

mike oldfield

a life dedicated to music

chris dewey

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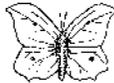
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This book is dedicated to
great but departed friends
who are no longer able to share my passion for
Mike Oldfield's music

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acknowledgements

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Key publications referenced within this book include:

Oldfield, Mike. *Changeling: The Autobiography of Mike Oldfield*. London: Virgin, 2007. Print. Referenced as (*Changeling*)

Branson, Sir Richard. *Losing my Virginity: the Autobiography*. London: Virgin, 2005. Print. Referenced as (*Losing My Virginity*)

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Dark Star: Highlights Compilation. Blandford: *Dark Star*, 1994. Print. Referenced as (*DSHC*).

Airborne: Mike Oldfield Fanzine. Maidstone: Ray Martland and David Porter, 1987 – 1999. Print. Referenced as (*Airborne*).

foreword

My introduction to Mike Oldfield happened through someone else's misfortune. Aged sixteen, I was working in a bicycle shop on Saturdays to earn some extra money. Not the kind of place for a musical education, you might think, but a blaring radio was present throughout the day. The mechanic was a keen audiophile with a passion for good hi-fi and buying lots of records! I was lucky enough to get his hi-fi cast-offs and regular loan of items from his extensive vinyl collection, which had a profound effect on my musical upbringing. I soaked up music and with the money I was earning, I too started buying records.

What has a bicycle shop and a mechanic to do with a book about Mike Oldfield? The shop was very busy, all manner of people from Dads fixing their kids' bikes, to teenagers pimping their rally bikes, people keeping their main mode of transport on the road and young ladies. The mechanic had designs on an attractive young lady who was a regular visitor and was desperate to go out with her. Wondering how best to approach this, he bought two tickets to a concert and plucked up the courage to ask her on a date, figuring if he had the tickets it would be much harder for her to say no. Sadly for him, she declined on that occasion, (for the concerned, that story has a happy ending, they later got together and married!) and one Saturday morning I was greeted with a rather crest-fallen mechanic relaying the bad news and asking if I was up for going to a Mike Oldfield concert. "Yeah, why not" I said. "Who's Mike Oldfield?" I said to myself. It turned out he had front row tickets to the *Platinum* tour at Wembley. Maybe not quite the great night the mechanic was hoping for, but for me it was a revelation. The seats were right in front of the PA.

I remember standing on my seat, dancing to the music pounding from the speakers and getting told to sit down by the security people, only to jump up again when they had moved on. I'd not experienced anything like that before. I was deaf and exhausted by the end (my hearing partially returned the following day!), but I had had a tremendous night. That was the beginning...

I started saving to buy Mike Oldfield records, writing to Virgin Records to ask for signed photos (every couple of months!) and briefly helped out the Unofficial Mike Oldfield Information Service. Janet Arnold's information service was next and followed by *Dark Star*, which is how Chris Dewey and I got to know each other, through my subscription to the magazine. Chris was looking for a co-editor following the departure of Peter Evans, whose *Music from the Darkness* was one of the first books about Mike Oldfield. Following my response to a questionnaire, I was short-listed and then selected as the lucky recipient of the post, unpaid of course. It was an outlet for one of my passions and one that I could share with like-minded people such as Chris.

So began a friendship that has lasted over sixteen years and one which has shared the many opportunities that have come our way from being part of *Dark Star*. Most of them quite unbelievable, from invitations to listen to Mike's albums before they are released or even finished, to writing material for the record companies, organising concert ticket allocations for subscribers, getting backstage passes to gigs and going to album launch and after-show parties. The list goes on and for me personally, having many opportunities to visit Mike's studio, meeting Mike, getting a private demo of his MusicVR project and being asked by him if I would write the *Then and Now* tour brochure notes. This led to Virgin asking me to write the sleeve notes to the *Best of Tubular Bells* album. What were everyday occurrences in these circles

were treasures for a fan like me, and created an incredible collection of memories. I feel blessed.

