

# Hit me with your rhymin' stick

What is it about Yeats that is so attractive to rock stars, and why does Auden have the crowd moshing at the Forum? Graeme Thomson meets the musicians turning poetry into pop

Scott decamped to his music room armed only with a long-cherished dream and a copy of WB Yeats's greatest hits, a brick-like anthology of the late poet's collected works. For a fortnight, the leader of the Waterboys sat at his piano and ploughed methodically through the book, pushing and prodding at the words on each page until some began to offer a glimmer of a song.

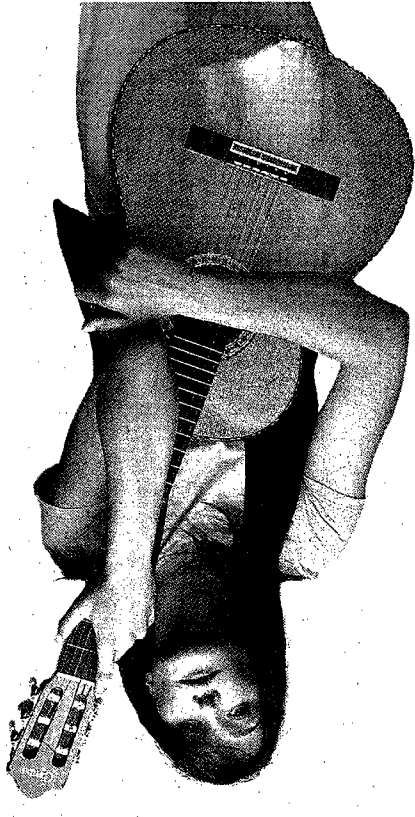
"If the first line of any poem suggested a tune in my head, I'd persevere with it, and if it didn't, I'd pass on to something else," says Scott. "I started at page one and worked through to page 600-and-something, and then I started again in case I missed any. I must have done that nine or 10 times, to give the opportunity for each line to sing to me. At the end of the first two weeks I had about 10 songs." He has since doubled that number, and the result is an appointment with Mr Yeats, a studio album in which the Waterboys recontextualise the words of Ireland's most venerated poet by setting them to rock music.

Scott has form when it comes to Yeats: as early as 1986 he was dropping The Four Ages of Man into the Waterboys' live sets, and he later recorded The Stolen Child for Fisherman's Blues and Love and Death for Dream Harder, both of which will be revisited in the new show. However, he's far from the only rock-seer in thrall to the Irishman. Yeats's words have inspired numerous musicians, including Van Morrison (Crazy Jane on God), Joni Mitchell (Stouping Towards Bethlehem, adapted from The Second Coming) and Bono (Mad as the Mist and Snow). A patchy compilation album of Yeats songs, Now and in Time to Be, was released in 1997, featuring Shane MacGowan, Christy Moore, the Cranberries and, yes, the Waterboys, alongside several lesser-known acts. Even Carla Bruni tackled Before the World Was Made and Those Dancing Days Are Gone on No Promises, her 2007 album, which tended to treat the words of great poets as though they had been torn from the Yellow Pages.

