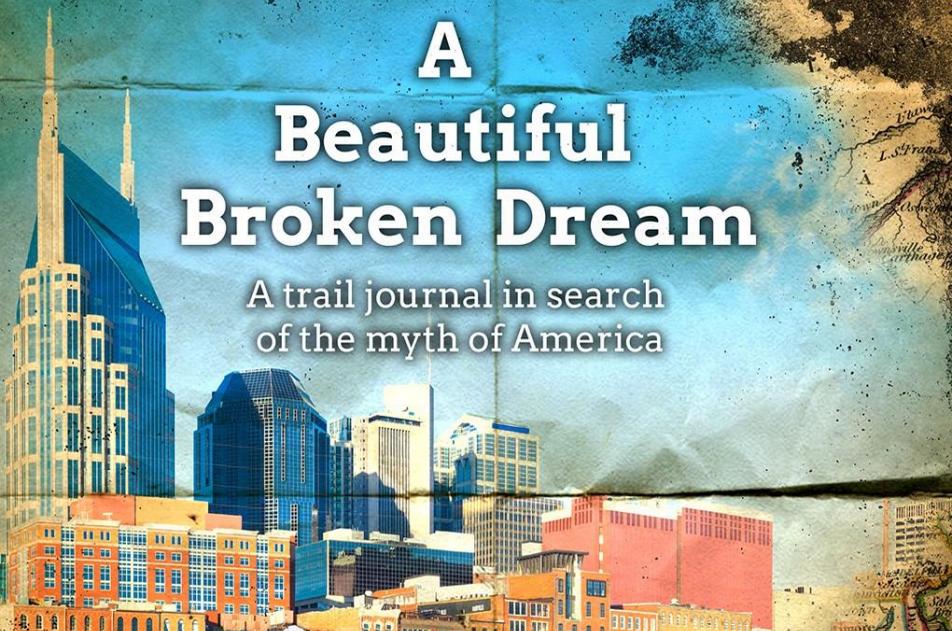


# A Beautiful Broken Dream

A trail journal in search  
of the myth of America



Steve Bonham



# Looking for America

**There are many beginnings to a story. This is one of them.**

**In 2016, I went to see Billy Bragg appear in concert with his American friend Joe Henry. It was their *Shine A Light* tour focusing on songs they had recorded about and on the American rail road. It was a fabulous concert – in fact I went twice. Through the songs shone the tough resilience of the American spirit, and the strong threads of compassion and defiance that are an essential part of the story. But there was a ghost in the room. The tour occurred shortly after the US elections and perhaps the disappointment and sadness of the Trump victory hung in the air. The American Dream denied.**

Joe Henry, with grace and dignity met the issue head on. After speaking a few words acknowledging the issue that hung around us, he concluded by asking his audience to believe that ‘this is not who we are, but where we are’.

‘Who we are?’

As I left that night and drove home I thought about how much my entire life had been haunted and inspired by the raw, simple idea of America. America as legend in a landscape, America as the incarnation of resistance to the baron, the king and the despot. A guiding light in the struggle for freedom. The idea of self-determination where you were judged by your worth not your family. A place where you could 'start again'. Where the choices you made cut straight to the chase about who you were and what you believed. And I had always been haunted by the rough-hewn characters of this legend: the vagabond soul, the outlaw, the bar room queen, the biker, the renegade, the immigrant, the bootlegger, the gambler, the defiant Indian warrior and the broken-hearted hobo. Of strong women and lesser men. Of heroes and villains.

America was born out of revolution: it was a rejection of the colonial, of religious dominance, of elites. It championed the idea of meritocracy, the idea that an individual, how ever lowly born, could through skill, dedication, intelligence and passion for success raise themselves to the highest human heights.

And as these thoughts lingered on with me, I became drawn to explore this extraordinary, flawed, magnificent idea and the spirit in which it which it arose. It seemed to me that there were things here

too easy to forget in these times of false truths, media manipulation and the trashing of principle; that there was something essential and universal about our romance with this mythical, fabulous world.

It has always been there slouching around in my imagination since the earliest of days I think. America for someone like me, whose childhood was in the sixties, was a place at once both exotic and unvisitable, and yet immediate in everyday life through the constant but slightly fuzzy images on TV. It was all bigger, bolder, more sophisticated, more magical and more decent than life in an English provincial town. It was a world drawn in the laid back charm of the *Dick Van Dyke Show* and, most perfectly, *Bewitched*. Where the simple moral certainties of the High Chaparral and the Virginian made the world at once both more exciting and safer.