Not content with this, Chris has taken all of this one stage further. With his long pedigree in putting together Mike Oldfield magazines, he felt that these experiences and those from people associated with Mike should be compiled into a book. Mike's career had yet to be told from the perspective of the people around him. There are few better placed to gather together all of the material created over the years and infuse this with the comment and fresh perspectives from those people that know or have worked with Mike over the years. It is remarkable, given the amount of material already written about Mike, that new information and facts have emerged through the research and interviews involved in compiling this book. This work brings all the knowledge and passion into one place, a real book, some might say like an old tin box of treasures, but refreshing in this transient electronic age.

When I get my copy on the fortieth anniversary of *Tubular Bells*, *Platinum* will be put on full blast and I'll be dancing on my seat again, raising a toast of thanks to Mike for all those wonderful memories and beautiful music.

Paul Harris, Gloucestershire, UK, March 2013

preface

Although just a bit too young to have been aware of the seminal release of *Tubular Bells* in 1973, I have been an enthusiastic follower of Mike Oldfield's career since 1979, but far more deeply involved since 1986, when I launched a small fan magazine in place of the official fan club run by Janet Arnold, which sadly closed in 1985. A late dear friend, Paul Beard, was heavily involved in the early days, and helped develop *Shoes & Strings* to a respectable magazine which exploded in size and switched to full colour printing after handing out free promotional postcards to fans queuing for the Edinburgh premiere of *Tubular Bells II* in 1992. Courtesy copies of the magazine sent to Mike's manager, Clive Banks, caught his attention and led to official accreditation as *Dark Star* in 1994.



The economies of scale from the jump in membership allowed us to grow further, gain support and join forces with Peter Evans' much-loved *View from the Beacon* and David Porter's informative *Airborne* fanzines. Many fans also know Paul Harris well, who joined us to significantly develop the service from 1998. It is a testament to Mike's long-lasting appeal that most of our early subscribers are still heavily involved with *Dark Star* today,

including Michael Kuleczko who has been key to our success throughout.

How Mike Oldfield came to be who he is, his drive to become a musician and his personal motivations about his distinguished career are covered in detail in his own excellent autobiography, *Changeling*, published by Virgin books in 2007. *A Life Dedicated to Music* deliberately takes a different approach, documenting the events of Mike's career through the information gathered in interviews during 27 years of producing Mike Oldfield fan magazines. The views of the musicians, music industry professionals, assistants and fans closest to Mike have been assembled in chronological order for the first time, with the addition of some new interviews and my own personal views, resulting in the first comprehensive record of Mike's 45-year career to 2013.

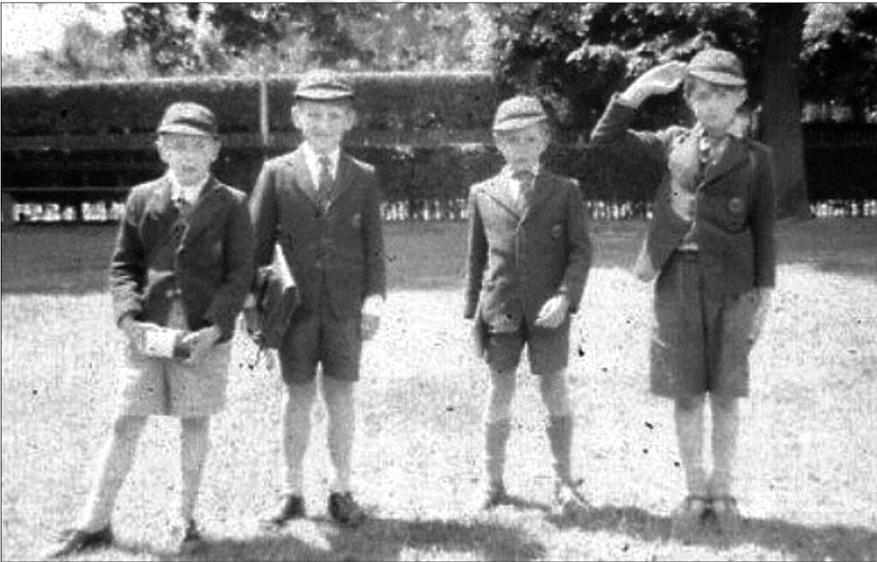
Special thanks go to all who have contributed to those magazines over the years to build the wealth of knowledge and resources published in them.