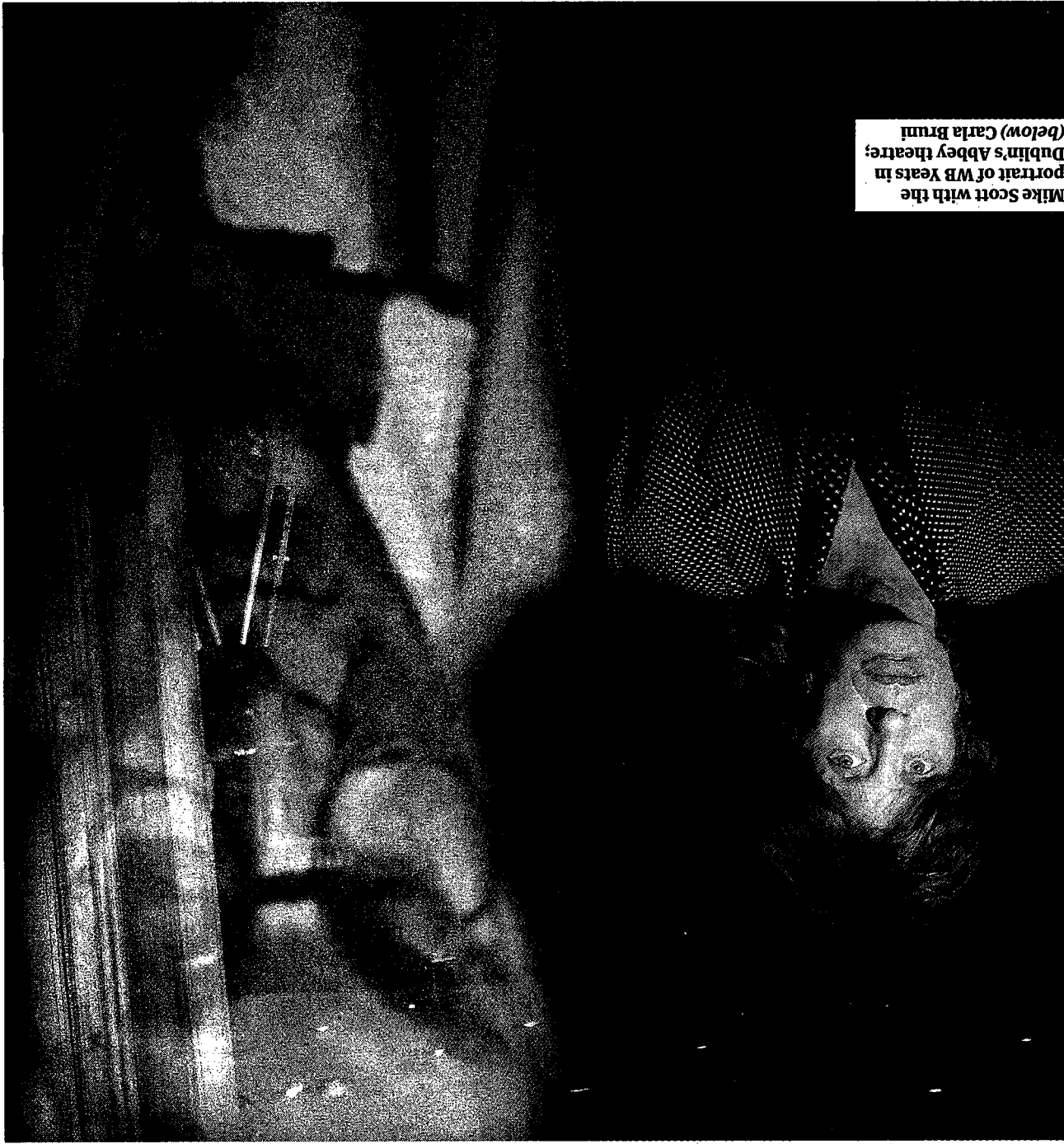
Just what is it about Yeats that is so attractive to musicians? His vision is both mystical and unfinished, and he adopted shifting stances - nationalist, liberal, nihilist, radical, establishment pillar - in a manner that would be familiar to any pop star, but there's more to it than that. "The words of Sylvia Plath were spun over a riot of such as Spitting Out Miracles and Swagger, such as Spitting Out Miracles and Swagger, and Sylvia Plath were spun over a riot of combinations of music and poetry, a light-60s explorers such as the Fugs earnestly declaiming the words of Matthew Arnold over bongos and electric guitar. You end up either with a performance that's indulgent, pretentious and overrespectful, or else something à la Bruni that fails to connect with the words. Ideally, says Langley, the listener should barely be aware that they're hearing poetry at all.

"A lot of poems sung over music don't work because they're too poetry," he says. "Rather than words 'on top' of something, I'm trying to make it sound like songs. Our version of Sylvia Plath's The Applicant worked very well. The poem is structurally quite simple, but it seems more complex than it is because I fit the words into different parts of the tune for emphasis; we sent out advance copies to journalists and nobody spotted it was by Plath. In fact, I was criticised for my 'new man lyricism'."

