

# NAUGHTY NOTES

By

**Jonah Jones**

When I was too young to remember, I started making noises on the piano in the sitting room. My parents encouraged the musician in me and discouraged what they considered to be the anarchist.

‘That’s a naughty note,’ Mum would say. ‘Can’t you hear it’s wrong?’

But I liked the naughty notes and would let them talk to me whenever no one was around to listen. They had a different personality and a special place amongst the regimented.

C major was easy because it was all the white notes. Slightly naughty was E flat but that was allowed because it was minor. B flat was a tad naughtier and was called the seventh, even though it wasn’t, but that was semi-allowed because it was the blues. By far the naughtiest note was F sharp. That was so naughty that Mum wouldn’t give it a name and howled at me whenever I played it when I’d lulled her into thinking I was in C.

I grew to like the naughty things, the naughty people, the naughty spirits that came in the night. They had a way about them, a means through which to achieve the things that the well-behaved could not. I knew I was somehow different, but it never concerned me. I was at ease with my solitude. Even surrounded by crowds, I was alone. It was only when I played music to others that I engaged with my fellows. I admit to a small niggle that prompted me to wonder if I would ever find a relationship or even a place to call home, but that niggle was easy to ignore most of the time.

Music can cause time to stand still and place to be transported on a magic carpet for it speaks without need of language, yet it connected with me in some way outside language. As I became educated and followed the career of engineer, I continued to play and began to take my music out to speak to other people, allowing the music to spread its own message. My job provided me with all the

stuff of mundane life and the appearance of a well-behaved citizen, yet the music whispered to me of sedition.

One special night, I dreamed that I was playing harp in the court of King Arthur. On waking I knew that it was a leading dream, as if someone with greater understanding had indicated my way along the road. The Celts would be gathering to meet their lord on the year's turn, and I wanted to be there.

There was an open mic evening on offer at the Lonely Shepherd Inn in Glastonbury for the Winter Solstice celebrations. Magic sits easily up on Glastonbury, so I put myself forward as a performer.

Driving there, I saw a grey horse standing alone in a frozen field, a ditch away from the road. She nodded her head as she watched me pass. It seemed like a good omen.

I carried my gear into the performance area and set it up at the back. Just a synthesiser and a microphone plugged into the PA system. I noticed that they didn't have Christmas decorations—well, not the traditional tawdry, sparkly sort. There were branches of yew, some ivy wound around the black oak posts, a sprig or two of holly on the ceiling beams and some mistletoe dangling suggestively over the bar. They'd also hung a picture of the Holly King, smiling at his own demise, on the wall above a rack of barrels. The son of the house was stacking well-seasoned logs next to the large open fireplace in which they'd set the Old King Log in pride of place.

'That's a fine Yuletide log,' I said to him.

'Certainly is. It took our Suffolk Punch to drag it here from the wood. Once it's lit, I'm hoping there'll be some vain and filthy songs to be sung.'

'I'll do my best,' I assured him.

With poor timing, the electricity failed, setting the pub crew to putting out candles and oil lamps. Once the kerfuffle was over and my eyes adjusted to the new light, the old pub took on an aspect of a hundred years ago, maybe even further back. She began to tell stories from those times as I looked around. The Holly King smiled ever more broadly in the warm, flickering light and the spark-filled smoke from the log as it began to bring its own light to the occasion.

‘They’ll have to drink proper ale from the hand-pumps,’ the barkeep said.

They’d evidently performed this ritual a few times along the way.

‘You’ll have to play the old piano,’ he told me.

‘Watch me work,’ I replied, confidence all over. This was going to be a challenge but not too much so. I tried a sequence and a tune or two on the old beer-stained and cigarette-scarred upright piano. She was a little out of tune but also not too much so and she had an extra rhythmic rattle from the horse brasses attached to the struts across her back. As I played, I was returned to those days when it was no more than the piano and me—the vibration, the force of fingers, a sense of connection that no synthesiser could match or mimic. Without a microphone, I would have to use my voice as it would allow. I was nervous about all the enforced adjustments but there was also the thrill of the unexpected opportunity. I hadn’t sung with a piano since Christmas carols at home with the family when my voice had yet to break. The horse brasses gleamed at me as if to say, “It’ll be fine,” and I thanked them for their encouragement.

Being early, I had the place near to myself before a middle-aged man and a young boy walked in through the wind-battered door. They were both darkened faced and the man was bearded. He was taking his weight upon a hawthorn pilgrim’s staff which the landlady asked him to leave outside.

