

The Treatment Tapes EP

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RAB NOAKES

THE TREATMENT TAPES EP



The background of the left side of the image features several thick, red diagonal lines that create a sense of movement and energy. The text is overlaid on this background.

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The background to this collection of songs is the aging process and some of the things that visit us as we progress through the years. Specifically, they refer to a diagnosis we received early in 2015. At the end of 2014 a lump appeared on my neck which was one of these things I had the feeling wasn't in any way benevolent. A sequence of examinations, biopsies and scans ensued and the diagnosis was tonsillar cancer, a consequence of the HPV virus. A course of treatment, consisting of thirty radiotherapy plus two chemotherapy sessions, commenced in March 2015. The treatment, although probably successful, was pretty tough, brutal even. Obviously, my wife Stephy Pordage and I were concerned that my voice would be affected. The medical staff gave assurance to the extent that, as it wasn't right up against the vocal cords, things shouldn't be too bad. As soon as I felt up to it, I was in the music room strumming and singing. Well, rasping to start with but gradually it opened up. The issues were, and to an extent remain, essentially phlegm and saliva-based so, soon enough a half-decent noise was evident. I still can't reach all the way to Aflat as before but nearly. Vocal ability can be a deteriorating thing with aging in any case so top notes could be expected to go.

Over the intervening months I've got to singing more and I've been out playing a number of shows, mostly promoting the album 'I'm walkin' here'. Many of the shows have been booked by Stephy, who's working well as my agent. I've also been writing some songs related to the treatment experience. I had a day with John Cavanagh at his Muirend studio in December 2015 where three tracks were recorded. The idea then emerged of gathering the songs together as an EP so that day was followed by another in April 2016. Another three songs were laid and the tracks, as recorded, reflect the progress through the months. You'll notice a wee rasp or two remaining. When I started to sing again I restrung the workhorse guitar to medium gauge strings (I usually use custom-light) and lowered it by a tone. That was how it was when we recorded *By the day*. Now I can reach that easily in normal pitch but we think including the December 2015 recording here lets you in on the process.

From basic vocal and guitar tracks recorded live, we added some further instruments starting with me and the Rabbitone (a baritone guitar) then a harmony vocal on *By the day*. Stuart Brown added percussion, Anne Rankin added oboe, Atzi Muramatsu added 'cello then Una McGlone gave us a double-bass part. John and Stephy mixed the tracks and Denis Blackham mastered them.

I've included the songs, at least one at a time, in performances since the gigs restarted back in November 2015. I often preface any rendition by making a little light of it saying something like "When something like this happens to the likes of me at least I know I'll probably get a couple of songs out of it". It sounds a wee bit flippant and it does puncture the tension a bit. Truth is though, it's what we do creatively. We utilise experience and observation of, and response to, life's ingredients, add a helping of imagination and deliver a work.

This specific collection is dedicated to all the extremely supportive people who were with us along the way. This includes all the medical staff namely nurses, radiographers, doctors, specialists and consultants. It is quite remarkable the level of expertise, concern, skill, patience and positive attitude that comes into play via the personnel in our National Health Service. Not to mention the sophisticated equipment that is made available. It also includes all the external supportive people from The Beatson and from Maggie's as well as the most attentive dear friends and family members who visited.

In 2013, I was invited to take part in photographer Walter Neilson's *Creative Fifers* initiative. I sang at its launch in March 2015 and at that event we

met the artist and sculptor David Mach. We've long been admirers of his work and in fact there's a print on the wall in our living room which represents the Sumo statue he made some thirty years ago. I used to be greeted by this amusingly muscular depiction of two large Sumo wrestlers holding a full-size, freight container when it was at Euston Station in 1987. He came to the first post-treatment concert in Kinross where, incidentally, I performed *By the day* and *Mindful* for the first time. Following that he made an irresistible offer to do artwork on our next release. I let it percolate before going back to him to confirm the offer was feasible. Of course, it was and I suggested he work with us on *The Treatment Tapes EP*. We've had a great time having lunches and exchanging texts, flinging ideas back and forth. David, 'the King of Collage', suggested such an artwork so Stephy and I gathered together a number of artefacts associated with the relevant months. I guess the most vivid of these is the bespoke mask which held my head in position on the radiography table. We rescued it from the refuse when the treatment ended, having half an idea we'd find a further purpose for it. David's been a joy to work with throughout and Stephy and I just love the landscape idea he's come up with. He came to my Fringe show in August 2016 where I performed *Water is my friend, That won't stop me* and, for the first time, *I always will*.

He's made perceptive comments about these shows, perceptions which have informed his work and approach. He's a most interesting, and interested, artist.

Richy Lamb, who's worked on all our sleeves since 2012, worked his customary inventiveness on the layout and digipak completion.

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Fade (to shades of black)

(Rab Noakes / Neon Music)

From about June 2015 I got singing at home and started to write some bits. This tune emerged and some words soon flowed. The notion seemed to be about not wasting time, about getting up and doing things, being in the moment. I recalled some couplets I'd stashed away in a notebook and they sat well with this idea which was making its presence felt. Never throwing anything away sometimes means things are buried somewhere never to be seen again. Yet again, there can be bits in there which will be of use, if you can find them. I'd met Paul Zervas & Kath Pepper, a duo from Wales and I really like them. Their sound has strong references to California records of the early 1970s, many of which I myself had absorbed at the time.

