordings for *Tomorrow, Tomorrow & Tomorrow*, the successor to *Time of the Last Persecution* – at the time rejected by no less than 14 record labels – by British independent label Durtro in 2005. Finally a compilation of outtakes and home recorded new material on a double CD (*Still Some Light*) was released by the Canadian Coptic label in 2010. These scattered efforts did nothing to re-establish Bill Fay as a force in the music business,

but the re-issues of his earlier albums in 1998 gave him some satisfaction, as he recalled in an interview in 2012: “It was astonishing to me. I won’t ever really be able to believe that it happened. That’s how I feel about it. I had come to terms with the fact that I was deleted, but that I had always kept writing songs anyway and that was good enough.”<sup>3</sup> It took another 14 years, however, until producer Joshua Henry, who had heard the early albums as part of his father’s record collection, managed to lure him back into a recording studio for *Life Is People*.

With its opening track, the sprightly but meditative waltz entitled “Garden Song”, *Bill Fay* establishes what Rob Young calls “an organic songwriting mode”, which eerily “couldn’t sound less stoned” in the matter of fact way that Fay is singing the words:<sup>4</sup> “I’m planting myself in the garden / Believe me / Between the potatoes and parsley / Believe me / And I wait for the rain to anoint me / For the frost to awaken my soul / I’m looking for lasting relations / With the spider, the greenfly, or maggot / Believe me.” In fact, the seriousness of purpose that manifests itself here somehow manages to save his songs from descending into kitsch, even though the musical arrangements seem sometimes overwrought on *Bill Fay*: “With [Peter] Eden [then manager of Donovan and Mick Softley] producing and Fay on piano a group was put together from the ranks of the capital’s

jazz/pop/folk crossover scene [...] and progressive jazz arranger Michael Gibbs was hired to write orchestrations for a twenty-seven-piece jazz ensemble,<sup>5</sup> which occasionally, it has to be said, descend into bathos in their combination of jazz influenced horns, film music-inspired strings, and some rock and pop mannerisms.<sup>6</sup> It is also clear, however, that the record company did not spare any expense at the time in order to launch their new artist, who is shown on the front cover as walking on the water (Fig. 1: *Bill Fay* front cover)



– “a miracle occurring on a grey afternoon in Hyde Park. But look closer and the miracle is a prosaic accident. He is standing on a concrete platform in the middle of a large puddle of rain water.”<sup>7</sup>

This combination of the transcendental and the mundane became a hallmark of Bill Fay’s songwriting from then on. Besides songs where even the titles point towards Christian imagery (“Narrow Way”, “Be Not so Fearful”, “Down to the Bridge”), *Bill Fay* also features portraits of fraught and very English (post-) war characters like May, who lost her lover in the war but keeps on singing nevertheless (“Sing Us One of Your Songs May”), or Stan, who is afraid of being abducted to Mars or Jupiter (“Goodnight Stan”), or Willie, who, even though a sailor and later a pilot, refused to go to war, only to find himself locked into a watchtower of his own making, witnessing the carnage (“Gentle Willie”). Such charac-

