

## The Universal Man`s Tale

### Bill Billings

*Bill is a hard one to categorise. He`s a very creative person, his talents embrace sculpture, poetry, music, painting and invention. During the renaissance the Italians had a name for such Leonardo-types: universal man.*

*Listening to him talk is like meeting an express train head-on with one arm tied behind your back. He can carry you away with the force of his argument, his energy, his anger. His perceptions have been honed by years of struggling against the system. The phrase `a prophet without honour in his own country` might have been coined for him.*

Who am I? Born London 1938, {but I lie to young dolly birds} hung around Mummy`s apron through the war. Daddy was away for six years. Wasn`t evacuated – Mummy didn`t know how to read the paperwork. We hid under the bed while the bombs were flatterring the city. This is all genuine – at the time it was really frightening. There were no bananas on the streets. Never seen chewing gum, fruit, cows, grass. Terrifying experience. Went to the local school three years too late. We didn`t have any schools, they`d all been flattened. {Hitler had done a reasonable job.} Won two scholarships – one for St.Martin`s College of Art – but couldn`t go because Daddy didn`t have fifty pounds a year. Went to Highbury Grammar School. Believe it or not Rhodes Boyson – now Education Minister – was headmaster, but he didn`t teach me to speak `properly`.

### Soldier Called Up

Was a teddy boy, six button jackets but I looked better in four, {that`s a lie I never looked good in any of them, but I thought I did.} Wasn`t a bad dancer – {laugh} – I did win a Butlin`s completion once. What a prick I must have looked. Never had your oats until you married. Youngsters wouldn`t understand that. Soldier, called up. Arrived at the army camp in my teddy boy gear. Sergeant-major hated the look of me with my sideboards and my pearl button waistcoat. Decided to destroy me, chopped all my hair off . . . . Soldiers, Signals, found out I was intelligent, made me an instructor, eighteen and a half years old, Corporal Billings, Royal Signals, 23440278, stamp it on the brain and on the heart in case you ever get killed and they`d open it up and there it is printed on the heart, Billings for the use of, article 1, expendable persons Did a few courses. Went to join the Arab army, Don`t ask me anymore about that – I was frightened and got a few medals.

Came home, marriage went on the rocks, crawled into an attic, met somebody who says can we have a proper house without being married – and we ended up in Milton Keynes in a council house and I remembered that when I was fourteen I won an arts scholarship to St.Martin`s. I wondered looking out of my sludgy heap on Netherfield what I could re-capture. I went out and built a concrete sculpture for

twelve pounds of my own money for my daughter. Lord Campbell comes and gives me a pat on the back. Then I do a beach buggy, then a tree house, then a giraffe and I teach a lot of people to do a lot of things but I find that I can't get aboard the gravy-train.

I'm on the dole then, doing part-time bits and pieces, jobs, prisoner, ain't got enough money to get out, trapped.

I built three concrete dinosaurs but only one has survived because I didn't belong to anybody. I didn't work in an office, I was just somebody living in Netherfield doing it, who hadn't actually consulted anybody. I wanted to put one in Linford Wood but they wouldn't let me. But if you go to Crystal Palace you'll see dinosaurs. I've seen things like that all my life. It's nothing risky, they're successful. I knew it would be successful before I did it. My dinosaur is the best selling postcard I've they've done. They never asked me – they've made a fortune out of it, never given me anything for it, ever, not a penny.

I built the first dinosaur on Netherfield. I scrounged the materials and built it in the middle of a field. A brontosaurus and they just destroyed it. I thought they had a point there, they said it was dangerous to children, they'd fall off it and it was near the road. So I went and built the second one, a stegosaurus, down at Bleak Hall which was in the middle of nowhere. They destroyed that one too. Same old story really, I hadn't asked anybody. Well, after that I really got my anger up. I thought that's it, I can't accept that. I'd come to this new city where everybody supposed to have a chance and I thought well, that's no chance, so I'm going to show you people how to have a chance. The only chance you get is fight. So the third one, the Triceratops at Peartree Bridge – which is the one on the postcard – I had to sleep in it for three weeks while I was building it. There was a petition to knock it down from Eaglestone residents. They said it devalued their property.

