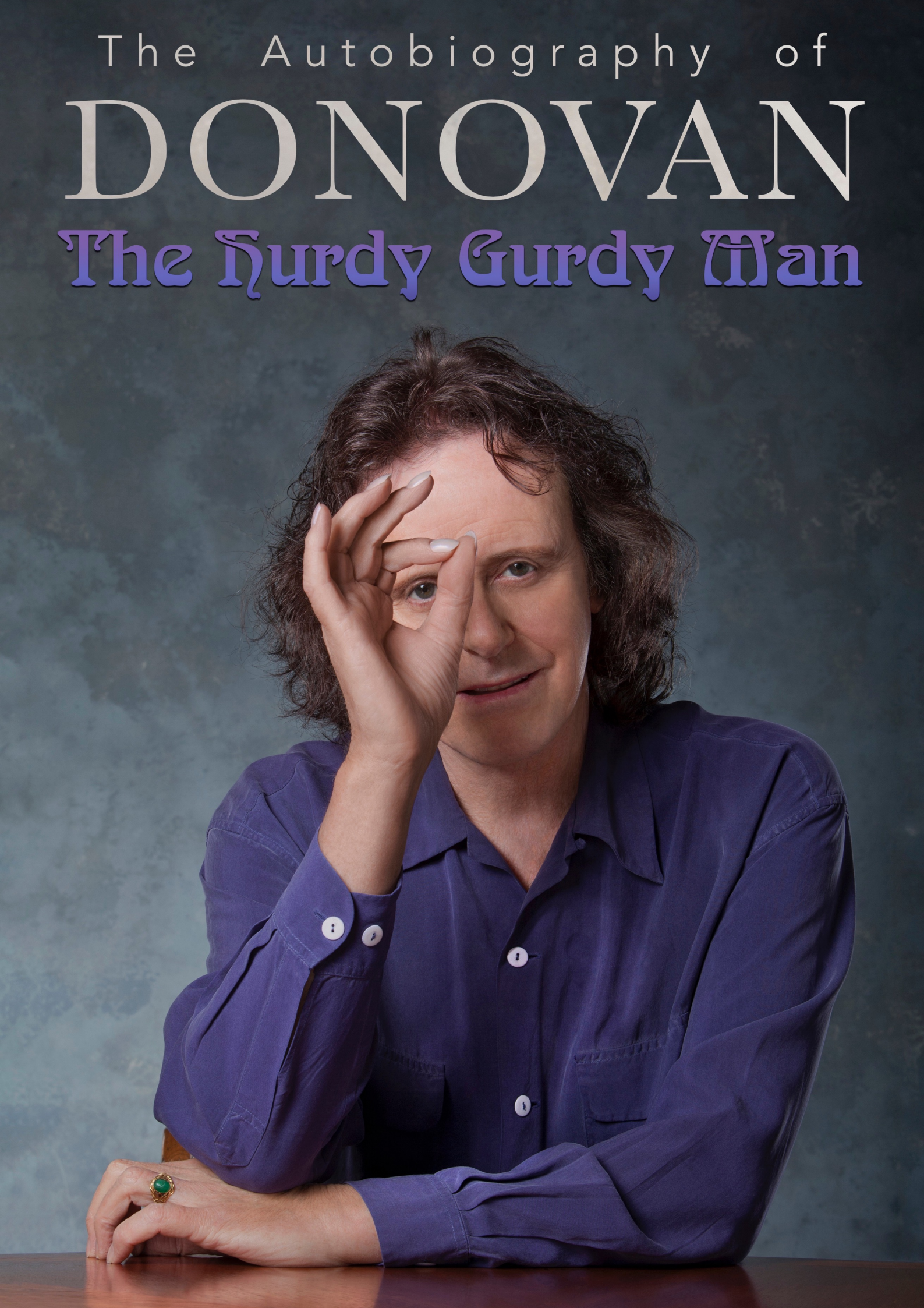
The Autobiography of

DONOVAN

The Hurdy Gurdy Man



Donovan Leitch

THE HURDY GURDY MAN

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To She . . .

Thanks To . . .

