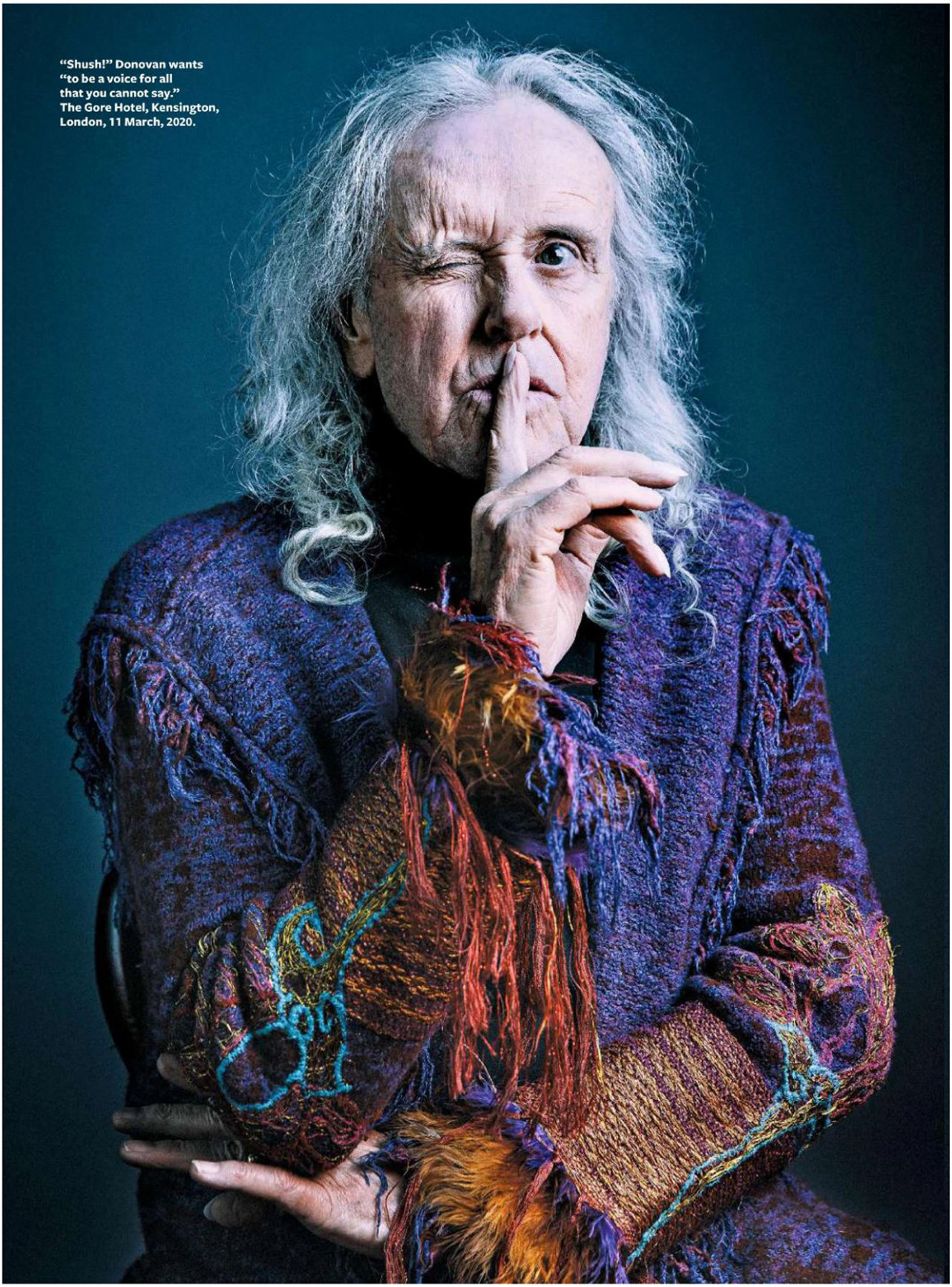


"Shush!" Donovan wants "to be a voice for all that you cannot say." The Gore Hotel, Kensington, London, 11 March, 2020.

THE GREEN MAN

The singer-songwriter most commonly known as Donovan has been at the forefront of musical counterculture since the early 1960s: he was ahead of the curve with folk, psychedelia and all points in-between, sitting in the driving seat alongside Dylan, The Beatles and the Stones. But for this bard, ecology was always his main muse. Tom Doyle meets him for an avalanche of anecdotes, just before the lockdown.