I started this tune with that in mind and I continued its construction thinking of it as something tailored to their voices and approach. They have performed it and I hope they do record it one day. With their consent it appears here.

Cities and towns have lots of wide-open spaces
Some are for people, some where dogs can roam
The countryside has many hard-to-find places
Not one of them you'd want to call home

A room full of strangers can help you to know
When it's not right it must be wrong
A day full of dangers can't make it all go slow
If it's not here it must gone
None of it lasts that long

It's all yours to hold on to in one respect
no-one else but you can understand
Don't wait to tell it your own way in retrospect
Sometimes it works out better when it's not planned
The reward may be already in your hand

Savour the things that stop you dead in your tracks
Is it better to look forward or look back?
So much of this life can just slip through the cracks
Don't stand and watch it fade to shades of black
Fade to shades of black
Fade to shades of black

By the day (One more shave'n'haircut)

(Rab Noakes / Neon Music)

This one's a wee bit of a diary of sorts. The verses document the sequence of events from diagnosis to treatment. The reference to 'One more shave'n'haircut' was meant deliberately jokily. It's also of course a music in-joke. A couple of other songs are referred to within the lyric to enhance its position as a temporary, borrowed thing. It seems to me to be one of those lyrics which sits between both prequel and sequel. It describes a section of something that's already begun, and will continue.

Breaking news
in the afternoon
One more thing that's
happening too soon
A trick of the light
or a phase of the moon
day by day

Looking at pictures
that will not lie
Losing direction
Reluctant to try
Sigh, cry
almost die
by the day

Oh let me be
loose enough to wander
bright enough to see
One more shave'n'haircut
and that's it for me

Nothin's remotely
the way that it seems
The whole affair feels like
a sequence of dreams
Fuelled by potions,
tablets, and creams
every day

Damaged pieces
on the mend
Fragile things that
break don't bend
A list of departures
before the end
of the day

Oh let me be
loose enough to wander
bright enough to see
One more shave'n'haircut
and that's it for me

Mindful

(Rab Noakes, Stephy Portage / Neon Music)

The first weekend of the process was a low point. I was blue as hell. You know the kind of thing. Nothing you turn your thoughts to has any good about it. I needed something external, maybe to go and talk to someone, in a form of counselling. I'd used Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (aka CBT) before when I had a wee bumpy bit a few years ago that made its presence felt as a totally irrational fear of deadlines. CBT really played a part in getting me past that, so I found Mary Maxwell and went to see her a total of four or five times. It helped again as it's mostly practical and is based in now. Be here now. The phrase 'radical acceptance' was one of Mary's I liked, so it's woven into the body of the lyric. The tune had been around since a US holiday in 2013. Stephy and I wrote the words together in the summer of 2015.

Do you ever wonder or speculate
where your life is taking place
Do you find that today turns up too late
on a pile of yesterdays

Be mindful
not half-full
You know how

Stay thoughtful
not doubtful
Be here now

Does tomorrow always have to be somewhere
you arrive at by chance
Does this new radical acceptance allow you
to move in an enchanted dance

Stay vital
like vinyl
You know how

Be resourceful
Stay mindful
Be here now

That won't stop me

(Rab Noakes / Neon Music)

Neither Stephy nor I affiliate to the terminology that often surrounds cancer. That is of course the many references to fighting and battling. Our strategy, such as it was, simply involved us coming to terms with it. Truth be told, cancer itself had only a minimal presence. It was the rigours of the effects of the treatment we had to deal with. I did feel quite resilient though in terms of facing it, getting through it and hopefully getting past it. This song reflects that sense of defiance.



I'm playing a new guitar here which was made for finger-style bluesy tunes like this. Stu's percussion is designed to form a combination of a one-man band performance and a New Orleans marching band.

That won't stop me
It's not big enough
You can play dirty
I can play rough
I bet when this started
You thought you were tough
That won't stop me
It's not big enough

You've never been welcome
We don't want you around
We'll happily see you
in a hole in the ground
We'll pack your bags for you
Run you outta town
You've never been welcome
We don't want you around

You try to hurt
by dishing dirt
You give it all your worst shot
I know the game you play
to all that I say
Is this the best you've got?

That won't stop me
You might as well give in
Save your breath and spare your time
Don't even begin
There's no point in starting
a fight you'll never win
That won't stop me
You might as well give in

You think you can catch me
with an enemy within
That won't stop me
It can't touch my thick skin

Oh how you protest too much
making such a din
That's not enough to stop me
It never has been

I always will

(Rab Noakes / Neon Music)

This is played on the same new guitar. I treated myself to it in the latter part of 2015 as a cheer-up present to myself. I do have a few Gibson acoustics of a variety of sizes, sounds and ages. There have, in recent years, been some very interesting selections made by the Montana factory of what to reproduce from the past. Lately a couple of short-scale, 12-fret models have appeared.

