



SAVAGE PILGRIMS

SONG BY SONG. WRITER'S NOTES



1. Stone and bone

This is about the 'square mile', the strange Masonic financial centre of London that is built (literally and metaphorically) on top of the bones of the working poor. It was written in the historic graveyard at Bunhill fields resting place of English visionary artist William Blake. I imagined the poor and long forgotten dead emerging from their graves, zombie style, to run amok in the banks and high rises.



2. Save your pity

My favourite song on the album. It's written in the voice of a dying man who has no regrets about the life he has led. I drew on a couple of specific people I knew, facing the end of their lives. I thought about the way they spoke and tried to get their voices into the words.



3. The Exile of DH Lawrence

In 1996 I was in Taos in New Mexico and was astonished to find that D.H. Lawrence's ashes were scattered there. I grew up in Eastwood, birthplace of Lawrence, but we never studied him and local people seemed to hate him. He was hounded out of the country. He spent the rest of his life in an exile he called his 'Savage pilgrimage'. I imagined this Eastwood lad, lost in the desert, stricken and dying with TB.



4. Billy's prayer

I heard about Battling Billy Marchant through a friend who was related to him. He was born 1890 in Salford was a fairground boxer who became a professional. He went to America and became a sensation. In 1914 he joined up and saw action in France. I just loved his determination, so typical of a generation of tough working class people, and I wanted to capture something of that in the song with its refrain of "they will not knock me down".



5. Gary Gilmore's last request

I wrote this after reading 'The Executioner's Song' by Norman Mailer. It's about Gary Gilmore who took legal action to effectively force the authorities to execute him. Which they did in 1977. He was a huge fan of Johnny Cash and in fact asked for (and got) a phone call from Cash prior to his execution. For me it spoke volumes about Johnny Cash's ability to reach out to so many different people through his music. So it's really a song about what an incredible communicator Johnny Cash was, that people felt he was their friend.





6. If love should rise

A song rooted in nature that has an age-old cliché at its heart - that coins and jewels are not the only riches. Years after writing this I realised I'd borrowed this idea from a Don Williams song 'Country boy' that has the line "I've got silver in the stars and gold in the morning sun"



7. Chains

Slavery was the thing that built the British Empire and the wealth of these great cities I've lived in like Manchester, Liverpool and London. I was reading some crackpot idea about UFOs building the pyramids and there's this enduring mystery about how the ancient world could create such greatness. So this song says there is no mystery, it was all built by slaves.



8. Four Corners

This song is about a specific crossroads in the Radford area of Nottingham where once stood a pub, a church, a school and a pawn brokers. It was known locally as 'ation corner - damnation, ruination, education and salvation. Radford is where my Grandparents come from and was dominated by Players Cigarettes and Raleigh bikes. Radford author Alan Sillitoe wrote about it in 'Saturday night, Sunday morning'



9. Bendigo

Another Nottingham song. This is based on a 1912 poem by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and is about William Abednego Thompson aka the celebrated prizefighter Bendigo. In 1839 he won the heavyweight championship of England. When I was a kid my grandad told me that his grandad (a bareknuckle boxer) had been a personal friend of Bendigo. In 2019 I sang this song on BBC1's 'Flog it' - my 15 minutes of fame.



10. Stand Tall before the wagon

Inspired by a line from cult TV series 'Carnivale'. The practice of standing tall before the wagon is a form of rough justice where someone is judged by a mob and punished accordingly. I borrowed the phrase for this tale of a man seeking vengeance.



11. Roll me out in the middle of the night

I tried to write a song of hope, about how it was all going to be OK in the end. This is what came out.



Matt Hill is a storytelling singer-songwriter who offers a British take on folk and Americana. Formerly known by the stage name Quiet Loner, his career highs include a songwriters circle with Billy Bragg at Glastonbury, two UK Americana chart number one albums and singing on BBC TV's 'Flog it'. matthillsongwriter.com

SOUND RECORDING

Producer notes

Sam Lench is an experienced sound engineer, mixer, producer, musician, composer and educator. Formerly a member of Samson and Delilah, Last Harbour and Gladeyes, albums he's recorded or mixed have been played on BBC Radio 2, BBC6 Music and reviewed in The Guardian, Uncut and Sunday Times. Sam produced, engineered and mixed Savage Pilgrims. He now lives in Adelaide, Australia. samlench.com

What experience did you want for the listener?

We wanted the listener to feel like they were in the room with people playing instruments all around them, blurring the participatory line between performer and audience.

Why record to tape?

There's an immediacy and an honesty about it because it forces you to make hard and fast decisions in the moment; is it a good take? yes or no, then move on. I like that way of working and for me that's the number one reason to use tape.

Where was it recorded?

The Kings Arms pub in Salford. An old, crumbly Victorian boozery whose regulars have included George Orwell, Graham Nash and Mark E. Smith. Paul Heaton from the Beautiful South was landlord when we moved in and we shared the top floor with Dutch Uncles. The modest sized rooms have an unfussy charm and character, and the stairwell was quickly conscripted as a reverb chamber.

What sort of gear did you use?

We wanted to weight the tones more vintage than modern, so we used mostly old dynamic microphones and ribbons. We used mostly Neve preamps, valve EQs and 1176 compression and recorded straight on to the 24 track tape machine.

Tell us about your recording methods

I really like heavily distorting old delay units to capture some grit on vocal elements like hums, whistles and harmonies. We also abused compressors, preamps and valve EQs to capture distorted, larger than life percussive elements like stomps, claps and kicks. My favourite sound captured on the record was sending Kirsty down the stairwell to play her musical saw, using the natural echo and ambience to emphasise the spooky, otherworldly sound of the saw.

What about the instrumentation?

We used a lot of traditional folk or americana instruments on the record including banjo, mandolin, guitar, bass and percussion. We always recorded Matt's core performances live, singing and playing guitar or banjo together just like he would at a gig. I used close and distant microphones so we could blend in a feeling of the listener being present in the room.