

Music/ Industry/ Politics: Alan Price's roles in *O Lucky Man!*

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Let's begin at the end. In the final scene of Lindsay Anderson's 1973 film *O Lucky Man!*, the director steps out from behind the camera and places himself in the centre of the action. The film's young hero Mick Travis (Malcolm McDowell) has been engaged on a futile quest for wealth and success which has ended with him destitute, wandering the streets of London. A billboard catches his eye inviting passers-by to audition for a starring role. He drifts none too hopefully into the casting session where Anderson plucks him from a large group of young men and photographs him in various poses. Instructed by the director to smile, however, Travis protests repeatedly "I can't smile without a reason. What's there to smile about?" Anderson hits him across the face with the script and (after a long pause during which a great deal of what he has lived through may well be going through his mind) Mick smiles. Alan Price and his band kick off what turn out to be the film's final celebrations with a reprise of the film's title tune bringing things full circle.

This moment has been described by, among others, Anderson's old friend Gavin Lambert as the character experiencing a Zen-like revelation.² Lambert's reading of the final scene picked up the association with Zen that Anderson had noted in his private journals in the hours after shooting it.³ Not that Lambert would have needed access to Anderson's private writings to know of his interest in this worldview. In a 1957 review of *Tokyo Story* published in *Sight and Sound* (the journal Lambert had edited until 1955),

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Arts and Humanities Research Council for the project "The Cinema Authorship of Lindsay Anderson" of which this paper is a product.

² Lambert, *Mainly About Lindsay Anderson*, 168.

³ Diary, LA 6/1/64/160 (16 June 1972). Archived materials held by The University of Stirling are referenced by folder, document number and, where recorded, date.

Anderson wrote of the wisdom and acceptance of life that comes with practising the Zen philosophy.⁴ Years later, when promoting *O Lucky Man!*, the director expounded this idea to journalists, reflecting on the way the final smile echoed the grin with which Mick had ingratiated himself as a salesman at the start of his epic journey: “I thought of it more as Zen master and pupil than as director and actor. It’s where the film comes full circle, where the smile at the end echoes the smile at the beginning [...]”⁵ Anderson added, “it’s not the facile smile of compromise” with which Mick Travis had tried to work his way into the favour of those who had in their gift the money, power and esteem he so greedily desired. Rather, this is “the hardened smile of acceptance.”⁶

These references provide useful pointers toward one of the film’s principal themes; however, they are all exterior to the text itself. Happily, *O Lucky Man!* has its own built-in reference system which buttresses Anderson’s and Lambert’s claims for Mick’s undergoing a Zen-like experience. That back-up resides, as we shall see, in the music of Alan Price and his band.

Our essay begins with the commercial value of Price to the project. We give an account of the personal and professional relationship between him and the director during the making of the film and touch on their different experiences of class and culture. Then we examine the process through which the lyrics evolved and how Anderson came to recognise that Price’s own qualities enriched the grand theme underlying the narrative’s many twists and turns such that he became a principal figure standing both in and to the side of the drama.

A frustrated beginning

Prior to directing *O Lucky Man!* Anderson had actually been planning to shoot an on-the-road documentary about Price and his band. David Sherwin (Anderson’s scriptwriter) kept a diary of production on *O Lucky Man!* and his account – corrected by Anderson at the other man’s invitation – reads,

⁴ Anderson, “Two Inches off the Ground,” 582-3.

⁵ Blume, “A Smile, an Echo, a Director,” 16; Walker, “What Happened After *If...*”.

