

## Music/ Industry/ Politics: Alan Price's roles in *O Lucky Man!*

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Prior to directing his 1973 film *O Lucky Man!* Lindsay Anderson had been planning to shoot an on-the-road documentary about Alan Price and his band. David Sherwin's diary account – corrected by Anderson himself – reads, “Lindsay had been planning a film about Alan Price after Alan had written the music for *Home*. It was to be a documentary featuring gigs, travel, digs and one-night stands. Like the old actor-managers with their travelling fitups. But when Alan teamed up with Georgie Fame the project ran into difficulties chiefly on copyright for the material they were using (£1,000 a minute for a Ray Charles number.”<sup>i</sup> When the documentary project fell through Anderson decided to use Price instead in the feature, which is now a neglected critique of British society in the early 1970s.<sup>ii</sup>

Warner Bros' senior executives and their publicity agents had, from the start, recognised the potency in marketing *O Lucky Man!* of three names among the principal talent attached to the film. Lindsay Anderson could be expected to draw audiences on both sides of the Atlantic for *If...* ; Malcolm McDowell likewise for his striking performances in the same film and more recently Stanley Kubrick's 1971 *A Clockwork Orange*; and Alan Price for his hit singles and albums, his work with The Animals, and with Georgie Fame.<sup>iii</sup> Price had the additional attraction that his music could be sold in two markets.

In letters and telexes written while preparations for the North American release of *O Lucky Man!* were under way, the music features heavily, with the main emphasis on publicity and promotion. Warner Bros had not only financed the film, but (in the decade when cross-media deals were becoming common) had also contracted to purchase rights to the songs that Price was to write and perform. As part of the deal, the company was to release music from the soundtrack on their own record label. That Anderson attached importance to the music is clear from his characteristically fierce communications to the studio. Heated disputes arose over, firstly, the want of timely confirmation of arrangements for the band's tour in the USA and, secondly, delays in the schedule for bringing the album to market, both events intended to anticipate the film's North American release.<sup>iv</sup>

It should be said that, no less than Anderson, the studio's executives expected the band's music to provide valuable publicity for the film;<sup>v</sup> and as it turned out, both parties were correct. The tour did go ahead. And the album, whose release had been held back by manufacturing problems rather than the studio indifference that Anderson seemed to suspect, enjoyed favourable reviews and strong sales. This was particularly the case after June 1973 when it came out in the USA. Jon Landau wrote that Price “infuses clichéd topics with fresh spirit and discordant asides that generate a peculiar form of rock ambiguity... Swinging, pounding and thoroughly professional, intelligent and blatant

rock and roll – that is the secret to the title cut and this very unexpected and very much appreciated surprise album of the year.”<sup>vi</sup> Ultimately the music for *O Lucky Man!* was to earn Price a BAFTA award, an Oscar nomination, and his first US chart album.<sup>vii</sup>

Even prior to the period of research for the documentary and pre-production for *O Lucky Man!*, observations of Price’s personality and *modus operandi* dominate the entries relating to him in Anderson’s diary. Price had written music for Anderson’s Royal Court production of David Storey’s *Home*, and had attended rehearsals on two occasions in May 1970 recorded by the director.

“He is less insistently aggressive than when we met [previously]... Alan is funny: there is a sort of intellectual rigidity, I don’t know how much he takes in, some of his responses don’t seem exactly bright... but there is such brightness and emotional commitment in his response: his laughter and sudden bursts of attention.”<sup>viii</sup> And ten days later, “Alan has an urgent animation that I find immensely attractive...”<sup>ix</sup>

In February 1971 Anderson writes that the younger man swings wildly between exaltation and depression; and although he admits that he cannot recall the medical term for the condition, he plainly has manic depression or bipolarity in mind.<sup>x</sup> By July Anderson actually muses about casting Price rather than McDowell as lead in the new feature film: “It is an interesting phenomenon – the tough, sexy, sensitive rebel – can I do this for Malcolm in *O Lucky Man*? But really Alan is the character.”<sup>xi</sup> In the outturn, of course, both men were to have key roles.

