

Rob Chapman On Meatball Fulton On Syd

Perhaps Syd's strangest encounter during this period was with American journalist Meatball Fulton, just after the release of the Piper At the Gates Of Dawn LP in August 1967. Fulton, driven by the same Kerouac-fuelled fantasies that had inspired Syd's Cambridge crowd, had moved to Berkeley, California in 1960. He wrote radio plays and documentaries for public funded radio stations and hung out on Haight Ashbury. In 1966 he came to England and interviewed Donovan, The Who and Jimi Hendrix among others. Fulton unearthed a rare tape of his interview with Syd in 2008 and the full transcript and unedited audio have found their way into the public domain via the internet.

Listening to the interview now is like eavesdropping on a conversation between two incoherent and incapacitated stoners. Essentially it is an exercise in non-communication but it speaks volumes about the times.

Syd is softly spoken to the point of inaudibility but the encounter is revealing on several levels. A minimally edited transcription of his response to Fulton's first (unheard) question runs as follows.

"Well I'll say for example, painting at an art school. Or painting, say, in infant school. The initial desire to paint or initial first successes at painting arised, I think, out of a very genuine basic drive, one way or another. So, and because of family and social set ups are channeled into success or otherwise and, through schools and such like, one gets different things. And I think and, course, one comes across teachers and people like that, teaching and, instruction and to talk to and there came, and I feel now that having left art school that there are a lot of things...that I could do. A lot of things I see now, a lot of things went in to me, into my head and thinking that these would, perhaps, changing and altering things. For instance I made a painting the other day...and... it's I could I see and hear very clearly, sort of, different instructions and different criticisms going in to the picture which were in fact criticisms that I could relate back to art schools and teachers and various things that'd come at that time. So...maybe.. this would be very valuable, this break. I don't know.. and, er, sort of, to... try painting again after a break of going in to pop music and going to.. playing this sort of music....just might work out that, get more, sort of, basic freedom. I don't know, it's something to just seems like the shape of the paper and, er.. seem to be a lot of assumptions taken place".

On first impressions, in its raw unedited form, this is gobbledygook. Although, as any music writer who has been faced with the task of contriving quotable utterances out of the rambling inconsequentialities of high profile rock stars will tell you, the above extract is no more inarticulate than many others that journalists encounter on a regular basis. Pick your way through the hesitant and halting delivery, the repetition, the grammatical cul-de sacs, and convoluted thought processes, and occasional quotable moments of clarity emerge. The entire rambling discourse can be boiled down to this. Syd has been thinking about his art school training and is now wondering how he can apply that conceptual grounding further to the next stage of his creative development.

Perhaps the most revelatory aspect of this fragment of conversation is that Syd is clearly thinking about resuming painting again “after a break of going into pop music.” It is not entirely clear if the break he refers to is the enforced break from painting, caused by dropping his Fine Art studies at Camberwell in favour of a pop career, or the short break from touring with the Pink Floyd in August 1967 caused by his ‘nervous exhaustion’. Nor is it clear if he is trying to apply his theorising to painting alone or trying to generate further interaction between his fine art studies and his music. Either way it reveals that at the height of his pop fame Syd was still thinking very deeply about painting and the conceptual framework it had provided him with.

Fulton’s response to all this is a fumbled attempt to ascertain whether the ‘criticism’ to which Syd refers means criticism by others or Syd’s critiquing of his own work. In essence Syd’s rambling reply suggests that the answer is ‘both’. Fulton then hits Syd with a prime slice of psycho-babble.

“Do you ever get, I don’t know, frightened by, I use this word because it’s, it applies to me by, er, the systems that, I mean this, in a sense, I don’t know, could be better worded, this in a sense, you know, is a system, when, when you’re, realise that the criticisms that you’re using on have been put in to you, y’know, sort of, conditioned. But, but when you realise more and more what it is that controls all the systems that, you know, system upon system, sort of, working your way through one in to another and another, does this really bother you or even frighten you? The feeling that you’ll never be free, that you’ll always be a prisoner? But, maybe you don’t have that feeling?”

Compared with the tortuous lingua franca of that, Syd’s initial comments suddenly sound like a lightning bolt of Taoist wisdom. Fultons attempt to initiate empathy is based on a complete misunderstanding of what Syd has just said. During their initial

exchanges Syd talks, albeit vaguely, about assimilating ideas and channeling thought processes. Fulton reduces these potentially fruitful areas of debate to hippie shibboleths; conditioned response, thought control, the system, the man.

