

David Cavanagh's article, 'ONE FOR THE ROAD', on Ronnie Lane, published in UNCUT, July 2010.

It was one of the most ambitious tours of the '70s. A merry troupe of minstrels, travelling the country in caravans, accompanied by clowns, animals and a big top. Ronnie Lane, the beloved entertainer, was taking his music back to the people. From May into June 1974, while the likes of Deep Purple cruised from hotels to concert halls in limousines, Lane and his band Slim Chance snailed around Britain in a rattle-taggle convoy. Wearing spotted neckerchiefs and scarves, they almost begged to be flagged down by a patrol car and asked what century they'd come from.

Ronnie Lane was a Plaistow boy, a Mod, an April fool (born April 1, 1946), a writer of deep-thinking songs and an occasional rogue. "He was a superstar... a wonderful mixture of East End nous and Romantic," says Bruce Rowland, the drummer on that 1974 tour. Songwriter Graham Lyle, half of the Gallagher & Lyle duo who played on Lane's album *Anymore For Anymore*, describes the tour's concept as "irrational but typical of Ronnie. He wanted a troubadour existence. He would turn up at a town, set up his tent and play to the locals."

It was called "The Passing Show". A picaresque odyssey along the highways and byways, it framed Ronnie's love of good-time music within the wider context of a Romany way of life. Viewed through the eyes of conventional rock tour promotion, "The Passing Show" was crazy. It required the country's least flexible officials – the town councillors, police constables and fire chiefs – to look at life not as a protocol but as an adventure. And deep at its heart lay an intriguing puzzle: Lane himself. Had he given up the jet-set glamour of The Faces for *this*? To eat his meals round a campfire and wash his body every few days in a municipal baths? To gamble his shirt on a pipedream, a chimera, a circus?

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On 4 June 1997, after living for more than two decades with multiple sclerosis, Ronnie Lane died at his home in Trinidad, Colorado, aged 51. The music world mourned him; friends and admirers included Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend, Rod Stewart, Ron Wood and Jimmy Page. The following day, 600 miles away in Austin, Texas, Ian McLagan – Ronnie's former bandmate – noticed a small, red fly buzzing around his radio when a local DJ played a Lane song, "Glad And Sorry". The fly circled the radio for some time, as though enjoying the

tribute, and then was gone. McLagan will tell you without a hint of facetiousness that it was Ronnie reincarnated.

To McLagan, who knew him for 30 years, Lane was “a naughty angel with an impish grin”. But he was also a seeker of enlightenment. McLagan: “After Ronnie took acid with The Small Faces in 1966, he found religion. First Buddhism. Then he found Meher Baba and went to India. Of the four of us, he was always the one gazing off into the middle distance.” Charlie Hart, a musician who worked closely with Lane in the '70s, comments: “He was grounded and earthy, but very spiritual, too. He *thought* in a spiritual way.”

Just as George Harrison was not born a Yogi, Ronnie was not raised a mystic. He had an old-fashioned post-war upbringing in the East End, similar to his contemporaries Steve Marriott and Kenney Jones. All three made their playgrounds in the bomb ruins of the Blitz. “We all got stung by the nettles in our short trousers and we all grew up in black-and-white in foggy London town,” Jones reminisces poetically. Ronnie had a warm, affectionate father (Stan), but an emotionally distant mother (Elsie) who suffered from multiple sclerosis and needed to be carried up and down the stairs. Ronnie was told not to worry; the disease wasn't hereditary. Later, he would wonder.

After experiencing fame with The Small Faces, Ronnie slotted into his popular role as bassist and bon viveur with The Faces and became part of a small community in Richmond who studied the teachings of Meher Baba, the Indian spiritual master. Pete Townshend was a devotee. So was The Faces' friend Mike McInnerney, who'd designed their first album cover. In 1972, Ronnie shocked the Richmond Baba set by leaving his wife, Sue, for McInnerney's wife Kate. The pair eloped to Ireland for a vacation, clip-clopping through villages in a horse-drawn caravan. Kate, a solicitor's daughter, aspired to a gypsy life, free from urban pressures, social confinement and materialism. Her influence on the immaculate Ronnie was visible.

“When The Faces toured England [in December 1972], we saw plenty of Kate,” says McLagan, none too warmly. “We'd been five guys touring, and now suddenly we were four guys and a shabby, grubby guy with his shabby, grubby girlfriend. It didn't gibe well with us.” Peter Burton, The Faces' publicist, observed the growing division: “Ronnie hated the glitzy showbiz lifestyle that was epitomised by Rod Stewart. Ronnie stopped getting in the Lear jets and started driving everywhere by Land Rover. It was quite clear he was going to leave. I seem to remember a sense of relief.”

Lane's departure from The Faces in June 1973 was the beginning of a new outlook on life. It was to be a rejection of every garnish and pretence in rock's dressing-up box. With Ronnie's blessing, Kate's Romany dream became a reality.

