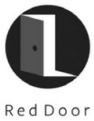

SONG
FOR
RIA
MICHELLE SHINE

Also by Michelle Shine

Mesmerised
The Subtle Art of Healing

SONG FOR RIA

Michelle Shine



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To my parents
Elaine and David Ratner
with love

This is a story about a crime of the heart…

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Interview with Alison Connaught

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In case anybody missed it, something phenomenal happened last year. Three and a half years after Alison's daughter Ria died, she released a self-written, self-produced album of just piano and vocals in an elusive style and it went platinum. The amazing thing is that, although she has written many songs for great artists over a span of thirty years, she has never released a singer-songwriter album before.

I spent a long time tracking her down. The people that I spoke to told me she likes to live a quiet life and is not easy to get hold of these days. Turns out, she wasn't easy to reach even when I managed to get through to her own people. Consequently, I've had to wait a long time for this interview.

We meet in the lobby of a London hotel. She is already there when I arrive, with a glass of red wine before her. She is short, slim, has tons of auburn hair, and doesn't look her age. She gets up as soon as she sees me, shakes my hand enthusiastically and says, 'Hi, so nice to meet you; and after all this time, huh?'

Part of my job is to make people feel comfortable in my company, but Alison immediately makes *me* feel comfortable in hers. She points at her glass and says, 'The irony is that most people have to feel stronger to give up wine, whilst I had to feel stronger to drink it again.'

She spent time with a shaman in North America and after that she couldn't drink wine for 'a very long time'. I ask about her experience with the shaman.

'Greg and my stay with the Hopis changed the way I see life. I couldn't write anything new for two years after Ria died, but not only did they help connect me back to the muses so I could compose again, they also helped me to find the courage and strength I needed to carry on with my life.'

'And to write the album.'

'You know, you don't realise – people don't realise – that sometimes when we are so hurt, it's like we are locked up in a cage with that hurt, and we can't seem to fight it because we don't have the tools to deal with it. We have to hook up with anything we can find that's natural to show us the way, and by that I mean something that resonates with the Earth.'

'But not wine.'

'No' – she laughs – 'you have to keep your head together whilst you're working it all out, at least I did; the truth hurts but the truth also heals.'

'How so?'

'Trust me, you don't want to find out.'

'I've been listening to the album for several months now and it's not like anyone else's music. It's not even

like your own music, those songs that brought you hit after hit after hit.'

'No, that's right.'

'Without a history as a singer-songwriter though, how did this album actually come about?'

'I was on a mission to understand what happened to Ria and why she was on opioids; I didn't know she was taking them until after she died. So I went on a journey to find out and these songs are the fruits of that journey.

'Then the publishing division of the record company that I've worked with ever since the start of my career approached me about these songs, and initially set up a meeting between myself and the production company that made the series about Ria's life. They wanted to use old material of mine, no doubt in poignant places, as part of the show. They also wanted a new song for the title theme.

'I wasn't convinced about the integrity of that forthcoming production, so I turned it down.'

'I'm intrigued, so how did the album eventually materialise?'

'Well, that's the maddest thing. You'd think my reaction would have immediately put the whole thing to bed. But within days of my refusal of their offer, I received an email from the record company with a proposition for a one-off deal. They promised me the album would have nothing to do with the television series but, nevertheless, the contract would only exist if I could manage to record and put out the work to coincide with the series being shown on terrestrial television worldwide, so that my work could be advertised in the episode breaks. Part of the contract included my commitment to appear on chat shows and give interviews.'

'So that's why we're here.'

She smiles openly.

'They also said something else, the thing that made me want to do it.'

'What was that?'

'That it would give me the opportunity to have my voice heard amongst the milieu of others about my daughter. Oh, and they wanted me to come back to them with my answer within a week. I had only one condition.'

'What was that?'

'My husband, Harvey, wanted to invest in a project that would keep Ria's memory alive – in the way her family and no doubt her friends and fans would want her to be remembered. So I said I'd do it, but only on the proviso that Harvey could be a fifty per cent partner in the project. Thankfully, they agreed.'

To date, the album *Song for Ria* has sold over ten million copies worldwide and won both a Grammy and a Mercury award. I remark on how this album defies genre and yet, at the same time, the melodies and even the lyrics are incredibly familiar.