I wrote poetry then about the whole situation I've been talking about. It was published in 1977. All right, the world don't owe you a living, but I felt I'd put so many years work in. I thought at least something would have come out of it. I'm not asking for money, I was asking for . . . I suppose it's recognition, that's the word really. The poetry was successful because I went to London. It wasn't through Milton Keynes. I went to London and because I was from Milton Keynes and spoke about something that was `out there` I was successful. People were interested and I went over to America and read at Harvard. So Milton Keynes isn't the only place that's got these weaknesses I'm talking about. I've done four books and had my poetry translated into Finnish, French and German.

Looking back, I think I had novelty value because I was rebellious. It wasn't because of my talent, they didn't care about the content. I was just a guy who was against the system which hurt me really. "Lorry Driver Writes Poetry." I got the same pattern of events with the T.V. people. You get on National T.V. but you're only valuable when you're serving them. They're going to do another programme next week and the week after, but you're finished. The cameraman works fifty-two weeks a year and so does the assistant and researcher . . . you don't, you're gone. So any artist who thinks: "I've made it, I've been on T.V." – that's it. The depression sets in

when they all go away and you realise you are in exactly the same position as you were before. What you need is a poxy wage and salary. What you need is patronage, and patronage doesn't come from Joe Bloggs down the road, who's on the dole, it come from THEM. The patronage has to be not an itchy little fee, goodbye, how clever you are, what a wonderful job but we're off to the South of France on a three month sabbatical. I don't want to be poor. I'm fed up with being poor since 1938. It's a stigma. It's like being on railway lines. The system says you can be anything you want. You can't, you can only be a product of the social background you come from.

I'm now employed by the Borough Council doing arts and crafts projects with local kids. They gave me a nissen hut at Stantonbury which I turned into a children's workshop. It was very successful. We had a playscheme in the mornings with over thirty children attending. In the back we had a children's workshop and we did all the props for the last two Milton Keynes festivals in the playground, and we also had bands practising two nights a week. It all went well for two and a half years and then some idiot came along and burnt it down which really took the wind out of my sails. If things like that happen you do get edgy. The more you do the more enemies you make. I did everything with a good heart and felt I had a note in me that the city needed. Everything I've done has been successful. The murals that I did three or four years ago in Bletchley are untouched, that's true. Now I have this room in Alex Campbell school which I use as a studio and the kids can come and paint. But if everything had gone according to plan I'd be part of the team, using my skills and contacts to make a practical injection into the city. They say they've got these people but I don't think there's anyone as good as me. The job of a community artist is to stimulate and give people confidence in their own ability – you know, the joy of life, making art live and be practical. I don't want to define it I'd rather do it.

A lot of the strength in my character is due to the twelve years that I spent in the army. I learnt how to wash my socks and iron my shirt and make my bed, although I did miss Mummy for the first six months and when I went on active service I did cry and suck my thumb. The discipline and training I had stood me in good stead for all the rebuffs of the artist in society, in MK in particularly.

You have to do it on your own. You can't even look to the working class people around you for help because they partly don't understand what you're doing until you've done it. All you get from the working class ranks is: "He ain't that clever else he wouldn't keep doing it amongst us." And you go to the bureaucrats and they say: "Well, if you're that good you'd be like one of us." D`you get it? You have no safety. You have to believe in your own talents and feel confident.

Do I think I've made it? Yes, because I didn't do it for financial gain alone. I made it as a person. I've been vulnerable and said how I felt. People can take me out of context and use it against me, but it's been happiness, not unhappiness. Maybe the unhappiness I've had to absorb within me. But you go and ask the kids, hundreds of them. They respect me. Funny but I've never felt that respect from the people who are paid to respect me.