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picking, to Mac 'n' Mick for our early riffs, to Anita and Ashley Kozac for heart and soul, to Shawn Phillips for the duet of a lifetime, to Terry Kennedy for the first session, to Mickie Most for the amazing partnership in sound, to John Cameron for the perfect compliment to my song-tales, to Danny Thompson or Bass-ik love, to John Sebastian for the long friendship and the grin of plenty, to Cathy Sebastian for tea and sympathy, to Roger McGuinn for the real folk-rock sound and square sunglasses, to Jimmy Page, John Paul Jones, Jeff Beck, Graham Nash and to all my studio pals, diamonds all. Let's do it again!

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A theme I try to follow in this book:

I became an outsider when I left home at the age of sixteen. I realised that I resembled what author Colin Wilson had described as the 'romantic outsider'. In this book I explore the ways in which I faced the interior challenges of this form of rebellion. Then, when I read about Zen Buddhism, the answer to the problem of my alienation seemed to present itself to me. I became a musician and dedicated myself to singing the teachings that can't be taught.

And always I am blessed with She who was there in the darkness of the labyrinth. My lady of the lamp, my muse and wife Linda.

CHILDHOOD: *Glasgow 1954*

I liked the danger wi' Harry. Ah was limpin', runnin' wi' Harry Cadbury across the back of St Vincent Street. We were in a battle, lobbin' tin-can grenades over the line at the Anderson Gang. The cans were filled with cold ashes from the tenement middens. We made the sound of explosions and felt brave.

Lots of the buildin's in Glasgow were skeletons from the bombing. Harry and me collected shell cases from the rubble of a World War. Spitfires and Hurricanes, Messerschmitts and Heinkels.

Oor wee battle over, we climbed the wae intae a ruined tenement – against the rules. The weak Scottish sun shone on the wallpapered bedrooms, open tae the sky, the mouths of the dead fireplaces gaping.

I was in a bedroom wi' half a floor and the ceiling caving in. Balancing on a joist, I found a cupboard and opened it. Inside was an old flower vase which had escaped damage. Inside the vase was a collection of Victorian 'scraps', printed scenes of cherubs and young ladies in long dresses and muffs. I was amazed at this find. Harry was a rough-and-tumble Catholic kid. I was a sensitive Proddie boy. Harry saw how much the scraps might get whilst I saw Art and pretty girls to dream on.

Noo Harry was hanging oot a top-floor windae, tearin' the lead pipe from the eaves. His daddy had taught him this. Soon we had a fire in

the back, splintered wood doors and windaes, paint bubblin' in the flames. Harry cut the lead into small pieces and smelted them in an old tin can. He poured the molten metal into ingots on a house brick. The company name came oot reversed. I was amazed.

The city night fell early in the northern winter sky. Lights in the windaes shone in the dark tenements. Hungry yins called up to their mammies for a 'piece 'n jam'. Bread spread with jam or butter and sugar flew doon from the kitchen sill, wrapped in newspaper. We crunched the sugar in our mooths, red-faced and hands tingling from the cold.

Efter a time, the windaes opened up again and the mammies called across the dark world.

'Are ye there, Harry?'

'Donovan, come up tae yer bed right now!'

I used to sleep wi' ma mammy. Daddy used to wake me up to kiss me good night, the smell of machine oil on his dungarees. He worked during and after the war as a tool setter in the Rolls-Royce factory which produced the Merlin engine for the Spitfire. He was a self-taught man. He might have made a scholar, had he not been born a poor boy, barefoot and underpaid. Mammy worked as a factory girl.

Donnie and Wynn had waited to begin a family, marrying in 1942, mammy at twenty-six and Daddy thirty. The ceremony was conducted in the side chapel of the Catholic church, as was the custom when a Protestant married a Catholic woman. Wynn was a young beauty who loved to dance, as did all the 'Big-Band Generation' and you could

> See them doon the Barra-Land
> Wi' frizzed and shinny hair
> A blondie Ginger Rogers
> And a skinny Fred Astaire.
>
> 'Glasgow Town' Donovan Leitch

The Second World War ended in the spring of 1945, but it wasn't until Hiroshima and Nagasaki were vaporised that all the Earth stopped fighting. I was conceived the August of that nuclear holocaust.

In the disruption following the Second World War, three epidemics swept the city: scarlet fever, diphtheria and polio. The children were hardest hit. I got the polio. So my right leg began to show signs of 'wasting'. An operation was performed, cutting the Achilles tendon in the foot, and I wore an ugly leg-brace for some time after. It was a long boot made of a hard substance which I wore only at night to give the little leg support. Removing the device would tear the hairs and hurt so much that I cried each morning, painful for my mammy and daddy to watch.