How can that be?

'I take that as a compliment.'

'Did you write the album thinking that this body of songs will cross the divide and appeal to people of all ages, all musical persuasions and political classes? Because it really is quite incredible the way this compilation has taken off.'

'No, I was far more selfish than that. I wrote these songs because they saved me from myself. It was a kind of self-flagellation, blaming myself for Ria's death. You know the kind of thing – if I had done this or that as a parent, things would have turned out differently. I was beating myself up with it.'

'Are you referring to Ria being part of a cult?'

'No, not at all. She was never in a cult. Everyone who was close to her will tell you that. There is absolutely no truth in that assertion.'

'So, why do you think the television show ran with that storyline?'

'I don't know.'

'*Do you have any idea, at least, of the motive behind why the makers of the show would want to put that idea out there, if it's not true?'*

'Spite. Jealousy, maybe… I don't know.'

'*Do you want to say any more about that?'*

'No.'

'No?'

'Are you trying to make me get down to their level? I don't want to do that. You asked me earlier about the songs on the album, what inspired them and about my guilt. I understand now it's quite a common feeling when people lose a loved one in such a tragic way. Everyone's experienced loss, guilt and shame. We are very often victims of ourselves but we don't talk about it.

'When was it? Last week, I think. I was approached by a couple through a friend of a friend of a friend. They wanted to give me their feedback on the work. They told me that they both couldn't stop listening to the album, but the woman said it was because of the lyrics, whilst the man said he's not a word man, that it's only the atmosphere of the music that means something to him, and the voice intonation – it's the feeling in the sound that moves him.'

'What about the lyrics? The meaning behind them?'

'Well, the truth is, the songs mean what they mean. I mean they might not mean the same thing to me, intellectually, as they mean to you. We all have our own lives, our own experiences, and come to our own conclusions but feelings are universal.'

'Were you surprised by the success of Song for Ria*?'*

'Of course, but I was even more surprised at having the opportunity to record the work and then to have the exposure.'

'As you said earlier it was because its release was perfectly timed to coincide with the showing of the series, Lucky Girl: The Story of Ria Connaught, *on television in, pretty much, every country in the world.'*

'That's right.'

'Apart from the cult assertion, did you like the series? I mean…'

'Sally Denoué is amazing. The first time I saw her take on the part of Ria was in her apartment in New York. I was spellbound; I thought my daughter was in the room with me. It was also the moment I first heard that they had started working on the series.'

'And how did you know Sally?'

‘Ria and Sally were housemates and budding actresses together. They shared a house in LA when they both found themselves working there.’

‘And Ms Denoué was nominated for the same Oscar Ria won.’

Alison smiles.

‘I’ve just realised, you haven’t answered one of my questions.’

‘I’m sorry, which one was that?’

‘Did you like the series?’

‘Of course not. What mother would enjoy seeing a screen adaptation of her own daughter’s demise, and on top of that, one that wasn’t exactly accurate?’ But, hey, you can’t slander someone who’s no longer with us and the truth is, I have a strange relationship with that show. If they hadn’t made the box set, I would never have had the opportunity to make the album, which I believe Ria helped me to write, by the way. There are bigger forces at work here, you just have to give into them.’

‘Meaning?’

‘My shaman and the Hopis taught me how to get back into life when I could no longer be inspired by it. They showed me a path, a route to return to acceptance by opening my eyes to what’s important.’

‘What’s it like, being on that path?’

‘It’s made me more aware of what goes on in the world and my place within it.’

She waves her arms in the air.

‘I’m more open. I understand that my daughter is still here in spirit, living inside me. Sometimes I hear myself responding to something or someone and out of my mouth comes a reply that’s uncharacteristic for me, but is something she would have said.’

‘Coming back to the album, do you see it as your response to the box set?’

‘In a way, yes I do.’

‘Can you say any more about that?’

She sits back in her chair with amusement written on her face and I can see her thinking. Finally, she says, ‘Leonard Cohen sang, “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in”. So, I suppose you can say that I have found the crack in me and I have let a chink of light in. This album is my truth; it’s everything I have to say.’