Mike Oldfield took the time to read and approve this book before publication. I was particularly pleased to hear that he is comfortable with me publishing it, as I have set out to make the content as accurate and valid a representation of his career as I can.

childhood

The children of Doctor Raymond Henry Oldfield and his Irish wife, nurse, Maureen Bernadine Liston all grew up to become world-renowned musicians: Sally (b 8th April, 1947), Terence (b 12th August, 1949) and Michael (b 15th May, 1953). Michael (Mike), the youngest of the three, was born in Battle hospital in Reading, Berkshire, UK and has become the best known of his siblings.

Mike spent his first years at a house in Monks Way before the family moved to Western Elms Avenue in 1956. A seemingly introverted boy who preferred to play alone, building models, taking radios and televisions apart and reassembling them, he believes he is a ‘mutant, or an experiment of nature, somehow incapable of normal social relationships... I didn't like other children and they didn't like me.’ (*Changeling*)



Mike Oldfield (far right) as a schoolboy, by Peter Cardani

His first experience of school as a five year old at St Joseph's Convent was bewildering, but only lasted six months before he moved to Highlands Junior, where he gained his 'most useful education'. (*Changeling*)

A childhood friend, Peter Cardani, remembers how he used to walk about a mile with Mike after school to catch the trolleybus home into Reading, where there was a playing field near the bus stop. Mike and a few other friends used to mess about having mock fights there, and Peter took this photo with his first camera, which shows Mike, on the right, pretending to be a soldier. Reluctantly, the boys conformed to strict rules from the headmistress of Highlands Junior School, Mrs Peach, to stay smartly dressed and even wear caps outside of school.

The Oldfields had a fourth child, born with Down's syndrome when Mike was eight. Although David was not brought to live at home, he lived for about a year, during which time their mother would be absent for long periods, suffering from depression, for which she was prescribed addictive barbiturates. Unable to sleep, and emotionally disturbed by the birth, she took to alcohol and became remote from the family unit, culminating in her being sectioned for periods of time in an institution. Mike became more isolated, and his time spent alone in his room was increasingly dedicated to listening to music and learning to play his father's Eko guitar, acquired while serving in the Royal Air Force in Egypt during World War II. Music rapidly became Mike's sanctuary, and he progressed very quickly on guitar.

John Wicks attended St. Edward's Preparatory school with Mike when they were nine, and they became good friends. John lived about five minutes away on Connaught Road: 'I have fond memories of him from that time, and was in total awe of his obvious talent, even at such a young age. Although he probably

doesn't know it, I learned how to play guitar by watching him play. In fact I learned a whole lot of things from Mike!' John went on to play in *The Records*, signed to Virgin, which had considerable chart success in the USA, where he now resides.

As well as his musical ability, Peter Cardani recalls Mike was brilliant at fast bowling in cricket. He was not alone in being terrified when Mike would start his long fast run up to the crease and release the ball from his long arm at phenomenal speed. His long arms were also put to great use in boxing matches, which were organised after school by Mr Pike, one of the younger, more popular teachers. Mike's arm reach was so great that on one occasion he took a great swipe and succeeded in breaking one of Peter's front teeth, as there was no such thing as a mouth-guard or other protection in those days!

Mr Peach, the headmaster of St Edwards, dished out regular 'rabbit' punches to the neck and Chinese burns on the wrists for getting things wrong in Latin, but he must have had a soft spot for Mike as he always selected him at Christmas to stand at the front of the assembly hall and sing the part of the Page to his King in the annual rendition of the Christmas Carol *Good King Wenceslas*. Mike did get into trouble trying instant fake suntan lotion though. He arrived at school one morning having turned a nasty shade of yellow, maybe intended to try and impress the girls after school or to cover up his incredibly nicotine-stained fingers. Every week during school assembly, announcements were made as to which boys were being punished with the writing of 'lines' or the cane. 'When the dreaded time came you would follow the headmaster up an old steep staircase into the attic of the school-house where you would be told to touch your toes. The headmaster would then slowly lift up the tail of your school blazer ensuring maximum impact from the cane after first taking

considerable time with his aim, causing you to tremble in your shoes. After your caning you were obliged to shake hands with him and say, “Thank you, Sir!”