But even then I was aware of the spectral monster of tragedy and horror that seemed to hide in the dark alley just off Main Street. A Main Street with its large clapperboard houses, ordered lawns and gently sloping drives in which two enormous cars gleaming with chrome sat parked under a shady tree. A monster that could break through in a terrible second with the dropping of a hand or the closing of an eye.

Scored into my remembrance is seeing my mother in tears at the dining room table over the news of JFK's assassination and the horrible grainy picture on the front page of the newspaper of his poor widow on her hands and knees on the back of the car, in a posture of almost animal-like fear and despair. And much later, returning from the swimming baths with my brother, waiting for the bus and seeing in the windows of a television shop the news that his brother had also been slain.

Now it seems the Monster is not only unleashed, but rampant and celebrated in a land where grey-white men speak from their lofty palaces about the freedom to own weapons built for slaughter as the nation's children bleed to death in their classrooms. And where women dressed like Barbie Dolls, with hair as hard as helmets, accuse the traumatised classmates of the slain of 'acting', of being manipulated and manipulative. America is now a place where ethnically un-pure army veterans are shipped 'back' to 'homes' they have never known. A place where the percentage of people living below the poverty line is almost twice that of any developed nation, and where providing essential healthcare to the poor and needy is seen as subversive.

But America has always been a mass of difficult contradictions, perhaps personified by the iconic figure of Johnny Cash. The Man in

Black was drug addict prone to violent behaviour, the voice of the disenfranchised; he was the outlaw, the renegade, the devout Christian; he appeared at the White House to sing for Richard Nixon. He was angry and benign, a poseur and possibly the most authentic voice in American Music.

Johnny Cash is America as a knotty paradox and contradiction almost to the point of absurdity. Perhaps I am drawn to contradictions, for I believe they represent the truth of who we are. As individuals we are not one thing or another; we are one thing and another. We are both tough and tender, drawn to fit in and break free; we are driven by serious goals and by enjoyment of the moment; we want to take care of ourselves and be cared for. The art of life is how we manage this. In the old world, the path was given to us by the King and the Priest, but the new world of America rejected this absurdity. It is an experiment in personal, individual responsibility, and for better or worse, it is the conundrum of who we are writ large.

Therefore I am still in love with the spirit of this land. Although most of the rest of the world looks on perplexed and sometimes horrified, I cannot give up on this place.

For it gave me rock music and that is the diamond catalyst of hope.

Rock music embraces paradox and makes something sublime. More than that it is the work of the commoner, not the elite, and speaks to them. If America faces up to the contradictions of being human, rock music and its roots are its most potent expression.

When in the Seventies when I bought my first guitar, my heart and imagination were captured in the same way as the generation before me by the raw power and defiance of rock 'n' roll. It appealed to the latent maverick and outsider in me and I completely accepted its message. I loved the immediacy, the essentialism, the handmadeness of it. It was music by artisans with simple tools. It offered everything a young man might desire: freedom, rebellion, sex, expression. I listened to bands like Little Feat, Tom Petty, JJ Cale, Creedence Clearwater Revival. Springsteen arrived and blew my mind. I couldn't be bothered with the overproduced British music of the times, bands like Yes, Genesis, Queen. The British acts that stayed close to the source were the ones I listened to. Peter Green, Eric Clapton and later Dr Feelgood and The Clash.

Sometime too in that decade I found Dylan. Not the Dylan of the protest songs and enigmatic sixties; I had been too young to understand them. But the Dylan of albums like *Blood On The Tracks* and *Desire* and songs like *A Simple Twist of Fate*, *Tangled Up in Blue* and *Hurricane* and much later *Man in A Long Black Coat*. The songs tasted gritty and real, the words rattling across the beat like a typewriter raging against steel bars, painting images drawn from the Old Testament, the dustbowl, downtown heartaches and dreams.