⁶ Blume, *ibid.*

Lindsay had been planning a film about Alan Price after Alan had written the music for *Home*. It was to be a documentary featuring gigs, travel, digs and one-night stands. Like the old actor-managers with their travelling fitups. But when Alan teamed up with Georgie Fame the project ran into difficulties chiefly on copyright for the material they were using (£1,000 a minute for a Ray Charles number).⁷

Music and marketing

When the documentary project fell through Anderson decided instead to use Price in the feature, which is now a neglected critique of British society in the early 1970s. This was a choice welcomed by the film's distributors. Warner Bros' senior executives and their publicity agents had, from the start, recognised the potency for marketing *O Lucky Man!* of three names among the principal talent attached to the film. Lindsay Anderson could be expected to draw audiences on both sides of the Atlantic for *If...* ; Malcolm McDowell likewise for his striking performances in the same film and more recently Stanley Kubrick's 1971 *A Clockwork Orange*; and Alan Price for his hit singles and albums, his work with The Animals, and with Georgie Fame.⁸ Price had the additional attraction for Warners that his music could be sold in two markets.

In letters and telexes written while preparations for the North American release of *O Lucky Man!* were under way, the music features heavily, with the main emphasis on publicity and promotion. Warner Bros had not only financed the film, but (in the decade when cross-media deals were becoming common) had also contracted to purchase rights to the songs that Price was to write and perform. As part of the deal, the company was to release music from the soundtrack on their own record label. That Anderson attached great importance to the music is clear from his characteristically fierce communications with the studio. Heated disputes arose over, firstly, the want of timely confirmation of arrangements for the band's tour in the USA and, secondly, delays in the schedule for bringing the album to market, both events intended to anticipate the film's North

⁷ LA 1/7/1/8.

⁸ See details of Warner Bros' promotion campaign at LA 1/7/3/5/34; and proposals for the UK campaign by Fred Hift Associates LA 1/7/3/8/1-10, April 1973.

American release and awaken interest in it.⁹

It should be said that, no less than Anderson, the studio's executives expected the band's music to provide valuable publicity for the film;¹⁰ and as it turned out, both parties were correct. The tour did go ahead. And the album, whose release had been held back by manufacturing problems rather than the studio indifference that Anderson seemed to suspect, enjoyed favourable reviews and strong sales. This was particularly the case after June 1973 when it came out in the USA. Jon Landau wrote that Price "infuses clichéd topics with fresh spirit and discordant asides that generate a peculiar form of rock ambiguity... Swinging, pounding and thoroughly professional, intelligent and blatant rock and roll – that is the secret to the title cut and this very unexpected and very much appreciated surprise album of the year."¹¹ Ultimately the music for *O Lucky Man!* was to earn Price a BAFTA award, an Oscar nomination, and his first US chart album.¹²

Anderson & Price--Price & Anderson

Even prior to the period of research for the documentary and pre-production for *O Lucky Man!*, observations of Price's personality and *modus operandi* dominate the entries relating to him in Anderson's private journals. They had already worked together when Price wrote music for Anderson's Royal Court production of David Storey's *Home*. He had attended rehearsals on two occasions in May 1970 recorded by the director.

He is less insistently aggressive than when we met [previously]... Alan is funny: there is a sort of intellectual rigidity, I don't know how much he takes in, some of his responses don't seem exactly bright... but there is such brightness and emotional commitment in his response: his laughter and sudden bursts of attention.¹³

Ten days later, Anderson writes, "Alan has an urgent animation that I find immensely

⁹ Correspondence LA 1/7/3/6/5-8 (May 1973); LA 1/7/3/3/15 (2 August 1973); LA 1/7/3/3/19 (15 August 1973).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Landau, "Loose Ends," 15.

¹² *Alan Price Online*.

¹³ Diary, LA 6/1/58 (9 May 1970).

attractive...”¹⁴

In February 1971 Anderson notes his observations that the younger man swings wildly between exaltation and depression; and although he admits that he cannot recall the medical term for the condition, Anderson plainly has manic depression or bipolarity in mind.¹⁵ By July he is actually musing about casting Price rather than McDowell as lead in the new feature film: “It is an interesting phenomenon – the tough, sexy, sensitive rebel – can I do this for Malcolm in *O Lucky Man*? But really Alan is the character.”¹⁶ In the outturn, of course, both men were to have key roles.

