

Close-up

B.A. Robertson
Songwriter
 Burbank, California



"Great collaboration is when it sounds to the listener as if all the elements of a song are of one voice," says journeyman songwriter and soundtrack composer B.A. Robertson.

More often known by his words and music than by his name, this 15-year veteran of the music industry has collaborated on many occasions. Among the primarily European songwriters the Scottish-born Robertson has teamed with are Phil Pickett, Tim Rice, Albert Hammond and Terry Britten. Nearly 20 of his songs have placed on either European or international charts as well as some U.S. charts. To date, these have earned him more than 30 silver, gold and platinum record awards.

Most recently and notably, he has authored songs with musician/composer Mike Rutherford for the first two albums by Rutherford's group, Mike & the Mechanics. Interestingly, the songs "Silent Running" and "The Living Years," despite somewhat atypical songforms and subject matter for popular radio formats, turned into major hits for the songwriting team.

As Robertson explains, he and Rutherford each brought something of their own to the songs. "Because I don't have rock 'n' roll 'chops' or heritage, I find I can't write rock 'n' roll records by myself," the 39-year-old Robertson admits, recalling his early formal study and involvement with music for the theater, as well as his more recent work in television and motion pictures. As he also notes, it was Rutherford, better known for his 20-plus years of work with the English rock group, Genesis, who supplied some of the missing ingredients. "I need someone like Mike, who's a little more mainstream and can play the groove, to collaborate with on the music. Then I go off by myself to write the lyric." When he comes back with the words, he adds, Rutherford or another partner will help to fine-tune them.

"It's a very organic process for Mike and me," Robertson continues. "We sit down with nothing... a bit of a line, maybe. Mike will set the drum machine and get the groove. Then, I'll play some changes on the keyboard and he'll play guitar and get the 'pocket,' and we'll work it together. For the first album, we had written some songs together, and Mike had some other 'bits.' Then, the producer, Chris Neil, wrote some songs with him and stepped in as the doctor, the 'Mr. Fix-it.' It was sort of cobbled together."

Remarking on the benefit of their first experience of writing together, Robertson claims they had more of a vision of what they wanted to accomplish with the second album. "When we started on the song, 'The Living Years,' we knew roughly what we were doing, but it still only came together in the studio."

In this song, the pair explored a nontraditional subject in pop music: mixed feelings about the death of a parent and missed opportunities for intimacy. And though it may sound to the average listener that the song was written around the dramatic, final verse ("I wasn't there that morning/when my father passed away..."), as Robertson points out, that verse was the last element to go into the song. "Everyone assumes that the idea of

that verse came early," he says, explaining how the diminuendo in the music of the final verse adds to the impact of the story. "But the track was already recorded that way before we had any idea of what lyric was going in there, least of all me."

With a firm nod of the head to spontaneity in songwriting, Robertson recalls a similar serendipity which the Beatles experienced in the recording of "Strawberry Fields Forever." That was an immaculate stumble," he says admiringly. "I'm a great believer in that... it's what pop music's all about. Some of the best exponents of pop music are really conscious of it. Someone with natural ability, be it a Bruce Springsteen or an Irving Berlin or a garage band, is more likely to write successful songs than someone with formal training. It's expressing some wonderful human emotion in the simplest way, yet with a sense of originality which is what makes millions of people love it."

As Robertson points out, this lack of self-consciousness is no less true for him and Rutherford. "We're supposed to be grown up, conceptual and know what we're doing. But of course," he adds, chuckling, "we haven't got a clue."

This is far from unusual for most songwriters, Robertson wagers, adding that creativity actually thrives in such a vacuum. "It's a good thing because creative people usually don't know what it is that they're good at or how they do it. We must always remain in awe, in wonderment of what we do. And certainly, no one's more in awe of himself than Springsteen. Even he says: 'Don't ask me why it works. I don't know.'"

What seems to work for Robertson as he chalks up more and more successes is to keep to the basics. "I've become more and more of a traditional songwriter as my career has gone on. I'm interested in isolating the emotion and finding that unique combination between the words and music. You have to get the emotion and feel of the words and music right first, then layer the rest of it on top."

In pursuit of more consistently original compositions, Robertson has also returned to traditional instruments. "If I'm writing on my own, I now write almost exclusively on piano. I found I was writing a really great drum sound and not a very good tune. I became afraid that I was discarding emotion for the benefit of technology. Now a lot of people are coming around to this point of view. Ultimately, it works on the piano or in my head. But it works differently for everybody, and I don't have any secret that way. My only secret is that I try to work harder. I really don't think I work hard enough."

So, as Robertson sees it, working is the end *and* means of songwriting. "It doesn't matter what I or anyone else says, really. All the people who think someone just doesn't have it will never dissuade them if they really want to write songs. They'll just go and do it anyway, just in spite of everybody. I think that attitude, that determination is necessary just to succeed. It's hip to go out and find your own path."

— Sam A. Marshall

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