

FEATURE

Arthur Wood follows
the trail of a
songwriter

HUGH MOFFATT

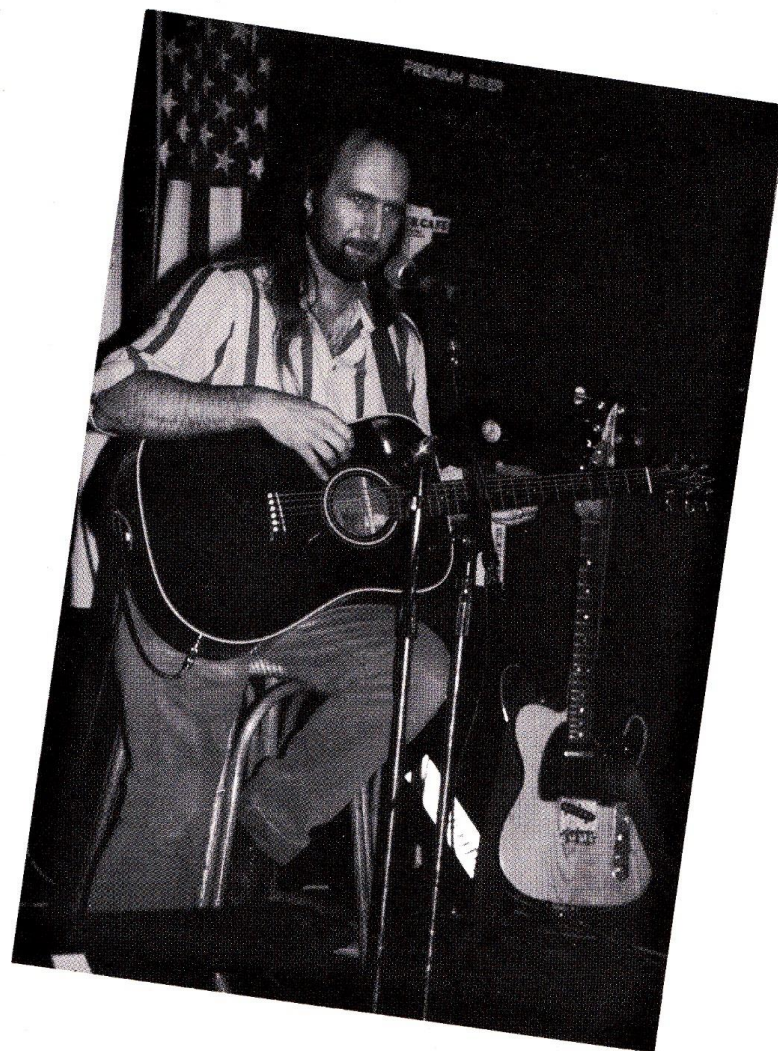
The first time I met Hugh Moffatt was at the Kerrville Folk Festival in Texas during 1986. My memory is of a tall, slim, hirsute fellow, of few words, with the look of a 'mountain man'. During his first visit here earlier this year, Hugh only played one date, at Birmingham's brightest new alternative music venue, the Breedon Bar and Border Cafe in Kings Norton. During my interview with him, he soon dispelled that earlier impression, about being 'a man of few words'.

Hugh Moffatt was born in Fort Worth, Texas on November 10th 1948 and claimed that his first musical memory was "hearing the Sons of the Pioneers playing on the radio". He tackled piano lessons for a short while but soon discovered that the trumpet was his first love. Throughout his High School years, he became involved in big band jazz, ala Stan Kenton and Woody Herman. Hugh jokes, "I was the guy who was overweight, with sunglasses, and too cool to talk to anybody".

Following High School, Hugh attended Rice University in Houston and graduated with a degree in English. During the late '60s, living in Houston, Hugh taught himself to play the guitar. "I'd been playing music all my life. I knew where the chords were and how to find them. I started listening to blues music, which is another major influence in Texas. It's my contention that every music in Texas is blues influenced. They even play Mozart with a blues influence." Hugh became attracted to the work of blues performers like Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb and Johnny Winter. A friend broadened his horizons further, introducing him to country music, "What caught me instantly, just like the blues, was that there was a little less barrier between the feeling and the music. I fell in love with country music completely."

In 1971, Hugh moved to Austin, deciding he would try to establish himself as a solo act. From 6.30 to 8.30 each evening, he presented his brand of folk/country music at the Saxon Pub and then dashed across town to Ferrari's 21 Club where he played from 9 till 1, for strippers.

Two years on, Hugh decided it was time to move on to Washington D.C. where there was a burgeoning music scene and his mixture of folk and country music might be well received. Travelling northwards, the bus passed through Nashville. Hugh decided to spend a week there, checking out the music. He eventually did make it to D.C., but it took Hugh 14 years to complete the journey. Hugh recalls, "I saw this big long line, so I joined it. It turned out to be the line for the last Grand Ole



Opry show which Stringbean played. Marty Robbins was on the bill. His singing floored me, and I was in tears, because I'd never heard anything so beautiful in my life. I went back to my hotel and something was happening inside of me. Picked up a newspaper the following morning and discovered that Stringbean had been murdered during the night. During the following week, I decided to stay in Nashville."

As soon as Hugh had settled in Nashville, he made the conscious decision to become a writer and roomed with a couple of other songwriters, Tom Benjamin and Gill Francis. During the day, he worked in a restaurant and, at night, he'd play the bars. Numerous other writers arrived in Nashville at the same time and he counts many of them as close friends, like Joe Sun, David Olney and Don Schlitz. Of this evolutionary period, Hugh explains:

"I started writing because of the atmosphere, because of the writers who were around. At that time, I was interested in Nashville for one reason only, and that was Kris Kristofferson. The songs that I was writing were along the lines of the Flying Burrito Brothers and Crosby, Stills & Nash. California Country. Kristofferson proved that you can take the folk and literary tradition, and you can be in Nashville too. We had all gone there, looking for it. Of course, by the time you hear about it

elsewhere, it's over in Nashville. Kristofferson was gone but there was this incredibly creative atmosphere of people."