Track list:

Broken
Spirit Hunter
I've Been Prey
Disbelief
All the Heroes
Less than Nothing (that's what I know)
From Afar
To Love Again
The Strange Thing Called Truth
Invisible
Warrior
Song for Ria

PART ONE

Broken

Only tragedy allows the release of love and grief
never normally seen
Kate Bush

1

The day after my daughter died, Harvey – my husband and Ria's stepdad – flew to LA. I just couldn't and went to the top of Parliament Hill instead, thinking the higher I could get, the closer I would be to her.

Sitting on a bench, letting the wind batter me, my hair slashing cat o' nine tails against my cheeks, I allowed myself to put my icy hands in my pockets, just.

I was light years away from feeling the nurturing warmth we shared after her birth, when still tied by an invisible cord, I'd wake with erupting breasts just moments before she cried.

She would have been about three months when I began to need my own space again and had to squeeze myself into stolen moments. Inspiration tugged me towards the sonoluminescence of my piano, a Bechstein – Bechs for short – as Ria clamped my nipple and held me still with her eyes. I was engaged in a tug of war, too often torn away from her by a superstition: that if I didn't kowtow to the muses, I risked them abandoning me for some other, more attentive, composer.

It was even harder when Ria began to move. On her knees, she was fast, but once on her feet she became unstoppable. An idea for a song landed in my head and I was its slave, absent without leave from the real world. It might have only been for a matter of seconds, but I would often find myself with a pulsating heart, yanking her away from curbs, catching her on a hairpin turn, as laughing and teasingly, she tried to dodge my grasp.

Ria was funny and clever and feisty, oh yeah. There was a resilience to her. I didn't see it slip away until one memorable day when we were together on the beach. I'd taken up photography; it was a bit of a phase. The sky was white marble with grey threads and blemishes. I found a large seashell with a smooth metallic blue and pink inner surface. My camera was poised to capture it but something made me look up. Ria was messing around by the sea. She was kicking up sandstorms, twisting her body this way and that as if to avoid hands that were reaching out to grab her. Her head was bowed, shoulders hunched.

She was on the cusp of womanhood and seemed so sad for what she was about to become. It should have been a celebration. I wanted her to have the freedom to find herself, be herself, without shame or guilt. I knew that would set her free of my authority, my loan, but hey.

My heart pleaded for her to blossom for my camera, then in one small moment she thrust her hands into her blazer pockets, turned swiftly around and stared into the lens. The tip of her tongue appeared at the corner of her lips as she lifted her chin and raised her luminous grey eyes.

Click.

***

Sixteen years later and I'm crooning over that black and white image of a thirteen-year-old girl, frozen in time. I kiss its glossy surface and place it on the piano stand where she stares back at

me with a myriad of what-ifs and if-onlys; I too, want to die.

My fingers extend over cold keys. My voice wails. I'm reaching out, yet unable to connect, not even with a note. Frustration has me slamming down the piano lid.

Where is she?

A white feather will do, or a fleeting intangible, glimpsed out of the corner of my eye. But nothing like that happens and I just want to run away. I stand up and knock over the piano stool then bang my fist against my lips.

I go into the kitchen and turn on the tap. Water cascades over the top of the kettle. I jump backwards but not quickly enough and now I'm soaked all down my front. I hoist the wet and heavy appliance over to its electric tray and it doesn't phut and die but surprises me by heating up, then I go and burn myself on its steam.

Over by the window, I'm blowing and shaking my painful hand.

Harvey comes home. Whilst I'm making him a dish of soulless food, he opens a good bottle of wine. I can't gulp it down fast enough. He asks me what's wrong. I tell him I'm surprised he's even asking. I don't remember him saying anything else.

After dinner, which neither of us manage to eat, he annoys me by taking his glass into the other room. He watches football, sitting on the sofa and propping his feet up on the coffee table. I go upstairs and toss and turn in bed. The aggravating sound of chanting comes up through the floorboards.

The next morning, as Harvey steps out of the shower whilst I'm taking a pee, he says, 'You complain that I'm not hearing you, but have you ever thought that it's *you* who's not listening?'

I don't understand what he's saying at first, or maybe it's just that I don't want to understand. I look up at him quizzically and flush the toilet.