Six months after that entry, in January 1972, Anderson confesses his personal fascination with Price, writing that notwithstanding the latter’s ruthless dedication to his personal objectives, the singer has acquired, at the level of fantasy, a sudden, unexpected potency in his imagination.¹⁷ We believe, judging by the recurring pattern of Anderson’s feelings toward other tough men such as Richard Harris, that what Anderson perceived as Price’s ruthlessness and remoteness actually augmented his attraction.¹⁸ A homosexual whose celibacy was a consequence of physical fastidiousness rather than want of desire, Anderson had fallen for Harris during the making of *This Sporting Life* (1963). Almost a decade later his thoughts still returned to him from time to time in fantasies of the actor brutalising him sexually.¹⁹ Indeed Anderson’s journal entries (always unblinkingly frank) often return to his sexual fantasies and preference for men who manipulate and command him.²⁰ In the case of Price, however, Anderson’s feelings modulated by degrees away from the hopeless passion he had felt for Harris and other men, and toward increasing professional respect and friendship.²¹ It is pleasant to speculate that in working with and getting to know Price well, Anderson himself may have come to enjoy as close to a Zen-

¹⁴ Diary, LA 6/1/58 (20 May 1970).

¹⁵ Diary, LA 6/1/61/20 (February 1971).

¹⁶ Diary, LA 6/1/61/29 (12 July 1971).

¹⁷ Diary, LA 6/1/64/24 (22 January 1972).

¹⁸ See, for example, diary, LA 6/1/64/50 (17 February 1972).

¹⁹ Diary, LA 6/1/64/294, (19 May 1972).

²⁰ Diary, LA 6/1/64/265 (5 October 72).

²¹ See, for example, diary, LA 6/1/64/104-5 (15 April 1972).

like relationship as he was to achieve with any of his collaborators.

Initially, when researching material for his documentary, the filmmaker had accompanied the band to a number of gigs where the disorganised pattern of work of both the musicians and their roadies drew his disapproving attention.²² Doubtless this was in part because it differed so greatly from the firm control that he liked to exert when working with a film crew. Observing the want of a rigorous plan of action for the gigs, he more than once reflected on the weakness inherent in this informality.²³ The same concerns returned when he noted what he described as Price's nerves, tension and inability to provide leadership for his musicians as they recorded the tracks for *O Lucky Man!* in the studio.²⁴ For his part, Price admitted his nervousness, recalling why he had asked to write and record the songs before the film was shot. Having worked with Anderson previously, he valued the affinity in their thinking. His respect for the older man was such that he wanted to make his contribution and not be overawed by the standard set by Anderson and his co-writers, Sherwin and McDowell.²⁵ In actuality, Anderson's relationship with Price as a writer was based on mutual respect. This differed from his working pattern with Sherwin whom Anderson dominated to make him write acceptable scenes.

After that first recording session Anderson wrote a detailed account in his journal of those four tough days. He thought that progress had been made, but not before he had intervened asking for changes in the lyrics. Price had first resisted but eventually came round under pressure. With these sessions finished, Anderson thought the music good.²⁶ And relations between the two men improved during the forthcoming months of work on the film, Anderson noting, after another studio session in May 1972, that Price had been unusually open to suggestions.²⁷

²² Diary, LA 6/1/59 *passim* (1- 9 October 1970).

²³ See, for example, diary LA 6/1/59/19 (October 1970).

²⁴ Diary, LA 6/1/64/65-68 (5 to 8 March 1972).

²⁵ van Lustbader, "O Lucky Men, How Did Your Movie Grow?" 29.

²⁶ Diary, LA 6/1/64/65-68 (5 to 8 March 1972).

²⁷ Diary, LA 6/1/64/125 (6 May 1972).

