

Langton Green

We purchased an old Volkswagon Beetle, and drove it down into Kent every weekend for a month, looking around Tunbridge Wells for a house. Eventually we found one in the old part of town, close to the historic Regency area called The Pantiles. Beverley's father in Australia gifted us a deposit, and we made the move in early 1967.

Shah's new home and HQ at Langton House, Langton Green, was indeed more suited to his style; its Regency proportions more spaciouly and graciously horizontal than the vertical Edwardian primness of the Big House at Coombe Springs. When we first visited, we found that Kashvi had already furnished the house with her unique fusion of East/West décor, and that a team of carpenters were busy outside converting a large barn into a communal dining room, and a row of cottages into guest accommodation and office spaces. The 40 acres of surrounding grounds, with additional barns and workshops, also provided wider scope for whatever 'curriculum' the teaching might entail. And if that were not enough, the property also included Langton Green, the enormous village green, itself. Once again we were impressed with the difference in expansive energy between the new Sufi

and the old Gurdjieffian regimes. On our first visit, Shah took me into his study and explained that he intended to start a publishing house affiliated to his new Institute for Cultural Research, and that my graphic design skills would be useful. I said that I would be happy to help. He thanked me, but said that I had done stuff for him without charge in the past, and that this was no longer appropriate. I acquiesced, and agreed to charge the Institute as a normal client. He laughed and said I might let him have ‘mate’s rates’, at least. With that we returned to the kitchen where Gabriel and Saira, the Shah’s eldest daughter, were playing, and Kashvi was pouring Beverley a cup of tea. Shah rolled up his sleeves, and started throwing stuff into an already bubbling saucepan on the stove, while exchanging ironic complaints about women’s privileges with Kashvi.

Kashvi said, “I hope you like pilau, because that’s what’s for lunch. Have you had pilau before?”

We said we didn’t think we had.

Kashvi shouted, “Shah! Don’t put so much cardamom in this time, they’re not used to it!”

“But it’s not pilau without cardamom!” Protested Shah.

And so began our 20 year relationship with the Shah family. I still had my job in Hampton Court, so would drive there every weekday morning. On weekends or evenings, I might get a phone call from Shah’s secretary Helena, arranging an appointment. Shah might ask me to design a book jacket, or to provide artwork for an Institute monograph, or to simply copy a rare piece of

Arabic artwork someone had found for him. On weekends we would usually spend Saturday helping out maintaining the Langton grounds and buildings, and staying for dinner in the large converted barn named after one of Rumi's stories, 'The Elephant in the Dark'. Shah often attended these dinners of about 30-40 people, sometimes bringing along a guest – maybe a media person or university professor – who was not connected to the Institute. The dinners quickly adopted a certain style: the volunteer cooks would prepare the food, the volunteer waiters would serve it, and everyone would enjoy normal dinner party conversations until the dessert was cleared away, at which point some glasses were refilled with Langton's dreadful home made wine, and the general hubbub would slowly, slowly decline until only Shah's voice was left. He would continue whatever conversation he was having with his neighbours, effortlessly expanding it to encompass the increased audience. It was amusing to sometimes watch the unwitting guest slowly realise that everyone else had stopped talking to listen to Shah – who blithely carried on talking as if nothing was happening. The subject could be anything from Anglo Saxon history to the Russian occupation of Afghanistan: Shah could talk entrancingly on any subject. Sometimes he would say something related to Sufism, such as a new teaching story he had found, or a long 'harangue', as he called it, about cult behaviour and conditioned responses. Kashvi rarely attended these dinners, because she felt uncomfortable with the ashram-like atmosphere. It was indeed singular to sit there among a rapt audience listening to

Shah lecture at length, and contemptuously, about the mechanics of cult psychology. Shah used to say that if he wanted thousands of slaves he could get them, anytime, in India – but sometimes I would look around at all the rapt faces and wonder what the difference was between us and a similar gathering around a guru in Calcutta.