Photography: Michael Clement

IN THE GRAND,

centuries-deep tradition of the troubadour, Donovan Leitch knows how to spin a yarn. The long, grey curly-haired 73-year-old stands in the library of The Gore Hotel in Kensington, resplendent in a purple, fringed dreamcoat, his fashion sense most excellently frozen back in 1967. He picks away at a green-painted acoustic guitar which has clearly seen much use down the years, its body scuffed and scratched.

Q casually enquires how long he's had the guitar and it turns out it's not as old as it looks. "1996," he replies, before launching into a long story about buying it ahead of making an album, Sutras, with Rick Rubin in Los Angeles. The famously gnomic, guru-like producer insisted that every day Donovan visit the Book Soup store on Sunset Boulevard, purchase a random tome, and write something inspired by it. The result, Donovan remembers, was a record edited down from over 100 songs. "That album took three years to make," he offers with an amused sigh.

It's an interesting tale, but Donovan is utterly unhurried in the telling of it. Over his shoulder, the Q photographer's eyes widen in panic. Precious minutes are evaporating from the allocated time for the shoot, as the singer/songwriter amiably rambles on. "The interview is after this, Don," his manager advises with a laugh.

When we eventually sit down together, side by side on a green velvet antique sofa, Leitch's stories continue to roll out, delivered in a lilting accent that still bears strong traces of his childhood upbringing in Glasgow. Often, when he reaches the end of an anecdote, he'll pause for breath and say, "But yeah... over to you", giving Q time to slip in a question.

The Gore Hotel itself is famous for having hosted The Rolling Stones' launch party for their Beggars Banquet album back in December 1968, an evening that ended in a booze-and-drug-fuelled custard pie fight. Along with being a pal of The Beatles and Bob Dylan's frenemy (more of which later), Donovan was mates with the Stones, but was sadly elsewhere at the time and so missed the bash.

Less than six months later, guitarist Brian Jones, Donovan's closest friend in the group, died after a still-mysterious drowning. Leitch and Jones were love rivals for one Linda Lawrence, who subsequently became the former's wife (and, 50 years later, remains so). But today Donovan has nothing but the utmost respect for his long-gone friend.

"Brian was it," he enthuses. "He was the one. He was doing things with audiences that were crazy. He was raising revolution, man."

Back in the '60s, as Donovan's music moved from folk through jazz, psychedelia and heavy rock, he saw his role as being a very different one from raising revolution. Namely, bringing poetry and "radical thought" to the masses through gently ruminative songs and the medium of the pop 45 RPM single. He still repeatedly refers to it today as "the mission". Every time he does, the years fall away and his countercultural teen spirit rises again.

"I thought, 'I'm gonna put the popular sound together with the poetic lyric,'" he declares, recalling his thoughts of 1964. "'We could make things that could actually appeal to the mass. I'm here to do it. I know the journey of the human soul. I'm going to sing these songs. I'm going to be a voice for all that you cannot say...'"

Donovan Leitch, born 1946, in Maryhill, Glasgow, was always a bohemian at heart. His parents – particularly his father Donald – were working-class socialists who'd sing Irish rebel folk songs at home. In the evenings when his dad returned home from his job as an engineer at a car factory, he would read poetry to the young lad. "He'd whisper it into my ear," says the singer. "I remember the smell of machine oil on his dungarees."

When Leitch was 10, the family moved to the new town of Hatfield, where he grew entranced by rock'n'roll and, at art school in his late teens, beatnik culture. He haunted the folk clubs of St Albans, picking up a guitar and beginning to write songs of his own. By 18, he'd been spotted and signed to Pye Records.

The folk scene was a militant one, though, and the finger-in-the-ear beardies didn't respond well to the release of Donovan's debut 1965 single, the whimsical ditty Catch The Wind. "They thought, 'Oh, he's sold out to pop music,'" he still quietly fumes today. "Folk singers didn't release singles, they released albums, like jazz people, like classical people. I said, 'Well, who do you think are the millions of young people? They're the folk of the future. And you're saying that they can't actually take this?'"

"I was the original green man. I stood alone, just like Greta Thunberg stood alone a year-and-a half ago, writing climate change songs when no one else was bothered."

Proving the folkies wrong, Catch The Wind was a Number 4 hit single, as was its follow-up Colours. Appearing on the era's prime pop TV show, Ready Steady Go!, Donovan was intent on making very direct eye contact with the viewership at home.

"As soon as I looked into the camera at Ready Steady Go!" he remembers, "the whole control room – they told me later – they went, 'Did you see what he just did?' And later I said, 'What do you think I did?' They said, 'You actually looked at the camera and we knew that you were looking at millions of people in their front room.'"

