

# TLC Showcase

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## JAMES COOK

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## Introduction to Memory Songs

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**M***emory Songs* is the story of how a boy of 12 can go from listening to the Beatles in a Hertfordshire bedroom to selling 20,000 records in nineties London, and survive the Britpop wars. Combining elements of *Bad Vibes*, *Revolution in the Head*, *31 Songs*, and *How to be a Heroine*, the book chronicles my journey from early pop dreams, to the high-stakes gamble of moving to London, getting signed, releasing a record that Brian Wilson liked, and certain strange encounters with some of the key Britpop players. Along the way we learn about the peculiar musical relationship between Suede and Led Zeppelin, Manic Street Preachers and the Waterboys, and how to play 'Black Dog' properly.

*Memory Songs* combines memoir (both humorous and insightful) with homage: meditations on major recording artists, all of whom had a direct or indirect influence on Britpop, the movement nobody wanted to belong to. Woven into this are explorations of some of my best loved 'memory songs'.

The extract here begins in 1992. The abyss. After four years in London writing songs with my twin brother and getting nowhere, I find myself impoverished, and of unsound mind. Old school friend Rob Newman is the biggest comic in the land; worse, the drummer from my old group is now in 'The best new band in Britain'. Watching Suede play 'Metal Mickey' on *Top of the Pops*, I realise it's now or never: rip it up and start again. I form a new group with my twin, called Flamingoes.

Then the story jumps back 12 years. 1980. Boyhood. Growing up in a satellite town with the songs of John Barry and the Beatles – *Revolver* in particular – I fall in love with music. Earlier still, watching the incomparably strange *You Only Live Twice* on scatter cushions, melting choc-ice in hand, I hear a Bond theme for the first time. We examine the odd relationship between the two Bs. John Lennon is shot; John Barry is replaced by a synthesizer. Welcome to the eighties . . .

I first approached TLC in 2013 with the first three chapters of *Memory Songs*. The reader report, by Doug Johnstone, was immensely positive, containing much encouragement. However, he also suggested I attempt a rewrite with several guidelines in mind. I referred to the report many times during the rewrite of the book, especially the darker days when things weren't going too well . . . Five

drafts later I finally had a book I was proud of. Last year, I submitted the entire manuscript. Doug's suggestions in his follow-up report were spot-on; they really did help to improve the book. I owe TLC – Becky, Aki and reader Doug – a huge debt of thanks; their help has been invaluable. Always professional, yet friendly and warm, I can thoroughly recommend TLC to any writer about to approach agents and publishers.

## Memory Songs, by James Cook

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**I**n the autumn of 1992 I was a 24-year-old unemployed musician living in a damp Muswell Hill bedsit. Under stringent conditions – a seven-day working week – I had been writing songs with my twin brother, Jude. So far, 250 tunes had been amassed. We'd been in the Smoke for over four years, and still hadn't 'made it' yet. The prognosis wasn't good.

Demos had been recorded, dismally empty gigs endured, plans ripped up and year zeros declared a number of times. Several record labels had taken an interest; none had offered a deal. We were sans manager and making the kind of daily either/or decisions every penniless musician knows only too well: food versus cigarettes; amp repair versus electricity bill; proper job versus an insane artistic project that has become increasingly indefensible to friends, girlfriends and every member of your family.

Ever since writing my first callow lyrics aged 14, I'd been striving to develop as a songwriter, learning different instruments, mastering the studio (we recorded and rehearsed day and night in a place called La Rocka – our very own Paisley Park, only in Tottenham Hale). But up to this point, there was very little to show for it. I don't mean fame. The mission was never to be famous, in some kind of *X Factor*-ish way, but to escape a Hertfordshire small town and make great records. That was the mantra. To experience those moments of glory from having created a work of art – an album – that my twin was fond of talking about. (How close the language of earnest young men who form groups is to that of radical fundamentalism.) 'Why don't you both just form a boy band, and get it over with?' a former girlfriend suggested, my brother and I being passably presentable. Maybe she meant something similar to

Bros. But Bros wasn't what I had in mind when I first picked up a guitar. Oh, no. John Lennon and Jimmy Page were the role models, and I laboured every day to produce music that even touched the hems of their Carnaby Street garments. Brian Wilson and Burt Bacharach too – serious songwriters. *Songwriters' songwriters*.