My limpy leg did not hurt, but I could not run fast with the gang so Daddy bought a wee two-wheeled pram with a long handle and the boys whizzed me around the back screaming, 'The injuns are comin', the injuns'll get ye'.

I got battered by some boys. I didn't fight back. Harry had to fight for me. I jist hiftae find anither way tae beat the boys, I thought.

Daddy would cradle me in his arms and read poetry to me: Robert Service, W. H. Davies and the Romantics, Shelley, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, and the Visionaries, Blake, Yeats and, not forgetting the Shakespeare of Scotland, our own Robert Burns. His uncanny memory retained long monologues and difficult poems, a traditional talent of the Celtic race. Oh, how my bardic father would intone magic poems of wandering. He opened a mysterious door to the other world of vision.

One day, I turned from my game on the linoleum to see my silver-tongued daddy standing in the doorway, his lips pursed in a smile. He winked at me. I tried to wink back but closed both eyes instead. When I opened them again, he was dressed in a fur parka with sealskin boots and mittens, a mischievous twinkle still in his eye. The parlour had

disappeared, snow-capped mountains gleam in the distance. As my Klondike daddy spoke, poetry came out of his beard in puffs of frozen air, snatches of Robert Service. When he got to the bit about Sam McGee being cremated I closed my eyes again. I was feart. But daddy was not feart. He was brave enough to dream. He was telling me it is okay to dream.

At the age of five I stopped sleeping in my mammy's bed, and instead slept alone in the front room on a convertible sofa covered with brown 'American' cloth. The high Edwardian room had a dark plywood dressing-table and a wardrobe in the 1940s style, soft and curvy. I remember the tall sash windows and a mood of sombre stillness as I lay alone in bed, watching the silhouettes of the passing trams in St Vincent Street moving across the ceiling.

Across the tramlines was a comic store that sold *Superboy, Green Lantern* and the mysterious *Mandrake The Magician*, and cousin Billy would come round to swop issues with me. I remember my cousin Billy was an artist and made a drawing for me of a graveyard with old-fashioned soldiers burying an infantryman. I was fascinated to see the drawing of the soul leaving the body. This image is as clear to me now as when I first saw it.

There was s big cupboard in my room where Daddy went to make pictures – his darkroom. He liked to take pictures of weddings and something called bar mitzvah. I didn't go into the darkroom without knocking. Sometimes Daddy let me stand and watch the white paper in the china tray slip about in the thick water. The magic pictures came from nowhere and I thought ma daddy so fine to do this. He never said a word. It was so peaceful in there, his secret place.

One night, when he was not making pictures, I slipped into the darkroom and took down a large manual from the shelves. The pages opened at a lovely young woman in the nude. She was smiling, her eyes laughing and her toes painted. I couldn't stop staring at her soft

curves. She stepped out of the book and slid next to me in my bed, her long wavy hair falling over my face as she held me close to her wonderful breasts.

At the back of the posh row of flats at the other end of our street was a large walled garden called The Henney. One morning, Harry and I were peering into the garden through a hole in the old stonework. A little girl was playing on the lawn – we'd never seen grass anywhere else than the park. She was pretty and skipped up to see the scruffy boys. She lifted her skirt and we gave her a mud-pack on her wee girl's willy. After school, Mammy was very serious and held my hand as we knocked on the posh door. I was told off for doing a bad thing. I didn't understand.

Two weeks later, unrepentant, I stood in the dark 'close' while an older girl lifted her skirt and pulled her knickers down to show me her smooth quim, fine red hairs, sleek and silky. I was amazed when she then peed in a bottle. Afterwards, Harry said that one of the boys had got television. We all went up to see the wee shiny square of glass in the big wooden sideboard. It was just like the pictures but black and white and not so much fun. We got bored and played in the dark. I thought of the big girl and hoped no one would tell on me again.

My mammy was the second eldest of seven sisters and two brothers. Her father, Michael Philips, had died soon after the First World War. The mustard gas had damaged his lungs and eventually killed him. They should have received the War Pension but the doctors insisted it was tuberculosis, so the family had only the Widow's Pension, and all the children had to work.

They fought for country, fought for King,
They won the war, it's true,
Tae see Germany and Japan,
Ye widnae think it noo.