Six months after that entry, in January 1972, Anderson confesses his personal fascination with Price, writing that notwithstanding the latter’s ruthless dedication to his personal objectives, the singer has acquired, at the level of fantasy, a sudden, unexpected potency in his imagination.<sup>xii</sup> It seems certain, judging by the recurring pattern of Anderson’s feelings toward other tough men such as Richard Harris, that what Anderson perceived as Price’s ruthlessness and remoteness actually augmented his attraction.<sup>xiii</sup> A homosexual whose celibacy was a consequence of physical fastidiousness rather than want of desire, Anderson had fallen for Harris during the making of *This Sporting Life* (1963). Almost a decade later his thoughts still returned to him from time to time in fantasies of the actor brutalising him sexually.<sup>xiv</sup> Anderson’s diaries (as always unblinkingly frank) return often to his sexual fantasies and preference for men who manipulate and command him.<sup>xv</sup> In the case of Price, however, Anderson’s feelings modulated by degrees away from the hopeless passion he had felt for Harris and other men, and toward increasing professional respect and friendship.<sup>xvi</sup>

Initially, when researching material for his documentary, the filmmaker had accompanied the band to a number of gigs where the disorganised pattern of work of both musicians and roadies drew his disapproving attention.<sup>xvii</sup> Doubtless this was in part because it differed so greatly from the firm control that he exerted when working with a film crew. Observing the want of a rigorous plan of action for the gigs, he more than once reflected on the weakness inherent in this informality.<sup>xviii</sup> The same concerns returned when he noted what he described as Price’s nerves, tension and inability to provide leadership for

his musicians in the studio as they recorded the tracks for *O Lucky Man!*<sup>xxix</sup> For his part, Price admitted his nervousness, recalling why he had asked to write and record the songs before the film was shot. Having, as I have said, worked with Anderson previously, he valued the affinity in their thinking. His respect for the older man was such that he wanted to make his contribution and not be overawed by the standard set by Anderson and his co-writers, Sherwin and McDowell.<sup>xxx</sup> In fact Anderson's relationship with Price as a writer was based on mutual respect. It differed from his working pattern with Sherwin whom Anderson dominated to make him write acceptable scenes.

After this first recording session Anderson wrote a detailed account of those four tough days. He thought that progress had been made, but not before he had intervened asking for changes in the lyrics. Price had first resisted but eventually came round under pressure. With these sessions finished, Anderson thought the music good.<sup>xxxi</sup> And relations between the two men improved during the forthcoming months of work on the film. Anderson noted his opinion, after another studio session in May 1972, that Price had been unusually open to suggestions.<sup>xxii</sup>

Factors other than the different ways they organised concerts and recording sessions would have added to Anderson's sense of alienation from the band's working methods. He was to some degree distanced from the culture of young people through his class background. This may help explain his choice of Price who (to judge by music press reviews) was not seen as being as 'cool' as some of his contemporaries. His work with Georgie Fame was described as 'a smooth and polished cabaret act' by *NME*,<sup>xxiii</sup> but Eric Burdon, fellow founding member of The Animals, is given more respect.<sup>xxiv</sup> Consonant with this, the preface to the script's first draft, describes Price as "a singer with a group – who are neither trendy or aggressively 'pop'"<sup>xxv</sup>

Anderson himself was sent to school as a boarder at Cheltenham College and completed his studies in Classics and English (interrupted by wartime military service in the Intelligence Corps) at Oxford University.<sup>xxvi</sup> All these factors marked him out as a scion of the upper middle class. Meanwhile, British pop music of the 1960s and early 1970s found it useful to let its Northern, working-class roots show, both, of course, being authentic ingredients of Price's life. That Northern aura amplified the ethos of youthful rebellion from the culture of the establishment, which remained centred on London and the South-East. Finally, Anderson belonged to a different generation, and the crew marked his 49<sup>th</sup> birthday during the shoot. Although he may not have known that two days later Alan Price turned thirty, he could not have been unaware of the age gap between them. In fact, at a time of life when most people consider themselves middle-aged, Anderson consistently wrote of himself as being old, as plenty of examples in the diaries testify.<sup>xxvii</sup>

However, his vibrant public voice must also be taken into account, not least because he consistently projected a satirical, angry rebellion against his background. David Wilson helpfully summarises one of the thrusts in Anderson's 1957 essay 'Get Out and Push!'. Principally focussed on revitalising British cinema, the paper also castigated society's stultifying mediocrity, philistinism and the smug, directionless self-display of a Little

England still intoxicated with the illusion of Great Britain.<sup>xxviii</sup> Added to this were the accumulating effect of his equally strong writing in *Sequence* and *Sight and Sound*; his associations with the Angry Young Men through the plays he staged at the Royal Court Theatre; and his satirical attacks on the upper middle class in *If...* All these things drew to his productions audiences disposed to seek out a theatre and a cinema more thoughtful or rebellious than mainstream Anglo-American fare was providing in the 1960s and 1970s. As Wilson also pointed out in reviewing *O Lucky Man!*, Anderson's diagnosis of British social malaise in 1957 remained valid in 1973.<sup>xxix</sup> And it is not hard to argue that the same themes (corruption and big business, torture, medical experiments on human guinea pigs, African dictators and the arms trade, exploitation of the developing world and poverty) remain relevant today.