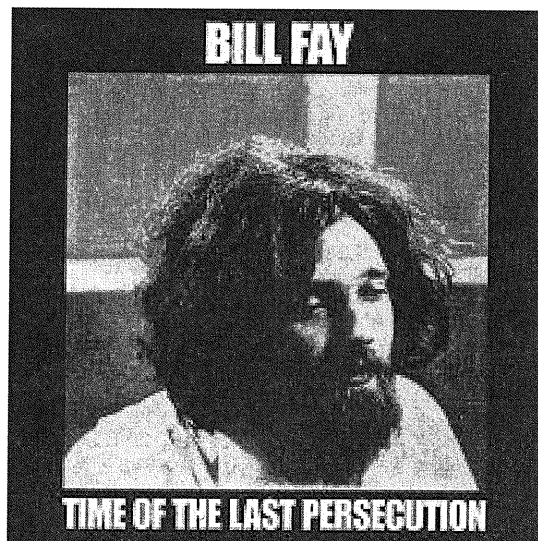
ter songs can no longer be found on *Time of the Last Persecution*, however, which replaced the focus on personal redemption characteristic of *Bill Fay* with a more apocalyptic angle, “warning against false leaders, messiahs and prophets” and pushing for “a new age of globally altered consciousness” under “the influence of the French Jesuit, palaeontologist and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin”<sup>8</sup>, while also falling “under the spell of a 19th century compendium of commentaries on the Biblical books of Daniel and Revelations.”<sup>9</sup> All this clearly makes *Time of the Last Persecution* Fay’s songs of experience to complement the songs of innocence collected on *Bill Fay*.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the imagery on the record sleeve shows a dishevelled singer, still Jesus-like, but definitely despondent (Fig. 2: *Time of the Last Persecution* front cover), so much so, in fact, that in line with the generally confessional bent of the singer-songwriter genre of the day reviewers began to speculate

about the singer’s mental health, which Fay rejected even as late as 2005: “It was the problems of the world that I was talking about, not my own problems.”<sup>11</sup> The music on *Time of the Last Persecution* is more clearly anchored in the rock idiom and foregrounds the inventive electric guitar playing of Ray Russell in a stripped down piano, bass, drums plus occasional horns setting, highlighting affinities with American productions of the day by such luminaries as Bob Dylan or Van Morrison, but to no avail: *Time of the Last Persecution* bombed completely, Bill Fay was dropped from his label and did not manage to find a new one for his next album, vanishing into obscurity for the next 40 years.

#### Picking Up the Pieces: *Life Is People*

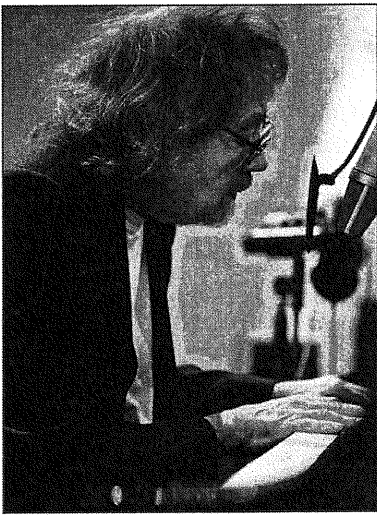
On the evidence of *Tomorrow, Tomorrow & Tomorrow*, which was released

only in 2005, Fay was very much ahead of his time when he was recording the material in the early 1970s. Pushing the rougher edges of *Time of the Last Persecution* even further, parts of *Tomorrow* seem to anticipate the do-it-yourself spirit of alternative rock and even feature some of the sonic experimentation that became the hallmark of later American bands such as Wilco or Lambchop. No wonder, then, that Wilco frontman Jeff Tweedy was so taken with Fay, who on *Tomorrow* occasionally sounds eerily like him. It was Tweedy who first lured Bill Fay back into the limelight by coaxing him out on stage during Wilco concerts in London at the Shepherd’s Bush Empire in 2007 and the Union Chapel in Islington in 2010 after covering Fay’s “Be Not So Fearful” prominently in concert and on the Wilco documentary *I am Trying to Break Your Heart* (2002, dir. by Sam Jones). When the recording sessions for *Life Is People* were finally



taking place, Fay returned the compliment by including a sparse cover version of the Wilco classic “Jesus etc.,” paring down the lush Wilco instrumentation to a rhythmically fractured piano accompaniment which highlights the affinity of this song to the hallmarks of Fay’s own songwriting. These are also foregrounded in a second piano-only track (plus cello solo towards the end), “Never Ending Happening”, which is as good a programmatic statement of ‘organic songwriting’ as any: “The never ending happening / Of what’s to be and what has been / Just to be a part of it /

Is astonishing to me". The seeming simplicity of the endlessly repeating piano figure is slightly undercut by the fact that Fay plays it with crossed hands, i.e. with the bass figure in the right hand and the descant in the left, throughout, as can be observed on one of his rare life outings on television in 2012.<sup>12</sup> This is very much in line with the image of idiosyncratic intimacy with his instrument of choice that the self-taught Fay projects in his second career phase: many images focus on himself lost in meditation at the piano (cf. Fig. 3: *Life Is People* front cover).