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The night after their son Luke was born (in August), Ronnie staggered into a Gallagher & Lyle recording session at Olympic Studios in Barnes, having crashed his car driving back from the hospital. He was drunk and emotional. Picking up a guitar, he played a catchy little folk tune he'd written, "How Come", for the producer, Glyn Johns. Johns liked it, as did Gallagher & Lyle and their group, and they all went back and recorded it at Olympic the next day. Ronnie's solo career was off to a flyer. To launch the release of "How Come" as a single, Lane and his new band (Slim Chance) gave a concert on Clapham Common in a tent belonging to Chipperfield's Circus.

"The press turned out in force," recalls drummer Bruce Rowland. "The circus people rose to the occasion, with clowns, jugglers, tiger cubs and lion cubs. The atmosphere was sensational and the music swung unbelievably." In February 1974 "How Come" reached No. 11. When Slim Chance performed it on *Top Of The Pops*, pianist Billy Livsey looked across the studio to see Stevie Wonder (who was there to sing "Living For The City") playing along to the chords. The Ronnie magic was spreading!

Ronnie was never sensible with money, his friends knew, but he had made one shrewd acquisition. On a Faces tour of America, he'd bought a 26-foot Airstream trailer and shipped it back home, where he equipped it with a recording studio. Lane's Mobile Studio (LMS) would prove a nice little earner when he hired it out to Led Zeppelin, Bad Company and others; and it also enabled Ronnie to record his own albums (*Anymore For Anymore*, *One For The Road*) wherever he liked. This was vital, as he and Kate now had a new home, Fishpool Farm on the remote, wild, English-Welsh border of Shropshire and Montgomeryshire. The farm came with 100 acres of sheep-grazing land. "It was in the middle of nowhere," Steve Bingham, Slim Chance's bassist, remembers. "Ronnie had a few old caravans lying around, and I lived in one of them while we made the album (*Anymore For Anymore*). The caravan leaked and had no heating." For Slim Chance's American keyboard player, Billy Livsey, life on the farm was a huge culture shock. "It was very ramshackle," he says. "Kate was like the hippie mom. She looked like she came out of a Grateful Dead concert. She was always making stews, and there were all these kids running around." Some band-members had brought their entire families. Gallagher & Lyle turned up and couldn't believe their eyes. Lyle: "It was a real commune attitude. Kate would be washing the clothes in a tub and putting them through a mangle. An enormous cauldron of soup sat on the fire from day to day." Livsey: "We recorded the album in a barn, surrounded by hay bales. The piano was out of tune half the time. We'd have a few pints in the pub, then wander back and start playing."

The local farmers warmed to them, sensing that Lane had no airs and graces, no dilettantism. He was not some celebrity up from the city for a rustic weekend. He was refreshing and genuine. “He was at one with the earth, in peace and tranquillity, and nothing else mattered,” reasons Kenney Jones. “He was probably right, too. We worry too much about the little things sometimes, instead of thinking about our families and kids.”

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The nationwide tour in 1974 was to be the crystallisation of every value in Ronnie and Kate’s life, and every note of the warm-hearted English roots music on *Anymore For Anymore*. “The Passing Show” would tour Britain like a circus – roll up, roll up – wending its way from town to town, pitching its tent on commons and parkland. A splendid time was guaranteed for all. “It looked perfect on paper,” says Bruce Rowland ruefully.

The convoy set off for Buckinghamshire – including a big top, a generator and a procession of gaudily painted and suspiciously antiquated-looking trucks and caravans containing musicians, wives and girlfriends. Ronnie had paid a retired circus owner £6,000 for much of the equipment, some of which was far from roadworthy. Worse, although Ronnie and Slim Chance were about to have another hit – “The Poacher”, in June – the tour was underfinanced and poorly advertised. Stubbornly, Ronnie insisted a family of clowns should feature in the show each night, despite being warned that the musicians felt uncomfortable around them and didn’t find them funny. As the tour progressed, there were altercations with police (who kept stopping them) and local councils (who wouldn’t let them park).

Slim Chance’s saxophonist Jimmy Jewell soon regretted his decision to participate. “It was a shambles,” he says. “The caravans would fall apart, literally, as we were going up the motorway.” Jewell claims Ronnie reneged on financial promises, evidently believing that the musicians, if it came to it, would play for free. Jewell: “It was this thing about, ‘Let’s all be gypsies, but you lot can be gypsies on no money.’ It was very romantic for him, but not so romantic for the rest of us.” When the tour reached Scotland, Jewell pinned a note to Ronnie’s trailer – ‘Goodbye cruel circus, I’m off to join the world’ – and left for the nearest station.

Then again, some nights were memorable. Everyone remembers Bath, where the fire chief threatened to cancel the gig for health and safety reasons. What would we need to proceed, Ronnie asked? A fire engine, the chief emphatically replied. At this, a young local stepped forward and announced that he had a fire engine. He was a student at the university, he explained, and his hobby was civil defence. He went and fetched his fire engine, and

subsequently became an invaluable member of the tour, parking his fire engine prominently outside the tent every night.

