

‘THE KIBBO KIFT’
or
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU ARE PERSUADED TO WRITE A MUSICAL

In 1975, Maxwell Hutchinson and I wanted to write an extended piece of words and music. We thought that this might eventually see the light of day as a ‘concept album’. It was not that long since I had left the cult of Scientology, and I wanted to do something about Leaders and Followers, a subject I was interested in, and of which I now had personal experience.

Max’s music, is rock’n’roll, or is perhaps better described as being very British Beat Music of various kinds, but we were both aware that it also somehow carried with it an atmosphere of the 1920s and 1930s. This strange musical flavour led me to look for a subject that would tick both boxes: A British movement of the 1920s to ‘30s with a charismatic leader.

I had a short list of a few movements that might provide suitable subjects for our double-album project. At that time I had a ‘readers ticket’ for the British Library, then still located in the iconic Reading Room of the British Museum, and I duly took my place beneath the fantastic dome. In that pre-internet era, that’s how research was done; in Libraries.

One of my subjects for investigation, maybe the second or the third on the list, was ‘The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift’, about which I knew virtually nothing. I had simply heard the name on a radio programme years before, and recalled something about strange hooded costumes and rituals conducted in secluded woodlands, and so I thought it might be a contender. The Library’s Grand Index; hundreds of enormous, blue leather, scrap books, showed-up several items, and as soon as they were brought to my desk, I soon knew that we had our subject; a breakaway movement from the Boy Scouts in 1920, led by a remarkable and charismatic leader known as ‘White Fox’, which had eventually mutated into one of the uniformed political movements of the 1930s.

I reported back in triumph to Max, and began serious research into this highly significant, though almost entirely forgotten, organisation. For those who would like to know what I discovered, I refer you to the website of the Kibbo Kift Foundation (about which more later) at <http://www.kibbokift.org.uk/>

The story of ‘White Fox’, the writer and artist John Hargrave, and the radical and extraordinary movement he founded and led, was eye-opening. A plot for our piece quickly presented itself, about a boy brought up in the original, camping and woodcraft movement, and who is greatly under the influence of its Headman. This young man leaves ‘the Kindred’ when the movement becomes a uniformed, para-military urban phenomenon. I began writing lyrics while Maxwell developed a series of typically excellent and idiosyncratic melodies to go with them.

When we were about half-way through the writing process, we met, socially, a Theatre Director called Chris Parr who had recently taken over as Artistic Director of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. He was interested in our music, and on hearing about our latest project, asked if we had considered making it into a stage production. This seemed like a promising

idea to us, as it looked as if there was going to be little chance of us ever having the resources to actually record the grand double-album that we were writing. We sang for him as much of the piece as we had created, he liked what he heard and we suddenly found ourselves as composers of a stage musical for the Traverse Theatre. Its origins as a words-and-music piece can be seen in the absence of any dialogue. Everything is carried forward in songs; 'sung-through' in technical theatre language, a language we were to become a lot more familiar with over the next few years.

The show was almost complete when I thought I should find out when 'White Fox' had died. He had been in the Medical Corps at Gallipoli in the 1st World War, so he must be long gone, I reasoned. Working my way through 'Who's Who' from the 30's, through the 40's and into the 50's, I eventually discovered, to my horror, that 'White Fox', who was the over-arching presence of our show, even though he was not going to be presented on stage, was still alive! And worse, the show, in places, was hardly complimentary about him. This looked like a disaster.

After confessing to Maxwell my failure to do my homework, it was decided that the only thing to do would be to write to the old man, try and see him and make a clean breast of it. I wrote to the flat in West Hampstead given as his address, and received back an invitation to tea.

So it was that I met John Hargrave, 'White Fox', Headman of the Kibbo Kift and Leader of the Green Shirt Movement for Social Credit. Of medium height, smartly dressed, with a pale face and aquiline profile, he was, even in old age, every bit as charismatic as I had imagined. To use a phrase coined by Glastonbury author Paul Weston, he disposed of a lot of 'voltage'. He was probably the most impressive person I have ever met. This article is not a memoir of my friendship with Hargrave or, as his wife and friends called him, 'Fox' or, as I called him, 'Sir', but he eventually became a very influential person in my life.