**BILL FAY**  
LIFE IS PEOPLE

Beyond these piano-centred pieces, the instrumentation on *Life Is People* is remarkable in that it re-unites Fay with two key players from *Time of the Last Persecution*: Ray Russell on guitar, who had remained active as a session musician throughout, and Alan Marshton (drums, percussion). The album at large combines a chamber use of rock instrumentation (piano, guitar, bass, drums, keyboards) with the Vulcan string quartet and the London Community Gospel Choir. The result is what Fay himself has termed "alternative gospel"<sup>13</sup>, and while some of the song titles seem generic ("The Healing Day", "Thank You Lord"), he always manages to add original touches, like the recurring lines about "trees", "sheep", or "flowers", which "don't speak, but they speak to each other" about the horrid past and present and the possibility of redemption in "There Is a Valley", or the im-

age of "the big painter in the sky / Who paints all our eyes" in "Big Painter". Other songs provide the trademark combination of the transcendental and the mundane, as in "This World" (with guest vocals by Jeff Tweedy), where the music seems to celebrate this world while the lyrics speak of transcending it ("This world is holding all the keys / Gotta break it before it breaks me / Something's gotta happen soon / Something set us free / From this world, this world, this world"). Or, on a less celebratory, blues-inflected note, in "City of Dreams": "I'm a street sweeper / In your city of dreams / Sweeping up the paper cups / Between the limousines / Thousands of windows / I'm scared of what I see / People wired up to telephones, plugged into TV screens", which then shifts towards "Lookin' at the sky above / Higher than these neon names / You can't buy and sell the clouds / They ain't among the commodities we trade / I am waiting for the City of God ...". And occasionally, the prophet of doom posture from *Time of the Last Persecution* resurfaces, as in "Empires": "Listen now, listen now / To the high wind blowing / Through the trees / Listen now, listen now / All them big trees / That got to fall / To make way / For the little baby shoots / Of the new growth beneath".

Fay's yearning for redemption finds its answer in the slightly pretentiously named "Cosmic Concerto (Life Is People)", an eight-minute celebration of the fact that "There are miracles / In the strangest of places / Everywhere you go" over two chords and an endlessly repeating piano motif, which are arranged into a gradual build-up towards a grand finale, strings and all, in which the singer reaches his personal climax in the saying that became the title of the album and shares it with humankind at large: "As my old dad said / Life is people / Life is people / In the space of a human face / There's infinite variation". While this may look trite on the page, Fay's delivery, which has by now

become more fragile and projects the sincere personal musings of a humble old sage, still saves it from the shallows of kitsch (in this case barely so, however, given that the infinite variation in the human face is not matched by variation in the musical material – but then, that's possibly the point: it's not the music that matters but its function as a medium for meditation on self and world). Besides all the religious trappings, Fay's emphasis is clearly on individual experience, as becomes clear in "Be at Peace with Yourself", the most traditionally gospel-inflected track on the album, choir and all, which does, however, not reference the transcendental dimension: "At the end of the day / Ain't nobody else / Gonna walk in your shoes / Quite the way / You do / So be at peace with yourself / And keep a spring in your heel / And keep climbing that hill". Accordingly, the album does not close with the celebratory "Cosmic Concerto", but with only tentative hope for redemption on "The Coast No Man Can Tell" that we will all have to reach one day, musically staged in a hymn-like piano-only track with a broken voice hovering somewhere between speaking and singing.