It was Mike who introduced Peter to Players No 6 cigarettes, which they would smoke behind the school garden bonfire. The cigarettes were bought from a vending machine close to the railway cutting where they played. One day, the French teacher caught them buying cigarettes whilst passing by on the bus. She reprimanded them, but kept it to herself and the boys got away with their misdemeanour.

Mike’s father flew model aeroplanes in Prospect Park, where the boys played, close to their home. On one occasion Mike’s father was struggling to get the plane’s engine started and was furiously flicking the propeller when it finally fired, but he failed to get his hand out of the way fast enough and it struck him across the back of his fingers and drew blood. When he eventually managed to get the plane into flight, it flew off into the distance and was lost from sight. This was long before radio–controlled models and you just had to hope that some kind soul would find and return it to the address on the plane.

Mike may have been short of cigarette money, or was perhaps saving up to buy a motorbike, but on one occasion he was offering certain items for sale at his home. Peter bought a chemistry set and a fishing rod, but doesn’t remember him being into either chemistry or fishing. After reading Mike’s autobiography, where Mike talks of his brother’s interest in fishing, Peter thinks there’s a good chance he bought stolen property, which he still has today and has used it to catch many a brown trout over the years!

Andy Lawson used to pass the Oldfield's house on the way to school and got to know Terry Oldfield during the holidays. When it emerged that Terry's younger brother was learning guitar, Andy

suggested he may want to meet up with his friend Chris Braclik, who was also teaching himself to play. Mick, as he was known to Chris and Andy, would spend most of his spare time either at home or at their place, playing a wide variety of music. Although not particularly proficient at that stage, Mike and Chris still became friends, practising together regularly. Mike had quite a wide taste in music and was exploring that world and developing his skills as a musician and his technical capability soon improved through mimicking the songs of the leading folk guitarists of the time, such as David Graham, Bert Jansch, Leonard Cohen and John Renbourn. When Mike was twelve, Chris swapped his six string Harmony Sovereign with Mike's twelve string Eko for a few weeks. Mike's abilities suddenly went through the roof and he was able to play anything. During the following two years, Mike became extremely accomplished, although Andy says Mike lacked a sense of melody at the time and recalls sister Sally frequently complaining that he was playing too many notes.

Neighbour Andy Holland found Mike struggling with his motorbike in the street one day and helped him fix it, which started their friendship. Andy also played the guitar and joined Mike and Chris Braclik to perform in the folk clubs in Reading, mostly playing traditional songs. The trio would play at The Blues Club and The Shades Coffee Bar, run by Sydney Luckington, which transformed into Reading's trendy music venue in the evening. The venue closed after a drugs bust in the sixties, but Syd then opened The White Horse, where the group became the resident act. One of the songs they put together, *Mellsong*, was written by Mike and went on to become the theme tune for Chris and Andy's duo, Melody Tickell, but they also played other tracks written by Mike as well, some of which have been recorded privately in excellent quality, but never released. Sally Oldfield

later also gave the duo her unused *Song of the Healer*, which also became part of their repertoire, but did eventually surface as outtakes on the *Children of the Sun* reissue in 2011.

Patrick Ginnelly remembers Mike well from their time together at Presentation College in Reading during 1966, even though he did not stay long: 'His nickname was "Ape" because he was so much bigger than the rest of us, and he spent most of his free time at school with an older boy called Richard Rydel. He was also the class monitor and played for the football team.' Peter Cardani was particularly impressed by his chat up lines with girls. One weekend a few lads went back to his parents' house with a couple of girls, one of whom they all fancied. Mike was the one who was the most forward and asked if he could "climb up her ladder". He had spotted the snag in her tights and was making the most of it!

The family moved to Redden Court Road, Harold Wood in Essex in 1967, where Mike attended Hornchurch Grammar and started his first music lessons. The teacher's approach, which required text book answers, frustrated Mike, as he preferred a less conventional approach which allowed him to demonstrate his compositional flair and remarkable guitar-picking techniques.