Class and culture

Factors other than the different ways they organised concerts and recording sessions would have added to Anderson's sense of alienation from the band's working methods. He was to some degree distanced from the culture of young people through his class background. This may help explain his choice of Price who (to judge by music press reviews) was not seen as being as "cool" as some of his contemporaries. His work with Georgie Fame was described as "a smooth and polished cabaret act" by *NME*,²⁸ but Eric Burdon, fellow founding member of The Animals, is given more respect.²⁹ Consonant with this, the preface to the script's first draft, describes Price as "a singer with a group – who are neither trendy or aggressively 'pop'"³⁰

Anderson himself had been educated as a boarder at Cheltenham College and completed his studies in Classics and English (interrupted by wartime service in the Intelligence Corps) at Oxford University.³¹ All these factors marked him out as a scion of the upper middle class, rooted (despite his early years in India) in the Home Counties. Meanwhile, British pop music of the 1960s and early 1970s found it useful to let its Northern, working-class roots show, both, of course, being authentic ingredients of Price's life. That Northern aura amplified the ethos of youthful rebellion from the culture of the establishment, which remained centred on London and the South-East.

As mentioned, Anderson belonged to a different generation, and the crew marked his 49th birthday during the shoot. Although he may not have known that two days later Alan Price turned thirty, he could not have been unaware of the age gap between them. In fact, at a time of life when most people consider themselves middle-aged, Anderson consistently wrote of himself as being old, as plenty of entries in the diaries testify.³²

²⁸ *NME*, 'Gig Guide,' (30 June 1973) 21.

²⁹ Altham, Interview with Eric Burdon, 9.

³⁰ Sherwin, *O Lucky Man!* Preface.

³¹ Ryan, Introduction, 3.

³² See, for example, diary LA 6/1/64/72 (12 March 1972); LA 6/1/64/112 (23 April 1972); LA 6/1/64/295-6 (19 May 1972); LA 6/1/64/144 (27 May 1972).

However, his vibrant public voice must also be weighed in the balance, not least because he consistently projected a satirical, angry rebellion against his background. David Wilson helpfully summarises one of the thrusts in Anderson's 1957 essay "Get Out and Push!". Principally focussed on revitalising British cinema, the paper also castigated society's stultifying mediocrity, philistinism and the smug, directionless self-display of a Little England still intoxicated with the illusion of Great Britain.³³ Added to this were the cumulative effect of his equally strong writing in *Sequence* and *Sight and Sound*; his associations with the Angry Young Men through the plays he staged at the Royal Court Theatre; his portrait of greedy power mongering by the rich in *This Sporting Life*; and his satirical attacks on the upper middle class in *If...*

Public statements such as these drew to his productions audiences disposed to seek out a theatre and a cinema more thoughtful or rebellious than mainstream Anglo-American fare was providing in the 1960s and 1970s. As Wilson also pointed out in reviewing *O Lucky Man!*, Anderson's diagnosis of British social malaise in 1957 remained valid in 1973.³⁴ And it is not hard to argue that the same themes (corruption and big business, torture, medical experiments on human guinea pigs, African dictators and the arms trade, exploitation of the developing world and poverty) remain relevant today.

Writing the lyrics

When in 1971 Anderson had travelled with the band to research the proposed documentary, he recognised that Price's music raised fascinating questions about its sources; but he appears not to have explored them, noting instead that he intended to focus on the singer's work at its most pure, personal and passionately lyrical.³⁵ With these words Anderson echoed his own trumpet call twenty years earlier in *Sequence* for British films, as part of the rebellion he urged against the island's ossified cinematic culture, to prioritise the personal and passionate. That call was to form one of the main elements giving loose coherence to the films by several directors (including himself) that had been released through the Free Cinema programmes of 1956-59. It also identified

³³ Wilson, "O Lucky Man," 127.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Diary, LA 6/1/60/27 (Between January and March 1971).

him as “a charter member of the [European] New Wave”.³⁶ By the time he came to preparing *O Lucky Man!*, however, Anderson’s approach had altered somewhat. It was not the sources but the philosophy of the songs to be written and recorded for the film that he discussed with the bandleader. For his part, Price remembered that the script interested him both because of its philosophy and the idea of a young man coming down from the North trying to make money and be successful, just as he had tried to do.³⁷ So whereas in the film Price is like the street singer in Brecht’s *Threepenny Opera*, in the drawn-out process of making the film he was to Anderson what Kurt Weill was to Brecht – an essential musical partner.