### Disarming Simplicity: *Who Is the Sender?*

This note of farewell and stocktaking sounded final, but it is in fact picked up again on the opening track of Bill Fay's 2015 album *Who Is the Sender?*, "The Geese Are Flying Westward": "Maybe I should have travelled / To places I didn't know / Maybe I should have ventured / Outside the places that I know / But I don't think so / I'm so glad to have seen / The clouds unfolding," Fay sings over a lush arrangement of piano, touches of a rhythm section, strings, French horns, and Uilleann pipes, introducing an album which seamlessly continues where *Life Is People* left off, if on a slightly bleaker note.<sup>14</sup> Many tracks intensify the contrast between nature and human endeavour, with, as one critic puts it, Fay's "balladic muse surveying a benighted world through an implicitly Christian prism, seeking succour in the innocence of nature and lamenting

human corruption.”<sup>15</sup> In “The War Machine”, for example, an idyllic opening stanza of rejoicing in nature (“Feels like the first day of your life”) is followed by “There’s a hawk in the distance / He ain’t praying for forgiveness / It’s his nature to kill / But mine isn’t / But we all kill in ways / That he doesn’t / As we pay our taxes / To the war machine”. Depending on the mindset of the listener, the following choral section can then either be heard as “Oh no / Won’t always be / The war machine”, or, more cynically, “Oh no / One always feeds / The war machine”, and ambiguities like this are sometimes cultivated intentionally: The “Order of the Day” replicates the military jargon but is then transmuted into the plea to “change this world”: “Can’t go on like this forever / Warfare the order of the day / Ain’t ordained to stay like this forever / It’s ordained to change / We’re gonna change this world / Change this world”.

Some songs are typical Fay fare, as even the titles indicate (“Underneath the Sun”, “Something Else Ahead”, “Bring It On”, “A Frail and Broken One”), and the celebratory hope for redemption along the lines of the “Cosmic Concerto” becomes equally dominant in a musically more varied fashion towards the end of the album in two hymnic incantations: “There’s a page incomplete / Unfulfilled as yet / There’s an age up ahead / Out of reach of this one’s grip / This I have to believe / That this world has got to change”, and, on the final track, in direct listener address: “May the all-present spirit be with you / May beacons everywhere be lit to guide you / May gates be thrown open wide to receive you / Into the world of life”. All this is again saved from bathos by Fay’s humble singing and the fact that the lyrics do not end on this affirmative note, but rather with the frequently repeated questioning plea “This can’t be all there is”. And as on *Life Is People*, there are a couple of songs with a more immanent focus on individual experience. One of these, “The Freedom to Read”, commemorates William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536), who provided the first translation of the bible into modern English

and was executed for heresy. The song opens with the execution and Tyndale’s alleged last words (“Open the King of England’s eyes”) and then switches to the singer standing in front of the Tyndale statue “on the northern banks of the Thames”: “I’d come to pay my respect / To a man burned at the stake / He took the words of the prophets / Out of the hand of the state”, culminating in the repeated indictment “Nothing short of a dark religious cult / The establishment of the day”. The antidote to the evils of institutionalised religion in league with power politics is the eponymous “freedom to read”, which enabled the bible to strike “a chord with the negro slaves” and enabled the singer to “read the words for [him]self” and fashion his private faith and musical practice from it. Characteristically for Fay, the approach is personal and simple throughout: “Listening to him singing about William Tyndale, [...] you get the sense that Fay isn’t nearly as concerned with Western civilization’s complicated 500-year relationship with Scripture as he is with Tyndale’s dedication to his democratic mission and his radical sacrifice.”<sup>16</sup>

Both Fay’s faith and his musical practice are perhaps most convincingly captured in the song “How Little”, yet another instance of ‘organic songwriting’, whose lyrics provided the title for this column: “There’s a melody / Somewhere deep / At the heart of it / There’s a melody”. Again, there is a link to music and writing (“There’s a rhythm and a rhyme / Through the years and days / There’s a signature / At the bottom of the page”), and though nature is duly celebrated (“Root and branch / Leave and Seed / [...] / Cloud and rain / Hill and plain / There’s a melody / At the heart of it”), the song characteristically combines assertion and doubt in the interplay of singer and background vocals in the chorus towards the end (“It’s all so deep” vs. “Little

do we know” and “There’s a reason” vs. “How little”).