He goes on, 'Sometimes you're so wrapped up in your own thoughts, you don't even know someone else is talking.'

'I don't accept that,' I say. 'When I write songs, I'm constantly tuning into characters and someone else's story.'

'Characters and stories,' he says, grabbing a towel.

'Yes, characters and stories.'

'That's not real life, Alison.'

He hurries into the bedroom. I run after him.

'Did you want to tell me something last night?'

'It doesn't matter.'

'No, it does. I'm sorry. I'm listening… I'm listening.'

He can hardly be dry but he's putting on his clothes, saying he's late for a meeting. Slightly dishevelled, he walks out the door.

Harvey is not a creative man. No, let me rephrase that, he doesn't work in a creative industry. He's a businessman. He doesn't do tai chi or meditation or any other spiritual pursuit but he's thoughtful, I mean he considers things, and most importantly, he gets me and that is

both wondrous and devastating.

I'm not going to try and write a song today. When I go into my piano room the instrument I've made music with for so many years is frowning at me in storm-cloud light.

'What do I have to do, Bechs?' I ask, standing at his side and placing my palms on his shiny veneer. I tell him that even though I don't stay in here permanently, this is my room too. 'In fact,' I say. 'If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't even be here. You'd be dumped in an LA lounge, scratched and damaged by some young upstart who cuts cocaine on your beautiful back.'

I am ignored and turn to stare at Ria's school painting. It hangs on the small piece of wall between two floor-to-ceiling windows so that when I play – correction, when I'm able to play properly, now a distant memory – I will glance over and feel the thrill of our two creative spirits wrapping around each other and rising like steam.

The painting is a swirl of rainbow pastels. I slip inside the endlessly changing colours into a whirling time and no-place. Then I pull myself out of the folds and try to rearrange myself in the bitter present; only I can't. The aura of the past haunts me – that night, eating dinner, sharing a bottle of wine followed by brandy, chatting about our day.

'What are we up to this weekend?' Harvey asked.

'Nothing.'

'I can think of something,' he winked.

When the landline rang the first time, we didn't pick up. We thought it must be a cold caller, as everyone else for years had preferred to reach us on our mobiles, even though mine was rarely switched on. On the third ring, Harvey slumped into the hall. His face was ashen when he returned. I can't remember what we did next; if we hugged, locked eyes, or looked away from each other. I do remember being stunned with disbelief, leaving the half-eaten food and trembling glasses on the table. On the way upstairs, I bumped into the doorway and bruised my hip. I didn't take off my make-up, clean my teeth or even undress. I just threw myself on the bed and closed my eyes.

Harvey shook me out of oblivion just as dawn broke the next day. When I asked why he'd woken me, he told me he couldn't stand my mewling any longer.

Some things, even in sleep, are impossible to forget.

★★★

Ria died in the bath from an overdose of prescribed medication. She was twenty-seven years old. I never even knew she was addicted to opioid painkillers. So much for my motherly instincts. What else did I miss? I didn't realise…what?

I am now left hoping for enlightenment to leap out of her year twelve artwork, and when that doesn't happen, I go over things in my mind. Questioning everything, just everything, on continual repeat.

Ria was a very private person. If I had made a point of studying her every move, would she have hated me for poking around? Would she have secretly loved me more? Would it have

saved her?

No matter where I stand in this room, or from what angle I view the swirl, I can only see hope in its brightness; a future unravelling that is now totally unravelled without explanation or goodbye.

A flash of sunlight slips through the clouds; the room smiles, mockingly. Sitting on my hands before Bechs, I don't disturb him. I'm not prising his mouth open or forcing him to collaborate with me. No, I don't do that. I just sit there listening to a couple of pigeons duet, hoarse as chain smokers. They go silent. Rain splatters against the window.

There are things I do to distract myself. Listening helps, a play on the radio or a discussion from which I stand apart. I take myself outside and walk the length of the tree-lined drive leading away from our home. The squelch of my footsteps turns to a plod in the sodden grass. Nearing the road, voices stop me in my tracks. I'd momentarily forgotten that they're still coming and going in a vigil beyond the gate. They've made a shrine for her from photos, flowers, candles and written messages. They scream the lyrics to the soundtrack of the film she won an Oscar for, as best supporting actress, in the same frustrated way I tried to express myself yesterday.