Interviewed by David Robinson for *The Times* shortly before the film’s release, Anderson described the method he and Price had adopted in collaborating. Early drafts of the script simply note the themes (“song of luck”, “song of opportunity”, “song of money”, etc.) which Price was to write. In fact, for each point at which music was to be inserted the director wrote a paragraph stating what he thought the song should be about. Price took that and reinterpreted it in terms of his feelings and attitudes – which Anderson found sufficiently different from his own to provide creative tension, but also sufficiently the same for that tension to be productive.³⁸

After a production meeting in the month before shooting commenced, Anderson mused in his diary: “In a sense the final zen-existential feeling of the film corresponds to [Alan’s] own feeling about life: be what you are: you are what you are: decisions won’t change anything. But of course this is mixed with an instinctive, romantic individualism...”³⁹ Making this last remark, Anderson was reflecting his belief that words only mattered to Price when they came to him in a flash.⁴⁰ Anderson believed (and in our view the film justifies his assertion) that this mix of the political and the deeply personal characterised the songs when considered as the Chorus. He thought that they

³⁶ Durwood, “*O Lucky Man!*” 11.

³⁷ van Lustbader, “*O Lucky Men, How Did Your Movie Grow?*” 29.

³⁸ Robinson, “Stripping the veils away,” 7.

³⁹ Diary, LA 6/1/64/41 (8 February 1972).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

“express the ironic attitude of the film quite directly, [and] the persona that Alan presents takes on an air of *knowledgeableness*.”⁴¹ As Price himself said, “In some ways the presence of me and my music is to be sort of an opposite to Malcolm. You know, I’m the guy who’s been there and can now adjust and reflect on it all.”⁴² For Anderson, Price remains slightly enigmatic as a character in the film, as if apart from the action. He has attained the attitude to life that it takes Mick the whole story to get to. In short, Price’s character is a portrayal of someone who knows what life is about.⁴³

Performance

Janet Maslin evaluated the impact of Price’s performance, finding that his songs are performed with such utter charm that their essential seriousness remains remarkably unobtrusive. And while Lindsay Anderson’s film, which Price’s appearances so delightfully punctuate, uses a series of bizarre but concrete episodes to suggest allegorical generalities, Price reverses that method – with sterling results. He may sing and write about the big issues, but his easygoing method reduces them to ironic everyday terms, making them all the more potent for their illusion of familiarity.

[This rests upon] the basic contradiction of Price’s style, with its abrasive energy camouflaged by disarming pleasantries. Price’s vocals, loose but perfectly suited to his material, play upon that seeming same contradiction, as do his superb arrangements and keyboard work, and the end result is a full-blown irony that’s more than merely verbal. It’s not just the lyrics, but rather the whole production, that contrast the sinister with a mood of simulated naivete.⁴⁴

When one reads the lyrics on paper (for example, those accompanying the opening titles) they do indeed seem to give too much away. Heard in the cinema, they do not. In addition to the light touch described by Maslin, other factors contribute to this effect. The first is the placing of the opening titles. They follow a prologue that mimics a grotesquely over-

⁴¹ Robinson, “Stripping the veils away,” 7.

⁴² Alan Price interviewed by Knippenberg, “This Price is All Right,” 16H.

⁴³ Robinson, “Stripping the veils away,” 7.

⁴⁴ Maslin, “Abrasive energy, disarming pleasantries,” 41.

acted, black and white silent film in the style of the century's first decade. After the card "Once Upon a Time", we are in a colonial coffee plantation: an impoverished labourer (McDowell) steals a handful of the beans he has harvested. A brutal, white police officer observes the crime, and arraigns the unfortunate man before a slaving white judge who, with no evidence, pronounces him guilty. The police officer carries out the sentence with relish, chopping off the unlucky man's hands. Cut hard to Alan Price, titles, music and song:

If you have a friend on whom you think you can rely –
 You are a lucky man!
 If you've found a reason to live on and not to die –
 You are a lucky man!

[...]

If you've found the meaning of the truth in this old world –
 You are a lucky man!
 If knowledge hangs around your neck like pearls instead of chains –
 You are a lucky man!