In a similar vein, the title track is the centrepiece of the album, addressing the mysteries of the songwriting muse as captured by Leonard Cohen: “If I knew where good songs came from, I’d go there more often. It’s a mysterious condition. It’s much like the life of a Catholic nun. You’re married to a mystery.”<sup>17</sup> In Fay’s simple and direct mode of address this becomes: “Had a song delivered / Through my door today / From an unknown sender / Far away / Who is the sender? / I’d really like to know / I wanna say thank you / To the unknown sender / Far away”. Delivered against a music background that builds from solo violin through violin plus cello to a string quartet backing and then adds meandering brass and a full band, this becomes a questioning celebration that increasingly focuses on music as a medium: “Had a song delivered / Through my ears today / Through the chords of my piano / That I play”. Along with this programmatic song about the mystique of the singer-songwriter as a medium for messages from an unknown origin, the cover art intensifies the image of intimacy between singer and piano inaugurated on *Life Is People* by relying on sepia colouring (see Fig. 4: *Who Is the Sender?* front cover). The Dead Oceans label’s accompanying PR material also supports this angle, introducing the new work as follows: “Ask Bill Fay about his relation-

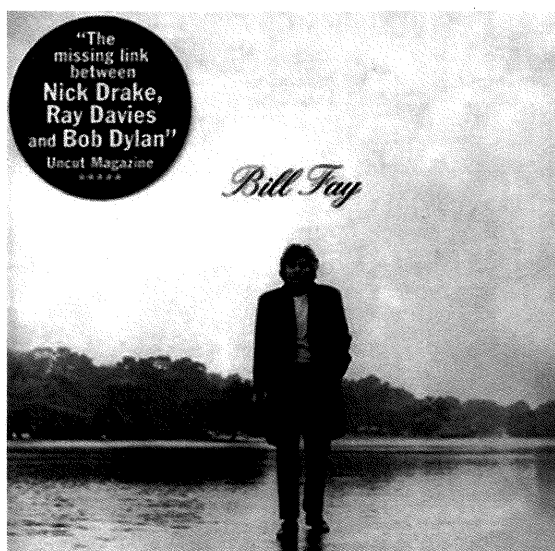


ship with his instrument and he says something revealing, not 'Ever since I learnt to play the piano', but 'Ever since the piano taught me...' What the piano taught him was how to connect to one of the great joys of his life. 'Music gives,' he says. And he is a grateful receiver. But, it makes him wonder, 'Who is the sender?'<sup>18</sup>

### The Missing Link?

With all this, Bill Fay places himself squarely at the centre of what is left of the singer-songwriter paradigm, which had its heyday in the late 1960s and early 1970s when he recorded his early albums and continued to be influential due to the paradigm's centrality in the aesthetics of rock music.<sup>19</sup> In combination with his amazing story, which suggests that he has for decades listened to his muse without the corrupting interference of commercial pressures, this suggests that his songs can be received as the authentic personal expression of the man at the piano, polished and musically enriched by the sympathetic producer of his comeback albums, who managed to create a personal musical space for genuine expression beyond the intimacy between the singer and his piano. And indeed, the sympathetic reviewers evoke just these categories, speaking of the songs' "disarming hymnal beauty and old world sincerity"<sup>20</sup> and insisting that it is "that intermixed esteem and humility that makes *Who Is the Sender?* feel vital. It isn't the strength of the argument – he barely makes one, anyway – so much as the depth of his sincerity [...] [H]e's genuinely amazed by the presence of so much grace in a world so broken."<sup>21</sup> This is, if you like, the essence of rock music without the noise and the showing off, and as such it has been adopted and adapted by luminaries of alternative rock such as Nick Cave, Jeff Tweedy, or Lambchop. And as to placing Bill Fay in the pantheon of the classic singer-songwriters of the 1960s, I would argue against what the reviewer in *Uncut Magazine* came up with for the CD reissues of Fay's early albums (which then