Sharing the same inspirations (Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger) as Bob Dylan, the two were pitched against one another as rivals by the media. On Dylan's 1965 tour of the UK, the pair met for the first time, as famously captured in director D.A. Pennebaker's 1967 documentary, Don't Look Back. In a now-legendary scene, Donovan »



Higher state of consciousness: Donovan takes it to the "fourth level" at The Gore Hotel.

performs his song To Sing For You in a hotel room in London, as a twitching Dylan and his acolytes watch on. Borrowing the guitar, Dylan responds by playing the blistering It's All Over Now, Baby Blue, effectively slaying Donovan.

It was the '60s equivalent of a rap battle. But did it feel as intensely competitive in the room as it does on screen?

"Does it look competitive?" Donovan wonders today. "Because I don't look at all bothered about it in the film."

Well, you maybe do a bit, but he's the one who's being competitive...

"*[Laughs]* I think it's safe to say that the New Yorkers, Bob and his team, were on amphetamine and so it was really intense. The jawline with the muscles sticking out and the constant cigarettes. Whereas, in Britain, it was hashish and, if you could get it, marijuana from the Rastas in Portobello Road. So, there was a different bohemian vibe. That's how I saw it."

It was, of course, a heady, progressive time. Before long, like many of the rest of his fellow '60s pop stars, Donovan was experimenting with other substances. "Mescaline was better than LSD," he says now. "Amphetamine was with the mods, not bohemia. There was no cocaine... not to speak of. There were a couple of junkie pals. But nobody cared about going anywhere near heroin."

He pauses and grins, as if trippy memories are flashing through his mind. "There were alternative states of consciousness being explored, it is true."

Kaleidoscopic hues quickly coloured Donovan's music and, in December 1965, he released what many consider to be the first psychedelic single by a British artist, the brightly woozy Sunshine Superman. It reached Number 1 in America, making its singer a transatlantic star at the age of 19.

Donovan threw himself into the burgeoning flower-power scene in California, as described in another of his songs from the time, The Trip, which finds our narrator speeding in a car through Los Angeles, out of his head: "Those lights were t-t-twinkling on Sunset."

But, just over a year later, the hippy scene turned ugly. "The dealers moved in about '67," he explains. "Before, everybody was getting high and listening to our songs. The dealers said, 'Hey, all these guys are making records promoting getting high.'"

Dabbling in LSD, he stresses, was not for the faint-hearted. "People would jump off buildings. People would think they were Jesus and that they could walk on the water. But there was something important happening. It was extraordinary, and therefore I expressed it."

Like the smarter elements of his generation, though, Donovan realised that there may be other, safer areas of mind-expansion. At the same time as The Beatles, he became a devotee of Indian "spiritual advisor" Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, practising daily meditation.

"The ancient books say very simply that people live on three levels of consciousness – waking, dreaming and sleeping," he avers. "But sleep is not the deepest rest. There's a fourth level and it's called transcendental super-conscious vision. And the only way you can enter it is with a mantra and a proper technique taught to you."

In February 1968, Donovan travelled, along with the four Beatles, Mike Love of The Beach Boys, film star Mia Farrow and other assorted disciples, to an ashram in Rishikesh, in the foothills of the Himalayas, to lose themselves in meditation. "Every press agency in the world followed," he points out. "It was ridiculous. The press camped outside for two weeks and then we were left. And we really did go deep."

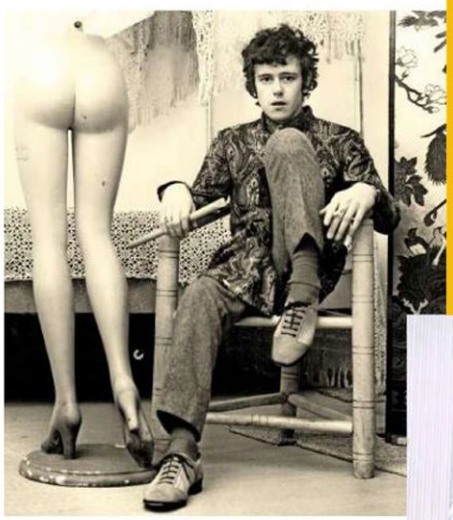
During the retreat, Donovan taught John Lennon and Paul McCartney the folk guitar finger-picking techniques that they respectively used to write the likes of Dear Prudence and Julia, Blackbird and Mother Nature's Son for The White Album. But Leitch had left Rishikesh by the time the infamous controversy erupted that saw the remaining Lennon and George Harrison fall out with the Maharishi, after rumours circulated through the camp that the supposedly celibate yogi had been hitting on women in the party.