Yet by the end of 1992, weary and re-cycling tea bags in double figures, I was beginning to question my purpose – and sanity. Four penurious years in the city had left me with a dangerously warped mind. As Kurt Cobain sang, something was in the way.

But I still liked to watch television, every now and again.

One bleak Thursday night in September, after a fully balanced evening meal of spaghetti, two fish fingers, and half an onion fried in economy marge, I repaired to the sitting room to watch *Top of the Pops*. (Not a long walk: it was conveniently located only a few inches from the kitchen.) I was anxiously awaiting the debut performance of a group that had special significance for me, 'The best new band in Britain', Suede.

There was a chance, however, that my precious television – ailing for months – wouldn't survive to the end of the transmission. This was troubling: if it broke, there was no money to buy a new one. And anyway, the shops were closed.

Suddenly they were on. My chest tightened. Despite, or because of, the tiny white portable set with a coat hanger for an aerial, they sounded pretty good. Vital, feral, alive. Eschewing caution, I turned the volume up to ten, the noise threatening to split the cheap plastic sound-hole. The picture quality was so poor it appeared as if they were playing inside a carwash.

Through the televisual froth, the singer, Brett Anderson, sashayed in a fair impersonation of Morrissey; flicked his fringe as if he was Bryan Ferry. In profile, he revealed an impressively aquiline, almost Bowie-ish nose. He sang the words to the verses (I could only make out 'lover-ly' and 'glitter') with a Johnny Rotten snarl on his lips. The sheer ardour of his performance was entrancing. The song Suede were playing, 'Metal Mickey', lacked the regal beauty of their first single, 'The Drowners', but compensated with a sort of unreserved self-assurance. The kind of swagger a song can only gain when its writers have come into contact with adulation for the first time: the difference between 'Love Me Do' and 'Please Please Me'. This was a group

that had been given permission to surpass themselves. *Oh Dad, she's driving me mad*, went the chorus. It could have been a line from *Carry on Camping*, spoken by Jim Dale. Yet they didn't seem like they were joking, especially the guitarist, a slight, bolshy-looking young man (who went by the mild-mannered name of Bernard). He thrashed and writhed, and sometimes punched the top of his Les Paul.

Hang on a minute, a Gibson Les Paul?

No 'indie' musician had ever dared to play that guitar in this way – using distortion, bending notes – while wearing a wide-collared shirt. It was an egregious allusion to the 1970s: Mick Ronson, Marc Bolan, Jimmy Page. And he was doing it on national television. This, I thought, could have serious implications for the country's youth. The drummer was pretty cool too. Loose-limbed, smiling; at home behind his kit, like the captain of a new yacht. His name was Simon Gilbert. I had a special interest in Simon, because, only 18 months before, he had played drums in *my* band. Let me explain . . .

The group my brother and I formed with Simon, the Shade, had been a power trio with an emphasis on tight songs rather than the long Dinosaur Jr-esque dirges then in vogue. We'd rehearsed industriously for over six months, playing original material alongside tunes by T-Rex and the Clash. Gigs had been sporadic, yet the band seemed to have a sense of common purpose, and, more importantly, mutual reference points. McCartney's high-flown bass on 'Baby You're a Rich Man'; Mick Jones's prominent backing vocal on 'Spanish Bombs'; Mick Woodmansy's restrained drumming on 'Five Years'. At some point during the previous January, Simon – a lovely man with a quiet smile – had sheepishly admitted he was moonlighting with an outfit based in East London, named Suede. One day he'd told me he might have to 'choose between us'. The end had come after a gig at ULU where Brett Anderson, bassist Matt Osman, and their manager – a bloke in a sparkly Ben Elton suit named Ricky Gervais (yes *that* one) – had been ominously present. When Simon eventually left the group I recall my brother saying: 'It's OK. We'll be so big next year, he'll have to throw his TV away.' A grisly irony. Now here he was on my telly, part of the biggest new band in Britain.