Nicola, a fellow pupil, recalls: 'I remember him telling us he was going to be a famous musician and we were very sceptical. He was very well spoken and rather arrogant, but he did kiss me once for a dare. He used to refer to me as "a rather large young lady" and once had to play Romeo to my Juliet in a class play reading! I rather liked him and I always use him as my claim to fame at social gatherings' (Friends Reunited website, 3rd February, 2011).

Chris Braclik stayed in contact with Mike after the move to Essex and borrowed his father's Morris 1000 pickup in August 1967 to drive himself, Andy Holland, Andy Lawson, Mike, and another friend known as 'The Rev' to the Edinburgh Festival,

where they played gigs at the Fringe Club and busked to poetry at the Travis Theatre. Andy Lawson has clear memories of freezing in the open back of the pickup whilst travelling all the way from Wallingford to Edinburgh, where they set up camp late at night in an open field. The next morning, they woke to hear voices around the tent, and emerged to find the Police outside, as they had pitched up on a golf course. With Mike still asleep in his sleeping bag, they quietly dismantled the tent and hid around the corner, to watch him wake in the open air, looking most bemused. After moving on to the Catholic Chaplaincy in George Street for a few days, they ended up squatting in a house in Bristow Street for the rest of the trip. Returning home, they placed a tarpaulin over the back of the van for protection, and are grateful to this day that they didn't die of carbon monoxide poisoning. Many more gigs followed with the group at The Dolphin pub in Wallingford, close to where Chris lived with his parents.

Mike had made enough money by this stage to buy himself a fabulous sounding hand-crafted Dick Knight guitar from a shop on Denmark Street, but found the action to be too high, so was not able to play it fast enough for his liking. In an attempt to resolve this, Mike filed down saddle and then the frets himself, but made it unplayable by leaving the frets uneven, so Andy Holland, now an apprentice engineer, took over and fixed it for him. After making these modifications and replacing the steel strings with ultra-light silk-wound strings, the Knight had an electric-like action, which was much softer to play. This guitar impressed many who saw it and Dick Knight subsequently sold many more guitars, thanks to Mike.

The Oldfields' turbulent family life clearly affected Mike deeply, forcing him into isolation at home, where he took refuge in developing his musical talents. The challenges facing his Mother

meant Mike was very independent at an early age, and used to spend a lot of time out of the house, fixing and riding his motorbike, as well as going out on long motorbike trips with his friend George Offerdahl. Mike was probably not as socially isolated as he remembers though; although he saw himself as a fish out of water, many of those who have contributed their stories looked up to him, not only because of his physical presence, but also because of his confidence, cricket ability and guitar prowess. Mike's determination to master the guitar and relative confidence to approach strangers were later to be critical in starting his career. Mike left school as soon as he could, aged fifteen and with just one 'O' level to pursue a musical career.

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how to order

Thank you for reading this free sample of Chris Dewey's biography, *Mike Oldfield - A Life Dedicated To Music*. If you enjoyed what you read and would like to purchase a copy of the book, this is available from the *Dark Star* website.

For details of how to order, please visit:

www.mikeoldfield.org/biography

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Mike Oldfield has consistently delivered momentous compositions with virtuoso performances since the ground-breaking *Tubular Bells* in 1973. Excelling at every challenge from folk, pop, classical, reggae, heavy rock and video production to computer games, his creative genius and insistence on perfection has ensured his place as one of the World's most successful recording artists.

This new biography documents Oldfield's career through information gathered in interviews during the author's 27 years producing Mike Oldfield fan magazines. It collects together the views of other musicians, music industry experts, and Oldfield's closest fans, as well as brand new interviews and the author's own insights all assembled in chronological order from the beginnings of Oldfield's music career 45 years ago up to the present.

Chris Dewey is the Editor of Mike Oldfield's fan magazine and has worked directly with Mike Oldfield, Virgin Records, EMI, WEA, Universal Music, Mike's managers, promoters, guest musicians, producers, engineers and personal assistants since founding the not-for-profit *Dark Star* in 1986. Chris is married with two children and lives in Dorset



www.mikeoldfield.org

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