"There was a bit of jealousy going on," Donovan says now. "And that's such an old story. But the good stuff had already happened. The world had seen some of their heroes ask to be taught something that was nothing to do with the world of drugs. It was pure and it was good."

Meditation acted as a pressure valve for Donovan, but not entirely effectively. The following year, 1969, he suffered what he later described as a "gentle breakdown" in Japan while travelling the world as a tax exile. One night onstage, as witnessed by his friend Gypsy Dave, Donovan began acting very strangely.

"I'm playing the songs and tuning the guitar in different keys for the wrong song," he remembers. "Or tuning the guitar and listening to the tuning. Deeeooow. And Gyp said, 'What's the matter, Don?' I said, 'I don't know, something's happening, it's very strange.' It wasn't drugs, it wasn't an overdose. I just said, 'It's over, Gyp. There's not much reason to do it any more. I can't do something when I don't feel the mission.'

"What is my legacy? Not the first psychedelic album. Not being the first to read a poem at the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame ceremony. Not the first to have a song every year in a movie for 25 years. It's that I was in service to the queen of heaven and mother nature."







"There was something important happening...": (from left) bummed out at home in 1966; marrying Linda Lawrence in 1970; hanging (holding guitar) with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and friends, India, March 1968.

JOHN PRATT/GETTY IMAGES, GETTY



Face the music: Donovan has been writing songs about climate change for over half a century.

"I looked in the mirror in the Japanese hotel," he adds, "and said, 'I'm going home.' I came home, and it all collapsed."

Back home and burned out, Donovan was emotionally rescued when he finally hooked up with Linda Lawrence, after writing a number of songs pining for her during the late '60s. The '70s were rough times for the singer, however. The hits dried up, before punk killed off his career. In the '80s, Donovan all but disappeared from public life, staying home and helping to raise the couple's daughters, Astrella and Oriole.

Luckily, though, he'd shrewdly managed to retain control of his publishing rights back in the '60s, and so the royalties from his hits kept him afloat financially.

"Publishing saved me," he says. "The Beatles sold their earliest publishing and they lost that. But my songwriting protected me."

Then, in a surreal twist to the tale, when back on the road touring in the late '80s, the Happy Mondays came to visit him after a show in Manchester, declaring themselves to be fans. More worryingly, Shaun Ryder was soon married to Oriole, while his bassist brother Paul hooked up with Astrella.

"The two boys fell in love with our two girls," Donovan nods. "And although I was a bit concerned there, Linda said, 'They'll be OK. Let's go up to Manchester and see what's going on.'"

So, is it true that the Happy Mondays turned you on to ecstasy?

"Yes," he smiles. "Linda said, 'OK, Shaun, give us the best you've got, and we'll go dancing.' Linda danced everybody under the table. I didn't take as much of a dose as she did. But when I took it, I realised it was just a mixture of many things. A bit of amphetamine, a bit of acid and a bit of this and a bit of that."

Leitch was sometimes alarmed by the Mondays' brazenly kleptomaniacal tendencies. "They came to *[visit me in]* a posh hotel in Manchester once," he says. "When the band were leaving, I saw one of them starting to unscrew a painting on the wall. Another one was taking the door handles off *[laughs]*. I said, 'Boys, forget your early life. You're now making music. You've got money from somewhere else.'"

It wasn't all that they stole, either. In the unequivocally-titled Donovan from 1990's Pills 'N' Thrills And Bellyaches, Shaun Ryder copped the melody and lyrics from Sunshine Superman, without cutting Leitch in on the credits. "Shaun nicked my tune, didn't he?" he laughs. "But that's OK. In the long run the girls survived Shaun and Paul. The whole thing was extraordinary."

Much like the life of Donovan Leitch. The latest chapter in his story is a new album, Eco-Song (Donovan & Linda Tribute Album To Greta), which compiles key tracks spanning 50 years of his career that prove him to be something of a climate change soothsayer. This, he would like to think, is his legacy.

"That I was the original green man," he states. "That I stood alone, just like Greta Thunberg stood alone a year-and-a half ago. I stood alone, writing climate change songs when no one else was bothered.

"So, what is my legacy?" he wonders aloud. "Not the first psychedelic album. Not being the first one to actually read a poem at the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame award ceremony. Not the first to actually have a song every year in a movie for 25 years.

"I'd like the legacy to be that I was in service to the queen of heaven and the other we call mother nature. That is the work today. Is it possible to save this planet from the stupidity that is going on?"

It's a question that Donovan dramatically leaves hanging in the air. For this loquacious minstrel, it seems, the mission continues.