Syd responds to Fulton's 'maybe you don't have that feeling' with a hastily re-assuring 'yeah I do', but this is mere surface diplomacy, Syd the gentleman being unfailingly polite. After these early exchanges he gradually but perceptibly begins to withdraw from the whole futile charade that is unfurling like so much hash smoke before him.

When Fulton attempts to press his interviewee further on the issue of freeing oneself from 'the system' Syd tries to bring the question back to the specifics of painting, stating "I finished a picture. I got through a lot of things. It's quite enjoyable, you know, and the idea is, I would like to get hold of that and be able to assimilate the system as it comes in, rather than as it goes out".

Again, gnomic and convoluted though it seems, this is merely Syd saying that he would like to be more methodical in his assimilation of ideas rather than being simply instinctive with his output.

More inconsequential exchanges ensue. Fulton asks Syd "Do you find yourself in patterns and constantly repeating the same patterns?" to which Syd utters a simple "mmm". Fulton then asks, "What are you working on at the moment? Inside yourself. Do you know?" After a wary pause Syd replies "yeah". "Do you care to say?" presses Fulton. "I can't really say, because it's obviously taking too much time to think about it", says Syd, which is polite-speak for "and it probably wouldn't be worth it and you probably wouldn't grasp the answer anyway."

Fulton then gets to the crux of the interview, the subject he seems to have been building up to all along. Himself. "Do you ever feel when you see people, that you could tell them something about themselves that they don't already know. Or do you look at people that way? I feel you do, that you really sort of observe people. Do you?"

Syd initially tries to distance himself from the narcissistic thrust of the question. His disjointed and contradictory reply hints both at a reluctance to deal with the enquiry and a certain degree of embarrassment at being put on the spot in this way. His response also contains a revealing nugget or two about the limits of journalistic encounters like this one.

“Nah. I think it's something about...um, wow, really gets...pretty...involved...this stage..I can't.. see... yeah there is a, I certainly do get a feeling of what people are like and, er...really, the complication comes out in talking, but this only comes out at certain times because of a feeling that talking is, in fact, a far less valuable thing than, er, and it's almost superfluous to everything else, you know. But the same time, it's a contradiction that the words and talking to people should be difficult in any way. One is hesitant to say 'No I can't say anything', you know. And I know as well this is something that occurs only at times, other times it doesn't.....and it's cool”.

Fulton then lays his cards on the table. “Yeah maybe that I think more in terms of words when I see someone and have an impression. I mean like, your impression of me - which you must have. Would you care to tell me? And be like absolutely honest. Do you have one?”

“In words?” replies Syd.

“Yeah’ says Fulton.

There is a pause before Syd utters an embarrassed “um....wow.”

Determined to solicit an opinion of himself from the pop star Fulton asks “I mean really be honest. And I'm asking this ‘cos you may have something to give me, I don't know”.

There is a long silent pause from Syd. Undeterred Fulton persists. “Not the general things, I mean whatever, the main thing that sort of hits you. And I'm not asking for a personality critique, ya know, ‘cos I know enough about myself that I don't need that”.

Syd’s unease is palpable as he struggles to respond to the conceit of the enquiry before him. “Well” he mumbles. “There's so many different things, that on different levels that I could say.....maybe the most strange thing is, um... meeting you, very strange to meet you, well it isn't really strange, it's not many people that...sort of... one can.. interviewers and such like, and you came in to that class. I mean generally it just sort of say hello and to get to say the questions and go again... I don't know...I don't know (laughs) Wow”.

“I see you're holding back,” says Fulton, somewhat disingenuously.

“No. Not at all! I understand. I think I learn a lot from you,” says Syd trying to put his interrogator at ease, which in the circumstances is diplomacy taken to absurd

extremes. He begins to stammer as his own stoned reasoning fragments further. As he struggles to extricate himself from this Lonesco-esque essay in absurdity he merely succeeds in binding himself in more semantic knots. "I know I feel from you that in, you not, really, that I could say anything and do anything and you would st-, I mean, you are recording it and that's cool and, er...but I could..and I know that applies to you, to me and you, cos really I.....assure you, you can do anything you want, but...and in talking, I mean, that includes if... I want to... if I wanted to say nothing or if I... I want to act in an extra-extraordinary way...then I feel that that too is justified."

There are several more painful minutes of this as Fultons persists with his folly in order to become wise. "Maybe in a sense there's something I could tell you" he offers vaingloriously. "I don't know what it would be. And the same thing, ya know, I've done this a couple of times, not in interviews, but ya know, when I met someone who, you can see in their eyes this stops what am I saying... do you have anything to tell me?"

Syd drifts into resigned silence and Fulton, perhaps finally getting the message, turns off the tape.

