

Mike Scott of the Waterboys: how we made *The Whole of the Moon*

‘My girlfriend asked “Is it easy to write songs?” There was a moon, so I pulled out a pen and wrote “I saw the crescent, you saw the whole of the moon”’

Mike Scott, singer-songwriter

I was in Manhattan with my girlfriend, Krista. She asked: “Is it easy to write songs?” In my 20s I hadn’t yet grown out of the urge to show off to a new girlfriend, so I said: “Yes it is!” I pulled a pen and a piece of paper out of my pocket. There was a moon in the sky, so I wrote down: “I saw the crescent, you saw the whole of the moon.” She was duly impressed. I fleshed it out in the hotel and back home in London came up with more lyrics and the piano part, a self-taught rhythm with one finger doing one pattern and three fingers doing another.

The Whole of the Moon is about someone like CS Lewis, who seemed to see so much and explore issues much more deeply than most people, or it could be about a Jimi Hendrix-type person who comes “like a comet, blazing your trail” and is gone too soon, but it’s not specifically about anyone. Contrary to speculation, it’s not about Swell Maps’ singer-songwriter Nikki Sudden, who I used to know and worked with. There was a message I wrote on the record’s label saying, “For Prince, U saw the whole of the moon” but it’s not about Prince, although he covered it twice, with different arrangements. I wrote the greeting because Karl Wallinger [keyboards] and I thought a lot about Prince when we created the sound of the record, in Livingstone studios in north London.

Karl played bass on his synth – a brilliant sound – and did some backing vocals. For the top line synth, I asked him to play something like Prince’s 1999, and he made it his own as he always did. Another four-note sliding melody was influenced by Prince’s Paisley Park.

I recorded the piano and vocal live over the drum machine. The next things that went on were the trumpets. I wanted them to have the impact of the flugelhorn in [the Beatles’] *Penny Lane*, like sunlight bursting through clouds. Roddy Lorimer came up with parts for two trumpets and two piccolo trumpets. Then Roddy’s trumpet comes back in the “popcorn and cannonballs” section with this fantastic melody. A

percussion cat, Martin Ditcham, came in with a bag of weird stuff that he rubbed together or shook – that “click” sound in the first few seconds is him. Karl and I each play a “crump” – where you put an elbow or fist low down on the keyboard. One kicks off the trumpet solo and there’s another at the climax. Golden moments.

The coup de grace was for the line: “Came like a comet.” We put a firework noise from a sound effects disc through an echo machine, so Anto Thistlethwaite’s fantastic sax solo erupts from the explosion. I’d laid down the groove on a drum machine, but it missed drum fills, so Chris Whitten drummed on the finished record on the day it was mixed in Liverpool’s Amazon studios with Mick Glossop. By then I was thinking: “The whole world’s going to love this.”

Max Edie, backing vocals

I grew up in Melbourne; in my early 20s London was my great escape. Everyone I met seemed to be an artist or musician. I answered an ad in Melody Maker to join a band, and the bass player was sharing a flat with Anto from the Waterboys.

Everyone was always jamming or playing or *singing on other people’s stuff*. I’d have these incredible long talks with Mike and then go back and write furiously. It was a very inspiring friendship. When he asked if I wanted to do some backing vocals, I soon realised the song was something special.

I was quite nervous, but Mike set me up in a dark corner so I wouldn’t be distracted. He wrote all his lyrics in this huge black Book of Shadows that he’d bought from a magic shop, but the writing was really tiny and difficult to read in the dark. I was terrified of singing the wrong thing, so I asked if I could write the lyrics out bigger.

Mike’s song *The Girl in the Swing* had a special meaning for him, I think to do with innocence. For *The Whole of the Moon*, he told me, “Imagine you’re a really carefree, very young girl” – six or seven or something. I could really get into that spirit of wild, free sweetness and just sang what came out naturally. I think in one take. Mike said that writing songs was a form of magic, and whenever I hear it I feel a rush of that exciting, inspiring feeling that we had.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/jul/27/how-we-made-waterboys-the-whole-of-the-moon-mike-scott>