When in 1971 Anderson had travelled with the band to research the proposed documentary, he recognised that Price's music raised fascinating questions about its sources; but he appears not to have explored them, noting instead that he intended to focus on the singer's work at its most pure, personal and passionately lyrical.<sup>xxx</sup> With these words Anderson echoed his own trumpet call in *Sequence* for British films, as part of the rebellion he urged against the island's ossified cinematic culture, to prioritise the personal and passionate. That call was to form one of the main elements giving loose coherence to the films by several directors (including himself) released through the Free Cinema programmes of 1956-59. It also identified him as "a charter member of the [European] New Wave".<sup>xxxi</sup> By the time he came to preparing *O Lucky Man!*, however, Anderson's approach had altered somewhat. It was not the sources but the philosophy of the songs to be written and recorded for the film that he discussed with the bandleader. Price remembered that the script interested him both because of its philosophy and the idea of a young man coming down from the North trying to make money and be successful, which he had tried to do.<sup>xxxii</sup> So whereas in the film Price is like the street singer in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, in the drawn-out process of making the film he was to Anderson what Kurt Weill was to Brecht – an essential musical partner.

Interviewed by David Robinson for *The Times* shortly before the film's release, Anderson described the method he and Price had adopted in collaborating. Early drafts of the script simply note the themes ('song of luck', 'song of opportunity', 'song of money', etc.) which Price was to write. In fact, for each point at which music was to be inserted the director wrote a paragraph stating what he thought the song should be about. Price took that and reinterpreted it in terms of his feelings and attitudes – which Anderson found sufficiently different from his own to provide creative tension, but also sufficiently the same for that tension to be productive.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

After a production meeting in the month before shooting commenced, Anderson mused in his diary: "In a sense the final zen-existential feeling of the film corresponds to [Alan's] own feeling about life: be what you are: you are what you are: decisions won't change anything. But of course this is mixed with an instinctive, romantic individualism..." Making this last remark, Anderson was reflecting his belief that words only mattered to Price when they came to him in a flash.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Anderson believed (and in our view the film justifies his assertion) that this mix of the political and the deeply personal characterised the songs when considered as the Chorus. He thought that they “express the ironic attitude of the film quite directly, [and] the persona that Alan presents takes on an air of *knowledgeableness*.” For Anderson, Price remains slightly enigmatic as a character in the film, as if apart from the action. He has attained the attitude to life that it takes Mick the whole story to get to. In short, Price’s character is a portrayal of someone who knows what life is about.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Thus while in marketing *O Lucky Man!* the band were working in the mainstream, their dramatic function ran counter to dominant culture. Anderson had been influenced by Brecht’s principles and practice ever since *Mother Courage* had played in London in 1956. *O Lucky Man!* was constructed broadly in harmony with those principles and with the purpose of casting a new, hard-edged light on contemporary society. The band participate as characters in the narrative and also comment as if from outside it, operating, as we have seen, like an all-knowing Greek chorus. In that role they have two functions – firstly, strengthening the structure and secondly, providing the moral context that frames the protagonists’ self-seeking behaviour.

Reviewing the film, George Melly wrote that although the Brechtian mode seldom works in cinema, it does triumphantly in *O Lucky Man!* He identified several factors that bond it firmly. They included McDowell’s Candide-like hero; excellent performances by several actors playing multiple roles; and Sherwin’s screenplay. The music too helps avoid the looseness to which the episodic picaresque form is liable – the wry edge of the songs links and illuminates the various episodes obliquely. Then too, Anderson’s coherent view of how society works gives the narrative its scaffolding.

Concerning the moral and political contexts, Melly noted that all the incidents (such as police looting a crash site, the sale of arms to an African despot and scientific experimentation on human beings) can be paired with reality. And he added, “... in the week of the Watergate disclosures, the film’s relevance needs no underlining.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> The happy accident (which in its day *If...* too had enjoyed) of being released at a historical conjuncture that illuminated the film is one thing, but not the same as a political programme. Satirists may justly agree with Matthew Hodgart that the form is devoted to showing how things really are and demolishing existing follies rather than advocacy for a new dispensation.