duly made it onto stickers attached to the CDs): He is not the "missing link between Nick Drake, Ray Davies and Bob Dylan" (cf. Fig. 5: Bill Fay CD reissue front cover with sticker). Instead I would rather see him as the missing link between Randy Newman (with whom he shares a certain similarity of voice and the man at the piano + studio accompaniment practice, but without any of Newman's satire, sarcasm and irony) and Van Morrison (with whom he shares the longing for transcendence and the mystical attitude to music making, but without any of Morrison's generic versatility and penchant for improvisation and risk taking). Ultimately, prospective listeners will have to try for themselves: Either you are touched by Bill Fay's sincerity, or you aren't. It's a personal matter after all.



### Notes

- 1 The aggregate reviewing website Metacritic records a Metascore of 86 out of 100, which pushed *Life is People* to 7<sup>th</sup> position on the list of best reviewed albums in 2012. Cf. <http://www.metacritic.com/music/life-is-people/bill-fay> and <http://www.metacritic.com/feature/best-albums-of-2012> (August 3, 2015).
- 2 <http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/20475-bill-fay-who-is-the-sender/> (August 3, 2015).
- 3 <http://www.spin.com/articles/strange-and-wonderful-return-cult-hero-bill-fay/> (August 3, 2015).
- 4 Rob Young, *Electric Eden: Unearth-*

*ing Britain's Visionary Music*. London: Faber & Faber, 2011: 294 (original emphasis).

- 5 Young 2011, 294.
- 6 Actually, the end result is strikingly similar to Nick Drake's *Bryter Layter* in the same year: Much as one can admire the musicianship that went into them, somehow the records seem overdone.
- 7 Young 2011, 292.
- 8 Young 2011, 514.
- 9 <http://www.allmusic.com/album/time-of-the-last-persecution-mw0000312876> (August 3, 2015).
- 10 Cf. Young 2011, 514.
- 11 Qtd In Young 2011, 514.
- 12 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zA9m0BZdrGI>
- 13 <http://deadoceans.com/artist.php?name=faybill> (August 5, 2015).
- 14 Producer and musicians are the same as on *Life Is People* with only few additions.
- 15 David Sheppard, review of *Who Is the Sender?*, *Mojo Music Magazine* (June 2015), 92.
- 16 M. Garner, review of *Who Is the Sender?*, <http://www.aquariumdrunkard.com/2015/04/30/bill-fay-who-is-the-sender/> (August 5, 2015).
- 17 Qtd in Paul Zollo, ed., *Songwriters on Songwriting*. New York: Da Capo, 1997: x. Zollo points out that Cohen is not alone in his assessment: "Many songwriters said that their greatest songs were written in a flash, words and music arriving simultaneously, like uncovering something that was already there." (xii)
- 18 <http://deadoceans.com/artist.php?name=faybill> (August 5, 2015).
- 19 For a systematic charting and contextualisation of the singer-songwriter paradigm see my *Romantische Kommunikation: Zur Kontinuität der Romantik in der Kultur der Moderne* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2003), 325-263.
- 20 David Sheppard, review of *Who Is the Sender?*, *Mojo Music Magazine* (June 2015), 92.
- 21 M. Garner, review of *Who Is the Sender?*, <http://www.aquariumdrunkard.com/2015/04/30/bill-fay-who-is-the-sender/> (August 5, 2015).