



Songs & Routines

Paul Rooney

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'All Over Now Fleur', performed by members of Dundee University Choir at The NWRA Variety Night, Dundee, 2002, 4 minutes duration. Photo: Colin Roscoe

Introducing *Judith Winter*

This limited edition publication & CD was produced as part of the exhibition 'Paul Rooney - Songs & Routines', recent text and video works, at the Reg Vardy Gallery, University of Sunderland.

It features text and music by Paul Rooney and various collaborators. The man who writes the catalogue essay is the artist, writer and curator Graham Parker.

Paul Rooney was born in Liverpool in 1967, and trained at Edinburgh College of Art. He has had residencies at The British School at Rome, Dundee Contemporary Arts/University of Dundee VRC and was Tate Liverpool MOMART Fellow for 2002-2003. He is a founder member of 'Common Culture'. Paul's individual practice focussed from 1998 to 2000 on the music of the 'Rooney' CD's and performances, and his practice has since incorporated text and video. The song 'Went to Town' was part of John Peel's Festive Fifty in 1998 and a Peel session broadcast in October 1999. Performances and events continue to be part of Paul's practice, and venues have included The Thread Waxing Space, New York, Ormeau Baths, Belfast, Dundee Contemporary Arts, Cubitt, London and Tate Liverpool. Recent commissions and shows include 'Crossing Over 6' hosted by FACT, a project with The Whitworth Art Gallery and the Manchester Camerata (chamber orchestra) and the British Council touring show 'Electric Earth'.

A selection of the lyrics featured in this publication was performed by Durham Scratch Choir on 13 May 2003 at the Reg Vardy Gallery. The opera 'Tony's a Winner' will be performed in the 'Roadshow' project commissioned by Grizedale Arts in 2003.



The man who writes the catalogue essay *Graham Parker*

This time out I'll start with a claim.

The simple, beautiful heart of Paul Rooney's work is that he asks people what they *do*, listens to the answers and repeats them in such a way that it never seeks to diminish or compromise who those people *are*. And that sort of grace is rare.

So that claim is how this starts.

I'm the man who's writing the catalogue essay and this is my fourth attempt at starting it.

I've done quite a few for other artists now and there are always different ways in. Sometimes I start with an anecdote (some essential moment that shows something vital about who the artist is, or an establishing quote from a suitable literary heavyweight, or even a deliberate cultural lightweight depending on the desired tone). Less often I start with a claim, like the one above, and it sits on my computer screen for a while whilst I figure out how to substantiate it. Which in the case of Paul Rooney's work is further complicated by its quiet resistance to anything approaching a grandiose claim. His songs and videos and installations insist on the importance and beauty of banal (in the word's true sense of common to us all) human detail over and above the poet's urge to bend such details for metaphor.

Which is why I've started this essay four times. Anecdote can seem cheap in the context of discussing Paul Rooney's work (I remember Ricky Gervais saying he didn't tell jokes because you 'didn't know

where they'd been' and there's something of that here). Anecdote is too approximate and liable to be misused by unreliable narrators, to fit easily alongside Paul's acute ear for the minutiae of dialogue. Too much of a breezeblock in legoland.

Of course I tried though. On Sunday (it's Friday now), I sat at my kitchen table in Manchester, in front of my computer and a cup of tea on a magazine (I still think of the table as new) and tried to summon the details of a drunken night in a tiny bar in New York's Chelsea. Various British artists in town for a show at Threadwaxing Space had commandeered an open mic for an impromptu a cappella session (Rooney and myself among them - though we barely knew each other). Promising fare for anecdote surely.

But as I typed the story resisted. The words wouldn't process. There seemed to be nothing much of meaning there to be retold to anyone other than those who were there (and of those I suspect the Cameroonian barman is not dining out on his memories of the evening). At one stage, Paul Rooney delivered a quiet version of one of his songs at the mic, definitely more to shut up the repeated requests from his braying peers than out of any sense of vanity, and that's about it. Nothing to see here. Nothing to tell.

At least there was nothing to tell on Sunday, with the football on in the background and the essay being at that early stage where the trips to the kettle and the e-mail checking are frequent and the occasional word count reveals only how far you have left to go, rather than the later anxiety of how it's all going to fit in. Anyway, yes, that was Sunday and it was 'bitty'.

Today's Friday and I'm in my office at Salford University and we're at 577 words as things stand and reading back my abortive attempt at salvaging a story, I honestly (it's important that this is true) find myself remembering Paul's quiet rendition in that New York bar and the way he sang of a British housing estate; of going down to the bottom shop; buying a magazine and of how he 'read it all' - the last three words drawn out firmly and as near to emphatically as Paul Rooney gets. A foreign town evoked in a bar at 4am, but evoked mainly as backdrop or relief to a simple commercial ritual. Too spare to be sentimental, but so heartfelt as to plainly acknowledge that the modest achievements of living can be made impossibly beautiful by the simple act of removing the apologetic 'just' from 'I'm just doing this'.