Beverley and I, with Gabriel, began to visit Langton Green on most Saturdays. Without intending to, or indeed realising it, we became the only Institute members who turned up without being invited. All the other people there every weekend were specially invited via a letter to their group leader. It simply did not occur to us to find out how the visitor's roster was organised, but we eventually realised that the Institute's employees, Sally and Helena, sent out invitations, and that the work schedules (gardening, maintenance, etc.) were managed by an older couple, Richard and Helen, who had purchased a cottage adjoining the Estate. We were vaguely aware that everyone else belonged to London-based groups, but we did not know how many groups there were, where they met, nor what materials or exercises they were studying. Here again, like Coombe Springs, no one talked about the Work. Sometimes we heard that documents and other materials had been distributed to the groups, but we never received any. In the 20 years, more or less, we continued to attend weekends at Langton Green, no one ever questioned us about our Saturday visits. In the first decade or so, Beverley always walked into the House with Gabriel, and later with our second son Nathaniel, to join a mother and child group – while I just wandered around

outside and found something useful to do. Maybe Shah was unaware that we were there most weekends? Maybe Sally and Helena assumed we had special dispensation from Shah? Maybe everyone else knew that I saw Shah frequently and produced some of his publications, so assumed I was in some sort of inner circle? On such thin ice we trod, all unaware.

The move to Tunbridge Wells caused our domestic and business situation to improve. At the Coombe Springs party we had met Pat and Mike McDonald, and I started doing graphics work for Mike's company Medical & Biological Engineering. Their leading product was an electronic muscle exerciser called Slendertone – marketed by Mike's partner Hermann Schaffer. Shah was a board member, and he asked me to do some designs for Slendertone magazine advertisements. Consequently I did all the ads and brochures for Slendertone UK for about 12 years. Similarly, another company associated with Shah, Medion, asked me to do ads and brochures for their ioniser – a device that electronically precipitated dust and bacteria out of room atmospheres. Meanwhile, I had quit my Hampton Court job and secured studio premises in a Tunbridge Wells building owned by a farming industry newspaper publisher called Agroup, for whom I produced artwork. So from pile driving in the snow while at Coombe Springs, I had ascended to running my own business within two years – and all largely due to my association with Shah. We even started a pre-school together in the main house's large garage block. The Shahs had two

daughters and a son, the McDonald's had two sons and two daughters, the Shah's housekeeper had a son, and we had Gabriel – all aged between two and seven – so we pooled our resources, hired a qualified young teacher and started a day school.

And I had not stopped writing songs. Whenever the mood arrived, I would pick up the guitar and see what emerged from it – recording the result on a cassette, and posting it to my old Newquay friend Wizz Jones. In this way, over the years, Wizz and his muso friends recorded about 20 of my songs on his LP albums. We even got a double page feature article in the *Melody Maker* trade paper, called 'Wizz and Alan: the Moses-Aaron Syndrome' – because I was the Moses character who wrote the stuff but did not perform, and Wizz was the Aaron character who did. There came a time in 1969 when Wizz's producer, Pierre Tubbs, at United Artists asked me to visit his offices in Wardour Street, London. He said he had listened to some of the demo tapes I had sent to Wizz, and he wanted to offer me a singer-songwriter album of my own. I said okay, and that I would leave all the old songs to Wizz, and write a lot of new ones.

"Great!" Said Pierre, punching the intercom, "Now I'd like to introduce you to your producer!"

A very weedy-looking guy came in and shook my hand.

"Grahame will manage everything for you in the studio, and arrange the tour afterwards," said Pierre. "You can get in any musicians you want."

"What tour?" I said.

“You’ll have to do a tour of all the folk clubs to promote the album – it’s a routine part of the contract,” said Pierre.

Now I had heard at length from Wizz how gruelling was touring the small venue circuit from Exeter to Sheffield – sometimes sleeping in the back of a VW minibus; sometimes being drowned out by drunken crowds, etc., and I did not fancy it.

“I can’t do the tour,” I said. “I’ve got a four year old son, another baby on the way, and a business to run in Tunbridge Wells.”

“Too bad, mate,” said Pierre. “No tour, no album.”

And that’s how I probably became the first and last songwriter to turn down a solo album.