Although offered up by Fulton in the 21st century as an important historical document the interview merely evokes, probably better than any other encounter of the time, Duggie Fields' and Spike Hawkins' observations about the constant pressure Syd was under, the expectations placed upon him and his necessary strategic retreat into avoidance and withdrawal.

The interview is also highly reminiscent of Bob Dylan's infamous backstage encounter with science student Terry Ellis at Newcastle University in May 1965, captured in all its painful detail in D.A Pennebaker's documentary Don't Look Back.

Ellis, who later went on to co-found Chrysalis Records, was at that time writing a piece for Courier, the Newcastle University student newspaper. Dylan, striding around back stage with his guitar and harmonica holder strapped on, is in turn nervy, nimble, quick witted, playful and belligerent to the point of bullying. Ellis, perched uneasily on a chair is in turn, intimidated, earnest, ill at ease, gauche, guileless, arrogant, thick skinned and blessed with an ego that his station, standing, and circumstance barely warrant.

Quickly reversing the roles between interviewer and interviewee Dylan fends off Ellis's initial enquiries by asking him to define what a friend is and what his attitude towards interviews is. He rails against the impossibility of answering glib questions in two

minutes to which Ellis tellingly responds, “You have the answers. You’re supposed to respond in two minutes.” Even more tellingly Ellis asks “Would you want to get to know me. I might be worth knowing.”

Exasperated, Dylan asks Ellis what his purpose in life is; to which Ellis boldly replies “I’m in the world for me. Just like everybody else.” As Dylan continues to tie him up in knots Ellis adopts a wounded tone. “I’m a person,” he implores at one point. “Well so what” says Dylan dismissively. “There’s a million thousand billion persons outside. You can’t get to know them all.” Finally we get to the coup de grace. “If I meet somebody. If I speak to them for a few minutes I think that person might be able to give me something,” says Ellis. There is a comical split second pause before Dylan registers the full implications of what has just been said. “Oh-ho” he splutters. “Now we’re getting down to it”. Even at this point Ellis doesn’t have the grace or gumption to simply back off.

“What is it that you want?” implores Dylan. “Everyone is out for whatever they can get,” repeats the guileless student hack. Dylan’s thin thread of patience finally snaps. “Do you ever just be quiet? And just watch and not say one word?” he asks. As the camera plays across Ellis’s face his expression, a mixture of hurt and annoyance, indicates that this is not a concept (or indeed a useful journalistic device) that has ever occurred to him.

Ellis’s subsequent write up in the University’s student newspaper reveals that he has learned little from the encounter, being as much about himself as it is about Dylan. “I had a long conversation with Dylan, during which I was never sure who was doing the interviewing, me, Dylan or Alan Price of the Animals’ he says before going on to quote salient (and largely self-serving extracts) from the interview. With characteristic modesty he concludes the piece “ And so it went on, all three interviewing each other, till Dylan at last came out with something telling, “I have my friends, I know who they are, I don't need any more. I don't see what you have to gain spiritually from talking to someone for a few minutes.” Well, I didn't talk for just a few minutes, but rather for over half an hour. I didn't gain spiritually, but I think I caught an insight into the man who wrote.....” (quotes lyrics from Blowin’ In The Wind) (emphasis mine.)

Fulton is similarly disingenuous in his retrospective introduction to the recently unearthed tape. “Syd Barrett of the Pink Floyd. What an odd little interview this is” he says in reverential, and as it turns out self-referential, tones. “His eyes were so open it

was like looking down into a tunnel. There were no barriers. I had to stop myself from tumbling down inside him. I think I now know what it's like to be Alice in Wonderland.” (emphasis mine.)

Like the encounter itself, this somewhat sensationalist retrospective account reveals as much about the interviewer as it does about Syd Barrett. Fulton both wants his pop star on a pedestal and to be able to bask in a little of the reflected glory that comes with being in the company of such a creative spirit. Dylan suffered scenarios like this all the time. So did John Lennon. Lennon, though, possessed an acerbic wit and a genuine desire to communicate, while Dylan was capable of turning interviews into stream of consciousness performance pieces. Syd Barrett possessed neither the desire, the steel, the stamina and the necessary degree of calculation to adopt either strategy. Where Dylan responds “oh-ho, now we’re getting down to it” when he susses out the situation, Syd merely retreats into embarrassment, inhibition, and incoherence. There is a chasm between Dylan’s razor-sharp intellect and rapier-like wit and Syd’s polite stoned befuddlement and he was singularly ill-equipped to deal with the kind of situations where people merely seemed to want a piece of him.