And I went back to find another America. A much more complex, conflicted America than the one of my childhood, more morally ambiguous, in which heroes were deeply flawed, and villains could be capable of self-sacrifice. A more diverse America, where Black people and Native Americans took centre stage rather than being bit part players hanging about in the wings. I devoured books about it when I should have been reading other things. *The Blackboard Jungle*; *Catch 22* and *On the Road*. I travelled in my mind through the rugged landscapes of *The Searchers* and *The Unforgiven* by Alan Le May, hit the road with Kerouac. I dug out and listened to the stuff from the sixties which had passed me by: the Byrds, Poco, Leonard Cohen, early Dylan, Gram Parsons, And then Woody Guthrie, Johnny Cash, And in much of this music was an intense relationship with

place, with moving on, a clear-eyed exploration and truth-telling about the world experienced by ordinary people and their extraordinary tales.

I was hooked by the artful simplicity and directness of it. The idea of the rambling troubadour unbound and unburdened on the road to anywhere.

I started to write my own songs. Here was a way I could express what I saw, what I felt, what I believed, albeit at first in the gauche, immature and probably pretentious way of a suburban kid of big imagination and little experience. Those were heady days, when in just one afternoon you could write a song about nuclear obliteration, another about fascist attitudes to getting high, and a third about how Jenny had destroyed your life by going off with Colin.

In this I was no different from a million or more other kids at the time railing against the stifling conventions and limited horizons of the worlds into which they were born.

And in the end, leaving University with no other purpose in life but to sign up to this band of brothers and sisters, I set off to find America for myself, travelling across the States with a one-way ticket on a Greyhound Bus to California and working in Hollywood for some time, an experience which was everything I had not expected.

Though, in the end, I never consistently made enough to survive as a musician and have paid my way through life doing other things, I have never laid my guitar down. Nor have I ceased to ramble, hooked as I am on the narcotic thrill of a new city, a new landscape and new people in which a thousand rivers of chance combine to deliver the unexpected and magical.

So that night, as I drove back along the M42 after the gig, Joe Henry's words running through my mind and songs about railroads, hobos and forests of pine on a CD purchased at the gig playing on the stereo, a familiar feeling crossed my mind - the spark of the need to explore. A line from an old Paul Simon song came to mind, something about going to look for America. To look, to understand. The only way to really explore anything is to experience it, to engage directly with the myth and the paradox and see what might

be discovered: what the idea of America actually means; why is it so compelling; why it sometimes seems to be going so wrong. But also to answer the questions I knew I hadn't even asked yet. And in the end I knew that whenever you search for *something*, in the end – at least in some sense - you end up searching for yourself.

I knew that I would have to put my feet on the ground. It is my way of finding out; it always has been. Not having a brain that lends itself to connecting the abstract to the real experience, I have learned that, for me, direct experience is my route to insight and understanding. Like many people, I have to do it, sense it, feel it, touch it, hear it, and see it to understand whatever *it* is. It is how my brain works; it is how *all* our brains work. Which is why school, forcing you to sit in chairs in silence, is ultimately such a terribly weird thing to do. I believe that to learn, you need to enter into a conversation with the world, putting yourself out there and opening yourself up to the unexpected, and to the wonderful dark magic of chance and circumstance.

And so the idea of looking for America – in all its impossibility – became a part of my life.

What was most important to me in setting off on these adventures was that I should start this as a 'regular guy'. I am not some super-fit trekking acrobat with a streamlined body and the ferocious sense of purpose of a racing snake. To be honest, I would probably best describe myself as the fat(ish) bloke with a dodgy knee. And in that, my wounded dignity may just be a way of more completely experiencing the adventure than just attempting the furthest, fastest, longest or highest. Such goals being unobtainable, perhaps, the conversation can become more open and emergent. At its best, this means the journey outweighs the destination and stuff can just happen.

My original thinking was to take a trip through the southern states of US, visiting some of the great musical places like Memphis, Nashville, New Orleans, and Bristol Tennessee (the musical the home of the legendary Carter family). I was particularly drawn to the Appalachian Mountains, where in dirt-poor cabins in isolated settlements, elements of folk music from all over Europe were woven into the forebears of bluegrass, country, rockabilly.

To me it seemed the music of America captures far better than anything else the heart and soul of this enigmatic country. It is the

songs of the streets and fields and landscape that provide on-the-spot reporting and commentary, a first-hand account of a state of mind in a moment in time. Sometimes it seems that virtually every town has managed to distil from the grain and fruit of its ancestry a unique musical spirit which it gifts to the nation and the world: Traditional Jazz from New Orleans, Urban Blues from Chicago, Country Rock from Nashville. Even when the seeds were planted elsewhere, the link between music and place becomes embedded and associated with a particular place and the legendary characters that played there.