One was a Nick Lucas from the late 1920s, the other the 1928 L1 Blues Tribute. It's the type featured in the famous photograph of Robert Johnson and as soon as I saw it I loved it. As soon as I heard it I loved it more. It quickly produced a couple of tunes. This song is based on the second of those. It's a love song. It's a love song of celebration, reciprocation, joint activity and ever-deepening attachment. It belongs here as the whole process was something Stephy and I tackled together. She was there to make sure I made it to all the radiotherapy sessions. She was there to make sure I ate something. She was there to make sure I did some exercise. She was there to put the shows together when I went back out singing. She was there, she was there, she was there. And she still is.

I loved you then I love you still
Like I say I always will
That'll be at least until
the darkest chill comes down

You'll be here when I need you most
assuring me you will stay close
You chase away the lingering host
of the howling ghost of a clown

You ease me at the end of the day
You never wander you never stray

You've always built for me a way to stay
not slip away

Together we'll meet what will arise
Together we will see what flies
Together we will emphasise
the shape and size
the laughs and cries
the binding ties
the glittering prize of
the endless rise of love

Water is my friend

(Rab Noakes / Neon Music)

A big change for us was the time spent in medical establishments in the company of the folks employed by our NHS. I've always been pretty robust and healthy and still am to a large extent and have never spent a lot of time at the doctors or, particularly, in hospitals.

As I say earlier, it is impressive what kicks in when such a diagnosis is made. Early in the treatment it was made clear that hydration was very necessary. 'Keep drinking water', they said. It was true. As things progressed my mouth became, what can best be described as, a shadow of its former self. Swallowing, and eventually eating, became difficult, in fact at times pretty much impossible.

At one point Alison, one of my radiographers, whilst encouraging me to drink, used the phrase 'Water is your friend'. It quickly became a mantra around the house. It also appeared, and still does, as *Water is my friend*. You'll spot the reference here to the great Bob Nolan's *Cool water* a song from the repertoire of The sons of the pioneers in 1948.

They tell me I'm in trouble
but I don't feel any pain
Once'll be enough though
I don't need this again
My baby's here beside me
On her I can depend
To always bring me sound advice
like water is your friend

There are people looking after me
who don't get paid enough
While bankers take a big reward
for far less useful stuff
There's a global inequality
they shamefacedly defend
amid their lies it does ring true
that water is my friend

I know I'm getting older now
Time is getting tight
I use the day the best I can
Same with the lasting light
I'm not going anywhere
I'll be busy 'til the end
of this list of things I have to do
while water is my friend

I was with someone the other day
I've known since we were boys
We marvelled at how we get through
life's sorrows and life's joys
It's like driving in the desert
on a road that does not bend
Should the temperature be high and dry
Well, water is your friend

Yes, water is my friend
Still, water is my friend

The Treatment Tapes EP

Musicians

Rab Noakes – vocals, guitars
Stuart Brown - percussion
Una McGlone – double bass
Atzi Muramatsu – 'cello
Anne Rankin – oboe

Producers

John Cavanagh (also sound-engineering)
Stephy Pordage

Mastering

Denis Blackham of Skye Mastering

Artwork creator

David Mach

Photography

Richard Riddick (outer sleeve)
Carol Ann Peacock (booklet)

Graphics and layout

Richy Lamb of Owned and Operated

Thanks

Over and above all the folks cited elsewhere in the notes there are others who I want to mention: Kate and Alan Noakes, Caroline Cunningham, Bob Buchan, Carol Scott and Dermot Coyle at Maggie's, Michael Campkin, Bryan & Emer Beattie, Kath & James Hardie, Alex Gascoine, Jill Jackson, Annie Kentfield, Musicians' Union, Ken Garden, Alison Smith of Maxwell Music, David Mundell of Backstage, Peter McCalman of PMMusic, Billy Sloan, Nordoff-Robbins, Russell Leadbetter, Billy Connolly, Allan Taylor, Martin Peirson, John Barrow.

January 15th 2015 was a day of contrasts. In the morning was my first meeting with surgeon Anne Hitchings. Following that, I made my way to Glasgow Royal Concert Hall for the beginning of rehearsals for that evening's concert. I was honoured and delighted to be a part of Greg Lawson's orchestration of Martyn Bennett's *Grit*. This was the prestigious opening concert of 2015's Celtic Connections festival. I was invited to be one of the singers in that event where I also played a little guitar. I sang two songs in the concert's first half.

Those contrasts were to be reflected throughout the year as the next few months were filled with small flurries of performance amidst diagnosis and preparation for cancer treatment. The treatment, when it commenced, quickly became all-consuming. The ensuing rigours were alleviated by creating landmarks to reach such as the MU conference in July, followed by Roddy Hart's Neil Young Tribute concert in September. The release of my *I'm walkin' here* album was delayed from May and it saw the light of day in October. November was devoted to touring in support of the release.

The songs here were written during the post-treatment period and were recorded chronologically so their performances reflect that progress.