As for his literary influences, Hugh states, "My literary hero has always been Shakespeare. He made his living, writing and performing for people who could not read. He was out there in the trenches. If they got bored for five minutes, he didn't have a job. He made a connection from one human heart to another."

"Many songwriters look down on simplicity as dumb. In fact, the key to everything is simplicity."

Following up this theme of keys which unlock the doors to becoming a successful songwriter, Hugh said that finding a mentor was another essential step. This person was Ed Penney who subsequently found fame by writing, producing and breaking the Terri Gibbs record, 'Somebody's Knockin' '. As a songwriter, Ed had started out in the New York City song factory—the Brill Building. He has never forgotten Penney's advice, "He made me think harder. A craftsman has to be able to stand coldly outside his own work and look at it from a stranger's point of view. If you can't do that, you can never finish a song. Financially, Ed told me that if I wanted to make money playing music, the odds were better in Vegas.

The most valuable thing he said, however, and this is strictly a songwriter's line, is that there is always another line. There is never any place in a song where there is only one line that will work."

In 1974, Ronnie Milsap recorded Hugh's 'Just In Case' and it quickly became a Top 5 single, an encouraging debut, but two years were to pass before Moffatt had another song recorded. In Hugh's own words, "Recognition on the first song means everything. Some part of you doesn't think what happens next. If you do, you figure that things become easier. They don't. It never becomes easier."

In the late '70s, Hugh was signed to the Mercury label and released a couple of singles. The first was the Don Schlitz song, 'The Gambler' which made the lower reaches of the Country chart, as did Schlitz's own version. Hugh paraphrases Schlitz's own words about that classic song, "Six months later, Kenny Rogers came along, and made us all a trivia question." Hugh's second single was his own composition, 'Love And Only Love'. That received scant airplay and Mercury terminated their association.

During the early '80s, Hugh formed a four piece band called the Ratz, the other members being Wade McCurdy on bass, John Dietrich on drums (now with Restless Heart) and Michael Bonagura. Hugh's first wife, Pebe Sebert, occasionally sang with the Ratz as did Kathie Baillie, Michael's wife. Kathie and Michael are, incidentally, two thirds of Baillie And The Boys. During the spring of 1984, the band recorded a five song EP titled 'Putting On The Ratz'. With some financial assistance from his parents, Hugh pressed up 1000 copies but if progress on the recording front was now on a self-financed basis, that was

soon to change.

"Late in 1985, a friend of mine inherited a lot of money and asked me if I wanted to make an album. I agreed, went in the studio for a week and laid down a bunch of guitar/vocal tracks. That was in January 1986. Soon after, Rounder Records asked me if I wanted to do an album so I used some of those original

"A song to me is not finished till it has been around for a while."

tracks and it was January 1987 before I finished all the studio sessions."

The result was 'Loving You' and, except for the Bob Dylan perennial, 'Tomorrow Is A Long Time', the ten remaining songs all had some compositional input from Hugh. His best known composition, 'Old Flames (Can't Hold A Candle To You)' had resulted from a collaboration with Pebe Seibert. Analyse the lyrics and it becomes obvious that it was written for, and about, his first wife (and co-composer), "That song has been recorded twenty times and has been a major hit twice,"

Hugh said. Dolly Parton's 1979 version is probably the best known. In 1978, Joe Sun recorded an album for the Ovation label which took its title from Hugh's songs. Who said that old friends don't stick together?

As I said at the beginning, 'Loving You' is a classic country folk album, the more so since it was Hugh's first attempt. Going by the recording budget figures which Hugh quoted (\$7000) it was also an economic miracle. There remains no doubt in my mind that it was an eclectic piece of work.

Rounder/Philo are sufficiently satisfied with the sales figures garnered by 'Loving You' that a follow up is a certainty (well, maybe only two things in life are really certain). Back to Hugh, "I'm going to record again in Nashville this coming winter. The album should be out by the summer of 1989. Of my songs, I'm sure I'll do 'Rose Of My Heart', 'How Could I Love Her So Much', 'The Devil Took The Rest' I tend not to record new songs. A song to me is not finished till it has been around for a while."

Let's hope that the album happens sooner rather than later and that Hugh's talents as a writer and performer are soon recognised by the many, rather than the few. A return visit to the UK, backed by a fuller tour itinerary would certainly help. The spring of this year appears to be the prime time. By that stage, his sister, Katy Moffatt, should have a new album out as well. If you knew her story and saw her stage act, you'd wonder why she wasn't more popular as well.

Mr. Promoter, I hope you understand my foregoing implication. It's up to you and a good heart.

VIDEO

BOB POWEL'S DANIEL O'DONNELL

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Intro: Stand Beside Me

1. Stand Beside Me
2. Our House Is A Home
3. Veil of White Lace
4. Medley:
 - Fraulein
 - Red River Valley
 - Black Hills of Dakota
4. Pretty Little Girl From Omagh
6. My Donegal Shore
7. I Wonder Where You Are Tonight
8. Don't Forget To Remember
9. The Old Rugged Cross
10. The Irish Rover
11. Wooden Heart
12. Take Good Care Of Her
13. Roses Are Red
14. Medley:
 - This World Is Not My Home
 - I Won't Forget You
 - Anna Marie
 - He'll Have To Go
 - Adios Amigo
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 - It Doesn't Matter Any More
 - Things
 - Play On: Danny Boy
16. Danny Boy
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