Takers and fakers and talkers won't tell you,
 Teachers and preachers will just buy and sell you,
 When no one can tempt you with heaven or hell –
 You'll be a lucky man!

You'll be better by far
 To be just what you are –
 You can be what you want
 If you are what you are –
 And that's a lucky man!

The silent prologue amounts to a deliberately crude lampoon that produces shock. Then suddenly eyes, ears and mind are busied upon the hard cut to the present which comes apparently out of nowhere at the very moment we expect the story proper to start. In addition to Price performing with his band, the director himself (in his famous leather jacket) wanders among the musicians to leave a sheet on Price's music stand. Meanwhile the main titles are superimposed on this scene.

Jim Knippenberg noticed a specific example of this method of juxtaposition of dramatic action and music referring to a moment when Mick has reached the summit of his

ambitions as personal assistant to a rich city businessman but Price suddenly appears and forewarns of disaster “...look over your shoulder, / ’cos there’s always someone coming after you.” However, Price is grinning and playful, gently making sport of everything in sight. As a consequence, profound and weighty topics don’t seem ponderous.⁴⁵

Music and dramatic mode

While in marketing the film the band were portrayed as working in the mainstream, their dramatic function in *O Lucky Man!* ran counter to dominant culture. Anderson had been influenced by Brecht’s principles and practice ever since *Mother Courage* had played in London in 1956. *O Lucky Man!* was constructed broadly in harmony with those principles and with the purpose of casting a new, hard-edged light on contemporary society. The band participate as characters in the narrative and also comment as if from outside it, operating, as we have seen, like an all-knowing Greek chorus. In that role they have two functions – firstly, strengthening the structure and secondly, providing the moral context that frames the protagonists’ self-seeking behaviour.

Reviewing the film, George Melly wrote that although the Brechtian mode seldom works in cinema, it does so triumphantly in *O Lucky Man!* He identified several factors that bond it firmly. They included McDowell’s Candide-like hero; excellent performances by several actors playing multiple roles; and Sherwin’s screenplay. The music too helps avoid the looseness to which the episodic picaresque form is liable – the wry edge of the songs links and illuminates the various episodes obliquely. Then too, Anderson’s coherent view of how society works gives the narrative its scaffolding.

Concerning the moral and political contexts, Melly noted that all the incidents (such as police looting a crash site, the sale of arms to an African despot and scientific experimentation on human beings) can be paired with reality. He added, “... in the week

⁴⁵ Knippenberg, “This Price is All Right,” 16H.

of the Watergate disclosures, the film's relevance needs no underlining."⁴⁶ The happy accident (which in its day *If...* too had enjoyed) of being released at a historical conjuncture that illuminated the film is one thing, although not the same as a political programme. Satirists generally agree with Matthew Hodgart, however, that the form is devoted to showing how things really are and demolishing existing follies rather than advocacy for a new dispensation.

The satirist appears in his noblest role when he accepts the challenge of oblivion, by taking on an ephemeral and unpleasant topic... [Politics] offers the greatest risk and the greatest rewards: politics is traditionally considered a dirty business, yet the satirist is most a hero when he enters the forum and joins in the world's debate... What is essential is that he should commit himself boldly to his 'impure' subject, yet retain a purity of attitude, in his aesthetic disengagement from the vulgarities and stupidities of the struggle.⁴⁷

As on-screen co-author of the satire, Alan Price retains the purity of attitude that Hodgart advocates. Yet he goes further, simultaneously playing the fulfilled existential, while indirectly serving the community through his music. Not a political programme as such, but a return to the basic starting point of so many renewed ventures – knowing oneself.

Having suffered Anderson's famous slap Mick is given the part. Alan Price, his band and the entire cast celebrate the film's completion, singing and dancing exuberantly with the Brechtianly disassembled Mick Travis/ Malcolm McDowell grinning delightedly and cavorting among the other actors, some in, some out of character.

Because on and on and on and on we go,
And it's around the world in circles turning,
Earning what we can
While others dance away the chance to light your day.

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⁴⁷ Hodgart, *Satire*, 31-2

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