The gigs, meanwhile, were Ronnie in quintessence: warmth and affection flowing from (and towards) the audience; Ronnie throwing his head back and singing like a man at a wedding; Ronnie shuffling across the stage with his guitar down by his knees. “Absolute magician in front of a crowd,” says Bruce Rowland. Billy Livsey agrees: “Never known a performer like him. He would go onstage absolutely tanked on barley wine, and he’d stare into the crowd with a smile on his face and the gig would become an instant party.”

But the tour eventually ran out of luck. It was abandoned in Newcastle, where, over three nights, Slim Chance played to a total of 30 people. Ronnie had spent thousands keeping it afloat, as had Bruce Rowland. “I lost about four-and-a-half grand, a lot of money in those days,” Rowland says. “Everything was broken and we had to bring it home. I took a 40-foot caravan down the M1 with a Land Rover, then went back to Newcastle on the train and drove the Pantehnicon down. It had two gears, no reverse, back brakes only, and no starter. I drove between 5mph and 10mph most of the way. It took me three days.”

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Slim Chance lost heart, drifted away from Fishpool Farm, and a new generation of musicians were bedded in. Central to the new band were multi-instrumentalists Charlie Hart and Steve Simpson. Hart stayed at Fishpool for 18 months, in a run-down cottage at the back of the farm. Simpson and his young family lived for an entire summer in a tent in Lane’s top field.

Hart: “It was quite a strange period. After ‘The Passing Show’, Ronnie signed up with these King’s Road, public school-type managers who signed him to Island. It wasn’t a very successful interlude. It was a good deal with a proper label, but the managers never quite got the measure of Ronnie. He would play pranks on them when they visited the farm.”

Indeed, although Ronnie would reluctantly return to a more orthodox way of touring – universities rather than circus tents – he never conformed to music industry practices to any serious degree, and as a result his career disappeared off the map. Philosophically, he was closer to pub-rock (Brinsley Schwarz, Ducks Deluxe) than he was to the Earls Court arena giants (Rod, Elton, Jagger) with whom he’d once consorted. Ronnie and Kate were just about the polar opposites of Rod and Britt, rock’s hottest new couple. Little wonder Slim Chance’s Steve Simpson describes Fishpool as “a parallel universe... a different kind of world”.

Friends had noticed that Ronnie often seemed unsteady on his feet. A heavy drinker, he sometimes struggled to climb flights of stairs, and there were days when he couldn’t button

his waistcoat. Barmaids would refuse to serve him in pubs, assuming he'd "had enough". But the truth was that Ronnie, just like his mother, had contracted multiple sclerosis. It was diagnosed in 1977, but some sources believe Ronnie had been aware of it – and had dreaded having it confirmed – for at least five years. His finances now in a hole, he relied on the generosity of friends. Glyn Johns rallied to the cause, producing an album by Ronnie and Pete Townshend, *Rough Mix* (1977). The same year, Eric Clapton took Ronnie and Slim Chance out as his support band in Europe, where they travelled in uncustomary luxury on the Orient Express. Clapton, a good friend of Ronnie's, had written his famous song "Wonderful Tonight" on a 1976 visit to Fishpool.

Ronnie and Kate had married, but it was not to last. The gypsy dream evaporated and a new reality took hold. When his journalist friend John Pidgeon encountered him in the late '70s, Ronnie was living with a new girlfriend in London, and Fishpool was just a memory. "He wasn't in a good way," Pidgeon recalls. "The MS had really kicked in and he was kind of wobbly." In a desperate bid to arrest his physical decline, Ronnie was proscribed a course of snake serum. He looked towards America, where pioneering treatment of MS included hyperbaric oxygen tents, and he dreamed of a place where the air was pure and the mountain views were spectacular. He moved to America in 1984.

"He used to curse the disease," says Ian McLagan, who remained in touch with him, "but he wasn't *sad* or anything like that. He'd be in the wheelchair, y'know, and he'd look down at his legs and say, 'Fuckin' MS... this bleedin' disease!' But he would say it with a laugh, because there was nothing he could do about it. The disease wasn't him. It was something outside of him."

Among musicians, it would be a long time before the full extent of Ronnie's achievements – and yes, failures – would be quantified. And by then, it would be hard to tell the difference between success and failure anyway. Had "The Passing Show" been a disaster? Or some sort of glorious moral victory? Had Fishpool been real or imaginary? "He was quite far ahead of his time," notes Charlie Hart. "His ideas predated Glastonbury almost, and the hippie travellers, Stonehenge, the Beanfield, all of that. If you think of The Pogues, The Waterboys, The Levellers, the bands that came after, they were all aware of Ronnie. In the developing history of English and Irish music, what he did in the '70s was very significant. That does vindicate him, I think, after all these years."