After telling him and his wife Diana, the actress 'Gwendolyn Gray', about my interest in the Kibbo Kift, he fixed me with a penetrating glare and asked what all this was actually about. I finally confessed about writing the show, and having assumed that he was dead. Thankfully, he thought this was a tremendous joke and encouraged us to go ahead, even when he realised that the main protagonist of our musical would be shown leaving his movement in protest at the direction it was taking. In fact he became an enthusiastic supporter of the show. He was very deaf, but when Max and myself did a loud command performance of our songs so-far for him, he thoroughly enjoyed it because, as he said, 'our primitive rhythms' suited the subject perfectly, and were the first music he'd actually been able to hear for some time. He even suggested some lyrics for one of the remaining uncompleted numbers.

The show, unsurprisingly entitled, 'The Kibbo Kift', was scheduled to run for two weeks in June 1976. I was working for Max's architectural practice as a freelance Architectural Assistant, so it was easy for me to take time off to go to Edinburgh as the show's Musical Director. This was a potentially invidious appointment, as I was not performing in the show or in the band, and was therefore rather like a non-playing Captain in a sports team. A potentially embarrassing situation, if nothing worse.

As things turned out, people were very pleasant, and Edinburgh was very intriguing and, well, very Scottish. I've always got on with musicians, but I found I also enjoyed the company of actors and theatre folk. The band which had been put together for the show were friendly and cooperative, and had been christened 'Totem', a suitably Kibbo Kift-style name. They were led by an experienced and very talented vocalist, keyboard and flute-player called Robert Pettigrew, with whom I am still in touch after almost 45 years (he played on the final track of my album 'Zoot Suit').

The cast were an interesting bunch, including Chris Parr's then wife, the charming Tammy Ustinov (daughter of Peter Ustinov), and Godfrey Jackman, who had been in the Royal Navy as Chief Petty Officer in charge of one of the teams in the notorious Field Gun race. He was then in his fifties, but sang our quite challenging rock material with great conviction. 'Wee Ronnie' Letham, a tough Scots actor, with a strut like a small fighting cock, tried to give me a hard time on the first day of rehearsals, but once it was apparent I was not quite as much a rabbit as I looked, we became friends and I shared digs with him for a while. Godfrey and Ronnie, sadly, are no longer with us.

There are many stories I could tell of my experiences in Edinburgh, but some are embarrassing, and some are unprintable (I was only 28). However, an extraordinary, kilt-related encounter with Kirk Douglas has already been the subject of [one of my blog posts](#). I will also pass over most details of the production, but at one point in the show, the cast went among the audience distributing replica Green Shirt political pamphlets, and there was a convincing street fight (with a cast of four) between Green Shirts and Fascist Blackshirts.

The band, a typically scruffy and long-haired bunch, were to be visible on stage as a dinner-suited '20s dance band, and accordingly had to have appropriate short, lounge lizard haircuts. This was anathema to all us 1970s rockers, but it was part of the gig, and they were actually getting paid; and to sweeten the deal, the theatre paid for the band to be shorn at an old-fashioned gents barbers on Princes Street. As non-playing Captain, I went with the band to get done too, 'pour encourager les autres', and thought I would have a proper wet shave as well. The elderly barber fingered my chin.

"D' ye use an ee-lctric shaver?"

"Yes..."

"Well, yee'll bleed...."

And I did. However, on his advice, I have never used an electric shaver since (it promotes tender skin and a heavy beard).

It was at this time that people started to call me 'Judge', rather than 'Chris' (as in Chris Judge Smith). The Director was Chris, one of the band was Chris, the lighting guy was called Chris and there was yet another Chris on the Traverse staff. There were too many Chris's around, and 'Judge' was both distinctive and slightly amusing. Max and I had our own music publishing company, 'Jiving Brothers Ltd.', and this also amused the theatre to the extent that it was credited on the posters.