I'm honestly remembering it now, without domestic distractions and with that indescribable momentum you get when these essays are beginning to come together and you feel you're really chasing the cursor and you're closer to the essence of the moment you want to convey. Just Paul Rooney in a bar singing about simple things you do when you're alive in Britain. Paul Rooney in a bar singing about simple things you do when you're alive in Britain.

A pause now. I've lent my video player to my girlfriend and I don't get it back till this evening and now's the time I wanted to rewatch Rooney's showreel. So I'm closing the word processing programme now. Then I'll probably check my e-mail (I do it slightly too often) and maybe call my Dad, before he calls me from the car on his way home from work. Sometimes it feels good to 'get your love in' first - when you remember or have a natural break in the day.

* * *

I've just used some asterisks to try and denote the passage of time. My video's back and sitting on the television in the bedroom and I'm watching Rooney's videos – consistently elegiac songs usually set to simple subtitled footage, in turn drawn from the vernacular of everyday life. In some of them, the artist appears on camera singing – in others he is an implied presence, hovering behind the video camera such as in his nod to Manet's 'Le Bar aux Folies-Bergère', filmed at The Town House Bar in Dundee (for the top-hatted man in the Manet original, read Rooney deciding on what drink to order). The woman behind the bar is posing impassively for the camera, whilst her voiceover muses on The Human League's tale of aspiration gone sour 'Don't You Want Me?'

And to paraphrase a familiar quote there are a lot of lives of quiet aspiration described in Rooney's work. People who in various ways are (to quote the artist in 'Warm Up') "effacing themselves in the process" – sublimating their own desires for their lives within the idiom of what they do to earn a living.

In that context, the work that I find both the most complex and yet succinct is probably 'Warm Up' – a voiceover account of filming the audience and warm up act at a recording of Granada TV's 'Stars in their Eyes', set to a slow motion video of the event. In it, the artist is brought from behind his video camera on to the set to face a light ribbing from the eponymous warm up man Ted Robbins ("You've only got a little one haven't you Paul?"). He stumbles through a stilted series of questions and answers whilst the warm up man prods the

audience through a series of 'Oohs' and laughs and applause. Rooney knows that the duo's awkward dance is a minor part of the evening for the audience and Robbins knows it too – but it's what they do. A small meeting between the self-conscious artist making and marking his minor cultural chords and the warm up man who had his own show at one point but who was "never a household name".

Rooney talks about Robbins 'knowing his place', but the artist's fascination is more to do with what it means to occupy a place, to spend time there, than it is with being told by someone else what that place is. It's why the second hand currency of anecdote doesn't figure as much in his work as the directness of present tense testimony. When anecdote does figure, perhaps most strongly in the synchronicity of the events described in 'I Am Not Going To America: An audio guide for any chairlift', the results are charming and acutely observed, but speaking personally (from a battered laptop computer in a bedroom in Manchester), I think I prefer the artist as reluctant protagonist rather than remote essayist – no matter how empathic. There's something important about the way Rooney implicates himself in his best work, which relates to that idea of self-effacement and of paying for the knowledge of what it feels like to be someone else for a moment. Rooney's own personal 'Stars in their Eyes' is a beautiful litany of buskers, call centre operatives, teenage gossips and waiters whom he's 'going to be tonight'.

That sense of implication is there in 'Busk' – where the artist sings a song called 'Around, Between' on the streets outside various Manhattan art museums (as my earlier shoehorned half-anecdote attests, he *did* go to America). The song describes the ritual patrol

pattern of a museum attendant and is bashed out by the artist on an acoustic guitar, to the affected indifference of the museums' patrons and passersby. I'm trying to find a way to describe the beautiful dignity of this work without sounding horribly patronising, but it's hard. I think it's something to do with Rooney making himself an integral part of the work – an avatar of someone else's routines as opposed to a commentator on them. Watching the video I appreciate the sparse prose that makes up the lyrics, but also feel for the intense, slightly embarrassed figure who is singing the song to complete their part of an unspecified private contract.

As I type that last paragraph the footage on the showreel Paul made for me gives way to quiet static on the screen. The lives he has carefully evoked pass by and give way to random noise.

I think ¹ about the first stanza of W.B. Yeats's 'Easter 1916':

*I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.
I have passed with a nod of the head
Or polite meaningless words,
Or have lingered awhile and said
Polite meaningless words*

It's one of those poems you 'do at school' – faithfully noting the metre, classical allusions and romantic call to arms of the subject

¹ honestly do – it's important that this is true.

matter, without really thinking about it. Yet I'd always remembered it less for the later lines about a 'terrible beauty' being born in the Easter uprising and more for this initial setting of the scene, with the poet noting his own previous indifference or ignorance of the potential within these 'extras' in his life. And I think that Paul Rooney insists on the vitality of such potential on its own terms.

I'll repeat my initial claim now (you can decide for yourself whether I do so tritely or whether the man who's writing the catalogue essay has made a structured case for the artist before he saves the essay and prints it):

The simple, beautiful heart of Paul Rooney's work is that he asks people what they *do*, listens to the answers and repeats them in such a way that it never seeks to diminish or compromise who those people are. And that sort of grace is rare.

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