By this point in the performance I wasn't crying with self-pity, I was laughing. They'd done it! They'd breached the citadel that had proved inviolable for four years. At that moment, I felt a curious mix of envy and pride for Simon.

As the song ended, and the show cut back to the baffled presenter, Simon Mayo, a random memory assailed me. In 1991, at a lamentably unattended Shade gig at Islington's Lady Owen Arms, during a sound-system breakdown, we'd all shared cigarettes like soldiers in the trenches. (Simon, a generous guy, had always been happy to flash his ten Benson. But then he had a proper job, selling tickets at ULU.) Yes, we'd been Brothers in Rock. Now he'd gone beyond me and made a life for himself.

Full of new plans and dreams, I braved the forbidding, tenebrous hallway where the payphone was located, and pumped in a ten pence piece. It was the last one, intended for the electricity meter. Far across London, in the office of the studio where the Shade recorded, Jude had been watching the same performance. I waited for him to pick up.

'The bastard!' a thin voice said, before I had a chance to say anything. 'He's done it.'

'I know.'

'I expect he still has his television.'

It was obvious to us both we would have to rip it up and start again. Not a single one of the 250 songs we'd written so far was as good as 'Metal Mickey'. And how cunning Suede had been in managing their influences! They had successfully repackaged the seventies for the nineties. It was 'glam', but refracted through an indie sensibility. We would have to embark on one last campaign. Yet this rupture with the past was necessary. It was what I'd been waiting for. Now that it had happened it was exhilarating, emancipating. Over the last two grim years of baggy, shoegazing and – worst of all – grunge, I'd found myself almost apologizing for loving Bowie and Bolan. It had taken a number of years to realise that I naturally gravitated to British art, rather than American culture, or to use a phrase not really in currency back then, Americana. Maybe it was the sense of reserve, the irony, the stylish clean lines, but from John Barry to Bryan Ferry it was mostly English artists over whom I felt an aesthetic excitement. And Bolan and Bowie, despite co-opting American cool, were unashamedly English. I quickly saw that from now on it would be possible to succeed on my own terms. All I would have to do is write some new songs with my brother. And maybe steal a new television.

The following week, a crisis meeting was called. In a moment of recklessness, we agreed to abandon all the old material and the band name. Goodbye the Shade, hello Flamingoes.

Year zero. *Again.*

But I'm jumping ahead. Perhaps it's best I share how I got into this mess in the first place. For that I must rewind many years before year zero, to the early 1980s to be exact; deep into the memory songs that resonate there.

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On the morning of 9th December 1980, I was in the Hertfordshire back bedroom I shared with my twin brother, getting ready for another school day; and listening, as usual, to *Revolver* by the Beatles. At some time after 8am, my mother ran upstairs crying, '*John Lennon's been shot! John Lennon's been shot!*' She was wearing a yellow crimplene dressing gown and waving a piece of burnt toast. She was also actually crying. In the kitchen, where she had been making breakfast, the news had just been broadcast on the radio. Mum's announcement was so horrifying and unexpected that I set off for school in a state of shocked excitement, not knowing if the gates would be locked, the country in national mourning.

I was 12 years old. Despite having owned the album for a few months, I knew little about the individuals who wrote the songs on *Revolver*. John was the leader; that was about it. Yet it had been long enough to side with the general consensus that the Beatles were The Best Band In The World.