Hargrave and Diana travelled up to Edinburgh for the first night. I arranged for Hargrave to meet and talk with the cast beforehand, and they were mesmerised. He could have started

a new Kibbo Kift tribe on the spot. They had had a demonstration, at first hand, of the spell cast by charismatic leadership, and I think it informed their performances.

The show was well received on the whole, and I will eventually post a selection of the reviews on another page. It was successful enough for the show to be brought back a few months later as part of the Traverse's program for the 1976 Edinburgh Festival, so another few weeks of performances, and wild Festival shenanigans, ensued.

Max and I wanted to take the band and cast into a studio and make a non-commercial recording of as much of the show as we could afford, but we reckoned without Equity, the actors union, which was, at that time, both very powerful and militant. The cast were forbidden to do any recording without substantial additional fees being paid, but we made a pretty good demo of most of the important numbers with 'Totem', the singing being provided by the prodigiously gifted Robert Pettigrew, the less-gifted Judge Smith and a singer called Christina Matthews.

One unexpected result of the production and the attendant press publicity, was that a surprising number of surviving Kinsmen of the Kibbo Kift and ex-Green Shirts now made themselves known again to Hargrave. White Fox had 'gone to earth' in the early 1950's in order to concentrate on his commercial and fine art, his writing and his work as a successful Spiritual Healer, and he was out of touch with almost all of his faithful followers. The upshot of these reunions was Hargrave's decision to set up a Foundation charged with gathering in all the surviving records, regalia and memorabilia of his movement and preserving them for posterity.

A surprisingly large number of Kibbo Kift / Green Shirt members responded to Hargrave's imperious 'Closural Decree'. They had kept their faith in the movement, and still had extensive personal archives of their Kibbo Kift experiences, and were eager for these to be preserved. I was actually present at the exciting excavation from an Edinburgh cellar of a large trunk stuffed with robes, banners and manuscripts of the movement, which had been in the care of an ex-Green Shirt, now an eminent university Professor of Persian. Angus McBean, the celebrated photographer, had been a Kinsman and donated some classic images of KK activities. Because our musical had prompted this late surge of activity, Maxwell and I were co-opted as Trustees of the new Kibbo Kift Foundation, but we were very junior figures in the protracted negotiations that eventually led to the massive collections being housed at the library of the London School of Economics, and at the Museum of London.

Meanwhile, our musical got another production of at the Crucible Theatre, Sheffield. This took place April to May 1977, and was directed by the late Mel Smith, who was a theatre director before he suddenly became a famous comic actor on television a couple of years later. Hargrave and Diana agreed to meet the Director, and when I brought Mel to their hotel the day before the First Night, he was confronted by this very elderly man asleep in an armchair with his mouth open. Hargrave awoke, fixed Mel with an intense gaze and proceeded to transfix and fascinate him. Mel, normally someone with a powerful and dominant personality, was putty in his hands, and the next day called a cast meeting to

exhort the cast, at that late stage, to abandon any idea of making fun of the whole thing. The Kibbo Kift was serious stuff!

In 1980 there was a third, non-professional production at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, but I was not involved in this one.

The relative success of the musical led to us writing a second show for the Traverse, 'The Ascent of Wilberforce III' produced there in 1981, and, at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith the following year (both directed by Ronnie Letham, a director as well as an actor). Max and I were also commissioned by the Hampstead Theatre to write a show for them, 'Geraldo's Navy' (which remains unperformed) and my connection with the Lyric Theatre led to another musical, 'Mata Hari', written with, and starring, my friend Lene Lovich, produced at the Lyric in 1982. With this show, my interest in Musical Theatre more or less ended. The art form of Musical Theatre, requires very specialised performing skills, expert musicianship, and generally more time and investment than my rather left-field examples of the genre could command. I was very happy with the Traverse productions, but it was an increasing struggle, with tight rehearsal schedules and limited budgets, to get the music played right, and sung right, and acted right.