Idewild's Roddy Woomble has worked with Scottish poet Edwin Morgan and curated Ballads of the Book, an entire album of collaborations between Scottish musicians and writers. He emphasises that, above all, the process should be fun. "There's a high seriousness associated with poetry, but it doesn't have to be that way," he says. "We didn't feel the weight involved, it had to be something you'd want to put on in the car."



Mike Scott with the portrait of WB Yeats in Dublin's Abbey theatre; (below) Carla Bruni

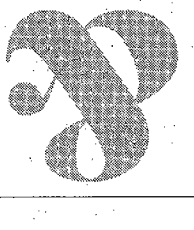


## I think putting Yeats to rock'n'roll and doing it for 20 songs is radical

Scott agrees that musicians shouldn't be afraid to bend poetry to meet their own purposes. Despite his affection for Yeats, he claims the Abbey shows aren't an exercise in reverence or nostalgia. They're about making the words sing in new and exhilarating ways. "I may be in awe of Yeats's skill, but I'm not in awe of his reputation," he says. "It's my job as a musical writer to treat the lyrics like I'd treat my own - to be ruthless with them, and unglamoured. My only responsibility is to make it as great as I can, and not to compromise. I can't be intimidated."

The Waterboys perform an Appointment With Mr Yeats at the Abbey theatre, Dublin, on 15, 16, 18, 19 and 20 March, and at the Grand Canal theatre, Dublin, on 7 November

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There are 20 songs in the show and seven or eight are untouched, but the rest have got subtle changes. Sometimes I've used a verse from another poem, or I've changed a word that might be confusing, or perhaps the rhyme doesn't quite work. I worked with a very clear brief: I might change something for the sake of the form, but I'd never change something that affected the meaning or the intention of the poet."

Perhaps these nuances explain why poetry and music tend to remain wary bedfellows, despite Scott's grand plan and many other examples. Former PJL bassist Jah Wobble turned William Blake's The Tyger into a dub reggae song and has recorded two albums of poetry set to music. The Celtic Poets and The Inspired of William Blake, Blake "chose me", says Wobble of a poet whose visionary status has made him susceptible to rock adoration (Mark E Smith and Patti Smith are both fans). "When you do something like this you feel you're part of a lineage, that something is being passed on that's bigger than you are," Wobble adds. More recently, Rufus Wainwright has set three Shakespeare sonnets (10, 20 and 43) to music on his new album, All Days Are Nights: Songs for Lulu.

Aside from the creative riches on offer, there are expedient reasons for plundering poetry. With copyright control rarely an issue, it offers an entire world of words, often gratis; it's also a sure-fire means of defeating writer's block. "When I haven't got enough lyrics of my own, I'm always looking around for things I might want to do," says Langley. "That was originally one of the reasons for doing it." Scott agrees: "Lyrics are always the thing that takes most time with me, and here I had a Wobble laments a rich seam of inspiration largely left untapped. "I want drama, and poetry is fantastic for that," he says. "It's a dramatic colour and I'm surprised musicians don't use it more, trying everything together, playing with connections and combinations. You could make an outstanding record using Shakespeare, because there's so many eternal truths there. Look what [film director] Akira Kurosawa did with him. You take the essence of what he wrote and use it."

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Part of the creative process is to change the integrity of the poet's work. may have tested their resolve to preserve Yeats's play The Shadowy Waters - which White Birds, for instance, is taken from some judicious shuffling - the bridge of mission for the project, Scott undertook although the Yeats estate granted him permission for the project, Scott undertook work because they're too poetry," he says. "Rather than words 'on top' of something, I'm trying to make it sound like songs. Our version of Sylvia Plath's The Applicant worked very well. The poem is structurally quite simple, but it seems more complex than it is because I fit the words into different parts of the tune for emphasis; we sent out advance copies to journalists and nobody spotted it was by Plath. In fact, I was criticised for my 'new man lyricism'."