The satirist appears in his noblest role when he accepts the challenge of oblivion, by taking on an ephemeral and unpleasant topic... [Politics] offers the greatest risk and the greatest rewards: politics is traditionally considered a dirty business, yet the satirist is most a hero when he enters the forum and joins in the world’s debate... What is essential is that he should commit himself boldly to his ‘impure’ subject, yet retain a purity of attitude, in his aesthetic disengagement from the vulgarities and stupidities of the struggle.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

As on-screen co-author of the satire, Alan Price retains the purity of attitude that Hodgart advocates. Yet he goes further, simultaneously playing the fulfilled existential, while indirectly serving the community through his music. Not a political programme as such,

but a return to the basic starting point of so many renewed ventures – knowing oneself.

- i LA 1/7/1/8.
- ii So too in the USA: some reviewers (perhaps urged by an interview in which Anderson reported that Yale students had made the connection) discerned parallels between the political satire in *O Lucky Man!* and the scandals being uncovered in the Watergate crisis. Warner Bros moved nimbly to exploit this link in their promotional campaign (LA 1/7/3/3/34).
- iii See details of Warner Bros' promotion campaign at LA 1/7/3/5/34; and proposals for the UK campaign by Fred Hift Associates LA 1/7/3/8/1-10, April 1973.
- iv LA 1/7/3/6/6-9 (May 1973); LA 1/7/3/3/15 (2 August 1973); LA 1/7/3/3/19 (15 August 1973).
- v LA 1/7/3/6/6-9 (May 1973); LA 1/7/3/3/15 (2 August 1973); LA 1/7/3/3/19 (15 August 1973).
- vi Jon Landau, 'Loose Ends,' *The real Paper* (27 June 1973) 15.
- vii 'Alan Price Online,' <http://alanprice.absoluteelsewhere.net/biography3.html> accessed 27 March 2008.
- viii LA 6/1/58 (9 May 1970).
- ix LA 6/1/58 (20 May 1970).
- x LA 6/1/61/20 (February 1971).
- xi LA 6/1/61/29 (12 July 1971).
- xii LA 6/1/64/24 (22 January 1972).
- xiii See for example LA 6/1/64/50 (17 February 1972).
- xiv LA 6/1/64/294, (19 May 1972).
- xv LA 6/1/64/265 (5 October 72).
- xvi See for example LA 6/1/64/104-5 (15 April 1972).
- xvii LA 6/1/59 *passim* (1- 9 October 1970).
- xviii See for example LA 6/1/59/19 (October 1970).
- xix LA 6/1/64/65-68 (5 to 8 March 1972).
- xx Eric van Lustbader, 'O Lucky Men, How Did Your Movie Grow?' *Zoo World* (25 October 1973) 29.
- xxi LA 6/1/64/65-68 (5 to 8 March 1972).
- xxii LA 6/1/64/125 (6 May 1972).
- xxiii *NME* (30 June 1973) 21.
- xxiv Keith Altham, Interview with Eric Burdon, *NME* (2 June 1973) 9.
- xxv LA 1/7/1/5 (October 1971).
- xxvi Paul Ryan, Introduction to Lindsay Anderson, *Never Apologise: The Collected Writings* (London: Plexus, 2004) 3.
- xxvii See for example LA 6/1/64/72 (12 March 1972); LA 6/1/64/112 (23 April 1972); LA 6/1/64/295-6 (19 May 1972); LA 6/1/64/144 (27 May 1972).
- xxviii David Wilson, 'O Lucky Man,' *Sight and Sound* 42, 3 (Summer 1973) 127.
- xxix Wilson, *Ibid.*
- xxx LA 6/1/60/27 (Between January and March 1971).
- xxxi Elissa Durwood, 'O Lucky Man!' *Crimmer's: Journal of the Narrative Arts*, (Spring 1976) 11.
- xxxii Eric van Lustbader, 'O Lucky Men, How Did Your Movie Grow?' *Zoo World* (25 October 1973) 29.
- xxxiii David Robinson, 'Stripping the veils away,' *The Times* (21 April 1973) Review, 7.
- xxxiv LA 6/1/64/41, 8 February 1972.
- xxxv David Robinson, 'Stripping the veils away,' *The Times* (21 April 1973) Review, 7.
- xxxvi George Melly, 'Mick grins and bears it,' *The Observer* (6 May 1973) 34.
- xxxvii Matthew Hodgart, *Satire* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1969) 31-2.