‘Why is that?’ he asked.

‘May is for the faeries,’ he was told.

‘Even when it’s dead?’

‘Especially when it’s dead.’

The man nodded and propped his staff against the outside wall before returning with a slight hobble to stand in front of the newly lit fire, holding his skinny hands up to the warmth.

‘We are guests in this country,’ he told the young boy. ‘We must behave according to the ways of our hosts.’

He regarded the seats in the room and made his way towards one, smiling at me as he did so. ‘Good evening, sir,’ he greeted me.

‘And to you, sir.’

The boy helped him to the seat and the man handed him a good silver coin. ‘Food for us both and an ale for me.’

‘Perhaps I will find myself an oaken staff,’ he mused. ‘Leave this one for the faeries.’

I was ready to play my music, sing my songs and yet not so. Something in the corner of my mind was tugging at me. I went outside to clear my head in solitude. A short walk and I could see the tor set dark against the light of the moon. The tor was as it had always been; a dragon mound. There was no church on top to corral its pagan power. Music floated in the dark sky. Not the music of the common man but that of the subtle folk, the music I strove to emulate, the true unbridled music of the star-folk and the pixies. Listening for a time, I was drawn into readiness. You don’t play music; it allows you to play what it wants to be played.

The Inn had filled up by the time I returned, so that I found myself sitting next to the boy.

The first act came on. A young girl with a classical guitar who begged the audience’s indulgence for the fact that there was no amplification, hoping they’d be able to hear her.

The audience remained quiet as she began finger-picking a simple sequence on her guitar. When she started to sing, she was fine. A little weak in delivery but everyone wanted her to succeed and so she did, gaining confidence and power to her lungs as she went. The bearded man closed his eyes, smiled, and lolled his head as he listened to the young girl singing about losing her sailor love to the wide ocean.

‘Is he all right?’ I whispered to his companion.

‘He’s tired. I think this ale that you have is making him even more tired. He’s not used to it. We have wine where we come from.’

That evening, there was magic all around. The crackling and the roar of the open fire, the merriment of the people and the music that rejoiced in its own transformative power.

I began my set with a song about the solstice and the capering of the Lord of Misrule. They all seemed to appreciate it, although the applause was more polite than enthusiastic. I then explained the story of the Mari Lwyd—the ghostly horse who comes a-begging with song at the turn of the new year. Thrown out of the stable so that the baby Jesus could have a place to lay his head, she wanders the world looking for a new home.

As I played the first notes, the boy picked up a tambourine, asked for forgiveness and stood beside me as I began the ballad of The Wanderer. When we reached the chorus, he joined his voice with mine in an other-worldly wailing tune of gliding pitches and quarter tones that provided an ethereal counterpoint. The heterophony that erupted from our joyous voices drew me into another way of being. He had strength, conviction and was an even naughtier person than I would ever be.

The door opened as more people came in and beyond the threshold of the inn, I could see the Fair Family dancing around the hawthorn staff to the untamed music. I looked across at my fellow singer and at that moment, the lights came back on, briefly casting a halo around his head, whereby I recognised him. He had asked for forgiveness not from me but from Mari Lwyd. For a short time, his image remained before me but when my eyes adjusted, I could no longer see either of the pilgrims. The LEDs on my synthesiser were glowing with the returning power but I knew that I had reached a peak. Leave 'em happy. The audience applauded as I bowed and smiled, then I went outside to see that the hawthorn staff had gone, and the church was planted unyielding and strong back on top of the tor. I knew that hawthorn staff was now a tree, twice-blooming in the parish of Glastonbury since ancient times.

To this day I wonder whether I might have changed history by telling him what would happen to him in his future, but I think not. “Not what I will but what Thou wilt.” Wasn't that what he later said?

In times of turmoil that clear, healing voice returns to me, singing the quarter tones to guide me through the chaos of the sensible, and I wish his naughty spirit well.

## A brief biography of Jonah Jones

As a writer - Film: One short script produced. Co-writer on two more. One script in production, one in pre-production (filming 19<sup>th</sup> August 2023). Both feature-length and short scripts have won awards.

Published: Short stories (one by *Syncopation Literary Journal*), articles and abstracts.

Stage: Eight plays produced. Six public rehearsed-reads.

Radio: Three short stories and two plays broadcast (BBC). Various pieces for Radio 2, Radio 4, and Radio Wales. Series and programme for Radio Wales.

TV: Sketches and short scripts for S4C, BBC. On-line monologue.

As a director - three short films and a documentary. Another short film in post-production.