I say 'owned', but in fact I had borrowed the record from my father's house (my parents were in the process of getting divorced; I spent the week at my mother's and the weekends at my father's). One Sunday at dad's, during the handover, I asked if I could listen to *Revolver*, the only pop album in his otherwise entirely classical collection. It was in there by accident. At my parents' wedding reception in 1966, someone had pointed out that the Brahms playing on the Dansette was perhaps a little, well . . . fucking boring. A guest had been sent to buy a pop record – any pop record – and had returned with *Revolver*. I often marvel at the serendipity of this.



What if they'd picked up an Engelbert Humperdink LP rather than one of the greatest albums of the 20th century? It's a bit like going into a bookshop looking for a novel and randomly choosing *Ulysses*.

I had always been curious about the four austere faces on the cover. They recalled the American Presidents on Mount Rushmore. The sleeve seemed to be trying to communicate an air of importance, yet a second element of the design – a collage of the group mucking about and throwing camp shapes – deliberately undermined this. The cover stood out among the countless Rhine scenes and Alfred Brendel portraits (the pianist glowering Satanically in his thick-rimmed spectacles, yet always looking strangely like Roy Hudd).

Dad didn't care for pop – it was the enemy of 'serious' music – but, for some reason, that afternoon he allowed me to play *Revolver*. As the first bars of 'Taxman' emerged from the speakers, something unusual happened. At the gaunt chop of the guitarist's bluesy chord, a peculiar feeling arose in my stomach. The only equivalent experience was when the local marching band had trooped around the market square of the town. Each thud of the bass drum had delivered a delicious blow to the solar plexus.

This, however, was subtly different. I knew somehow that the blues was linked to sex, and to a 12-year-old boy this was of urgent interest. I didn't fully understand what was I was hearing, but knew I wanted to hear more. As the record progressed it became increasingly puzzling. Why did it have 'Indian restaurant' music on it? Why were there so many different musical styles? I recognized the laborious 'Yellow Submarine' from school, but the next track, 'She Said She Said', mentioned death over a tumult of distorted guitars. There were inexplicable developments in the songs: the funny chord in 'I Want to Tell You' sounded like the wrong notes were being played; as if someone had made a mistake and hadn't bothered to correct it.

My parents, who had been talking over one wonderful song after another, decided it was home time. I asked to hear one more tune. A brass fanfare blared from the speakers; then a space of a few seconds, leaving the listener suspended in anticipation. A Beatle began singing (I wasn't sure which one): he was alone; he took a ride; he didn't know what he would find there. Curiouser and curiouser. There was something new in the mix: romantic melancholy, a yearning sadness. The verse flowed into the bridge – a descending bassline – the figure that, many years later, Alex Ross, music critic for the *New Yorker*, would observe 'has represented sorrow



(in music) for at least a thousand years'. The sequence ended in an explosive release on almost only one note:

*Got to get you into my life!*

That was enough.

The car was waiting. I didn't hear the last song, 'Tomorrow Never Knows' (probably a blessing; that would have completely blown my mind). I wanted to seize *Revolver*, confiscate it for further investigation. Perhaps it would be useful, a road map for the perilous teenage years ahead. My father agreed to let me take the record, and, in doing so, passed me into the hands of the enemy.

## About the Writer

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James Cook has lived in London for over 25 years, working as a musician and songwriter. His band Flamingoes (which he formed with twin brother Jude Cook, now a Heinemann novelist) released two albums 12 years apart: *Plastic Jewels* (1995), which was very well received by the *Guardian*, the *Telegraph*, *NME*, *Melody Maker*, etc; and *Street Noise Invades the House* (2007). There at the start of the much-maligned Britpop movement, the band toured the UK and Europe extensively, ultimately selling 20,000 records worldwide.

James Cook's other work also includes short fiction. In 2009 the author was commissioned to write a short story about the Australian band the Triffids. It appears in *Vagabond Holes* (Fremantle Press, 2009), alongside pieces by Robert Forster and Nick Cave.