At the time, the theatres we worked in were 'reps' and would engage a team of actors for a season, during which they might be in several different shows. Specialist musical theatre performers might therefore not be available. I was once told by a Theatre Director, on enquiring whether a certain actor proposed for a show of mine could actually sing,
"Of course he can sing. He's an actor."

Scripts and demo recordings of the three musicals by Max and myself are all available in the Archive section of this website.

The 1977 Sheffield production of 'The Ascent of Wilberforce III' led to a cunning plan on my part. In my role as Musical Director, I had to recruit a band to perform the music for the show. I also wanted to have one more go at fronting a working Rock band, so I contrived to put together a band that I would be able to take on the road, once the show's run was over. The band would be paid for their theatre work, and I could use downtime and spare moments during the run to rehearse my own material. This worked quite well, and when the show closed I had a semi-rehearsed band ready to gig round London. There is very little on this website relating to 'The Imperial Storm Band'; we never released a record and for some reason there are no surviving photographs (which is very unlike me). However there is some information on [my Gallery page](#) (for 1977).

I remained friends with John Hargrave and Diana for the rest of their lives. John died in 1982 at the age of 88, while Diana died in 2009 at the age of 97, recording vocals for me in her late 80s as 'The Medium' in 'Curly's Airships. As time went on I gradually became more involved with the running of the Kibbo Kift Foundation, greatly helped in this task by Harry Wykes, who, unlike me, was a genuine Woodcrafter. Harry was a youth leader with the Woodcraft Folk, a left-wing organisation which had broken away from the Kibbo Kift in the mid 1920s and remains active to this day. Harry had come across Hargrave's books and, before his tragic and unexpected death in 2005, strove to reintroduce Kibbo Kift-style,

Native American and African tribal woodcraft to the Woodcraft Folk. Harry became a very close friend. He was a knowledgeable Rock fan, and was a great supporter and promoter of my own music. He also dragged me, kicking and screaming, into the digital age, as my computer guru and first Webmaster.

We were both fascinated by the political and economic creed of Social Credit that Hargrave had followed and had tried to use the KK to promote, transforming it in the process from a relatively small, middle-class, camping, Woodcraft and World Peace movement, into an urban, street-political, radical, and indeed revolutionary, mass movement. We both found the economic analysis of Social Credit compelling, and Harry, a life-long Socialist, argued convincingly that the idea was a true development of Left wing tradition, rather than being a manifestation of any Right wing ideology; an lazy but understandable assumption that images of marching, uniformed Green Shirts with drums and banners might suggest.

With the inevitable passing of older Trustees of the Foundation, I eventually headed the negotiations with the [Museum of London](#) to enable them to take ownership of the artefacts that had previously been only on loan to them, thus releasing more resources for the renovation and publication of the collections. I also eventually undertook the cataloguing of Hargrave's own substantial, though chaotic, [archives at the L.S.E.](#) These had had to be hurriedly salvaged from John and Diana's rented flat with only a few hours notice, after Diana went into nursing home following a stroke. Harry Wykes and I struggled for a long day, filling sacks and boxes with the numerous manuscripts, large amounts of correspondence, books and artworks, that filled the place; the meticulously stored remains of an extraordinary, productive and varied life.

As a result of our efforts, recent years have seen the publication of two large, heavily illustrated, books about the movement, 'Designing Utopia - John Hargrave and The Kibbo Kift' by Cathy Ross with Oliver Bennet (2015, Museum of London) and 'The Kindred of The Kibbo Kift' by Annabella Pollen (2015, Donlon Books). In 2016 there was a fine exhibition about the movement at London's [Whitechapel Gallery](#), and the startling visual imagery of the Kibbo Kift has even penetrated as far as Italian 'Vogue' who published an elaborate fashion shoot of KK-style costumery.

I have begrudged none of the time and effort expended over the years on behalf of Hargrave's legacy, but I learned a valuable lesson, and when I completed and released the double-album '[Curly's Airships](#)' in 2000, on a subject just as compelling as the Kibbo Kift, I was careful not to become involved in any of the various admirable committees and organisations promoting and studying the history of airships. I still have a bookcase of Kibbo Kift material, but my collection of airship books was sold at auction.