I take a left across the grass and trudge to the other, smaller gate that's almost imperceptible amongst the foliage. As I push, it digs into the ground and I have to wrestle my way around it to go into the woods. I wait for Annie on the bench that Harvey and I put there to honour her late husband, John.

They were neighbours who came with the house, living on our land in a small homemade dwelling next to the public footpath. We allowed them to stay, rent free, as did our predecessors. The Foragers – not their real name – didn't deal in money but offerings of eggs, freshly butchered rabbit, pigeon and hand-picked perennials, all brought to our door with thanks.

As I wait, I think of Ria as a small child in a blue dress, yellow wellies, russet hair, playing a jungle game and violently attacking the grass with a stick. I ask, what were you thinking, Ri? Who were you attacking? Someone bad that you had known when I wasn't around? My head shoved so far up my arse I couldn't see what I should have seen.

I shake my head free of those terrible thoughts and look towards the animal smell, at a hen leading her flock and a sheep with a bell. Annie is coming. She's carrying a crooked stick. I have to shield my eyes from a beam of light that's slipped through the trees. The sun disappears and dim reality takes over. Raindrops plop onto leaves at my feet.

'For a moment there, I thought we were going to have a rainbow,' Annie calls. 'Last week I saw one over in the clearing that went right across the sky.'

She waves her stick and sits down beside me in her raggedy clothes that never look warm enough. Her greying, naturally oiled hair sends its musk my way. The smell doesn't bother me. I find it comforting.

Looking down at her muddy plastic shoes, I ask if her feet aren't cold and how come she's

able to wear those things even in winter, which is something I've never thought to ask her before.

'You get used to it,' she says. 'You get used to everything eventually. Whatever life throws at you; you either get used to it or life's going to chew you up and spit you out.'

I think about that and ask, 'What about losing John?' She stares ahead at the tree – its arthritic roots peeping up through the ground, its trunk thick and scarred with keloid lips surrounding a gaping mouth – its head of leaves shielding us from the worst of the rain. 'Have you got used to losing him?'

'Yes,' she says. 'I'm used to it. Doesn't mean I like it but this is my life now and I have to be OK with it.'

'I need to ask you something.'

Her eyes fix on me.

'I know when you and John were very young, you were homeless and met on the streets.'

'That's right, we were a couple of drunks.'

'Then you came here.'

'We did.'

'How did you both get off the booze?'

She smiles, shrugs, says she doesn't really know.

'Was it this place?'

'I hear you,' she says, but that's all she says.

The rain stops although there are still drops sliding off the tree's foliage. The sheep stands still. The chickens waddle around. A squirrel comes out of nowhere and speeds up the tree. It feels good to be sitting here beside Annie, in silence. I'm startled when she says, 'I once wanted what other people have.' She looks up at the sky, laughs and says, 'I can't tell her that.'

'What?'

She shakes her head.

'You wouldn't understand.'

'Try me.'

'No.'

'Why not?'

Her cheek twitches. A faint flutter overtakes her lips. 'This has nothing to do with me. You and Harvey have always been kind. I don't want to upset you.'

'You won't upset me.'

She leans forward and stares at the ground. I look down too. A twig is wriggling. There's something small and alive under a rug of brown soggy mulch. Why is it alive whilst my daughter isn't? I could put an end to that life, instantly, with my shoe. I could walk away from that murder, go off and live my life and never think about it again. I shudder and look up.

Annie says, 'You have to accept what's happened. Yes, you have to accept it because if you don't the bitterness will get you.'

Accept it? How is that possible? I need to get away from this moment, from Annie, and I say

what I always say at the end of our conversations.

'Is there anything I can get you, Annie? Anything you need?' But there's an edge to my voice, even I can hear it.

Her response is almost imperceptible; the shake of her head followed by a long blink and a nod. I understand that she understands that I don't understand. What I do understand, is that it saddens her that I made her tell me something she knew I would take in bad part.

She stands and waits for her joints to settle. I watch her walk away from me, followed by her animal brood.