One thing, though, I was certain of: on this trip I wanted to travel with a companion. In many of my adventures I had travelled alone. In itself this can be a fine thing – rambling along, whether it be on foot, by train or by plane seems to create a kind of immediacy and rawness to the experience - a reflective solitariness. But I knew too that travelling with someone else added something – a kind of binocular vision of an experience, making it sharper and richer. And also, someone to remember with. I have been lucky enough to travel to some wondrous places and experience the profound alongside the mundane; often I mourned the fact that such moments can never be really captured by photograph, word or recording. Yet with another, you can relive them, and there is

something rather lovely about that. Also, with the best of companions, you travel with someone who pushes you along on low days, sees things you miss; someone who with all their similarities and spiky differences constructs the journey with you in an act of creativity.

My friend Dinny is such a someone to go adventuring with. We had met several years ago on a 4x4 expedition in Namibia, and since then had taken trips dragging toboggans across frozen lakes in Ontario and exploring Oman. She is a very talented artist who sees her other vocation as a hiker. She is tough and very competent, and the previous year had completed the 800 mile Arizona trail. More than that, she has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Americana music. The fact we can also make each other laugh and stand each other's company for long periods of time with only occasional friction was an obvious reason for me to invite her to join me on this adventure.

It was an invitation she turned down.

“The thing is Steve, I don’t think several weeks on the road in a motor vehicle does it for me. I’m more of a trekking gal. Have you thought about doing some of this on foot?”

Which I had, but my plans were still vague. Dinny told me about the Benton Mackaye, a three-hundred-mile long trail which ran through Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina.

“We could combine the two,” Dinny proposed. And so it came to pass. Hidden resonances started to emerge, and the idea started to grow and evolve. First of all, I discovered that the Benton Mackaye trail runs through the Southern Appalachians, an enormous forested area which was once the heart of the Cherokee Nation. A place where – contrary to popular imagery – people lived not in tepees but in wooden cabins, in villages of about 2000 people with a distinctive culture and a sense of common interest. And into these lands too came early and later settlers, bringing their own dreams and visions for this place and the heart-breaking conflict that resulted. I got to thinking that quite a lot of their cultural DNA was still be found here.

There was an opportunity too to experience first-hand and in a visceral way a little of what those early settlers found when they took the first step and entered the seemingly endless wilderness of the greenwood that stretches across these three states and includes the Great Smokey Mountains. Such an experience would surely have shaped the emerging character of this great country.

And in doing so I would be challenging myself with something that I had not quite done before. In tackling the Benton MacKaye I would be 'through-hiking', carrying on my back for up to three weeks everything I needed to survive: clothes, tent, food and water. I had done many treks over the years, including a Moroccan trip earlier that year, but the larger supplies had always been carried on mules and camels or in 4x4s.

This would be different. For those who have never tackled this sort of thing, you divide a hike such as this up into sections, usually between some sort of habitation or hostel, possibly a small settlement you can hitch to from a road head. To these places you post in some supplies like dried milk and fruit, rice, and noodles,

since given the remoteness of the region it is very unlikely you will find a shop selling the things you need to re-provision with. One of the other key bits of planning is to know where the water sources are: they tend to be streams and springs which can be unreliable at certain times of the year. This allows you estimate how far you need to go to get more water, and how much water you need to carry. And water means weight – a lot of it.

And so with my good friend, I took off on a trek through the forests, high places and hidden spaces of the old Cherokee Nation in Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina. We planned to camp as we went, to avoid irritable bears, rattlesnakes, agitated natives, over-exuberant creeks, and a whole variety other nonsense, and to try to hear in the trees, and scent on the wind, the echoes of the things that inspire us all. Woven in with this, we would take time out to connect with the great music towns of Nashville and New Orleans and anything else musical that we might happen upon. What follows in this book is a tale of that journey, and the essays, songs and poems that arose through the trip.

The best of America is something that has moved and inspired millions of us. And yet these days it sometimes seems that it has let

us down – it is a beautiful yet broken dream. And we need that dream at this moment in our history. A dream that we can better ourselves; be more than we were, but not just materially. We are so used to America's physical protection, its guardianship. I hear in Europe and other parts of the world so much that is scathing and mocking – are we asking too much of it?

My journey was to a specific region of the United States, so my story is biased, selective and idiosyncratic. So am I.

