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PERSON IN THE NEWS

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The guitar-wielding war poet of our age

By Ludovic Hunter-Tilney



There was a time when anti-war songs were straightforward affairs. They were Country Joe and The Fish singing, “One, two, three, what are we fighting for? Don’t ask me, don’t give a damn, next stop is Vietnam”, or Edwin Starr hollering “War! Huh, yeah! What is it good for?”, to which only one answer was possible: “Absolutely nothing, uh huh!”

But the bar has now been raised. Strident righteousness and tub-thumping choruses will no longer do. [Polly Jean Harvey’s album *Let England Shake*](#) has elevated the [anti-war song](#) to a new level of sophistication. It is an achievement that this week resulted in the British singer-songwriter winning the Mercury Music Prize, pop’s version of the Booker Prize. She is the first person to have won it twice.

Let England Shake was inspired by the concept of the war artist. “I was aware there were officially appointed poets and artists that go out there to Afghanistan and Iraq, and bring back their work,” Ms Harvey told the FT earlier this year. “I was curious why there weren’t any songwriters in that position. So that became my framework as a starting point. I officially appointed myself, in my mind anyway, as the song correspondent.”

Recorded in a church in Harvey’s native Dorset, the album goes from the first world war to the 9/11 conflicts of the last decade. Influences range from Harold Pinter’s terse, bloody poetry to Kurdish folk song, and the imagery includes scenes of brutality – soldiers falling “like lumps of meat” – alongside unsettling moments of beauty, such as the “scent of thyme carried on the wind” at Gallipoli.

Her Mercury Prize victory has a grim symmetry. The previous time she won it, for her album *Stories from the City, Stories from the Sea*, was precisely 10 years ago. Ms Harvey was unable to collect her award in person: it was the day of 9/11 and she was stuck in the US, sitting in a hotel in Washington watching the Pentagon burn.

Ten years ago, no one would have singled her out as the songwriter likely to produce rock’s most powerful response to the coming decade of bloodshed. Ms Harvey, 41, has always been drawn to darkness and violence but in the past her songs were about the elemental side of life – desire, rage, sex, death – not current affairs.

In a 1998 interview, she looked blank when David Beckham’s name was mentioned and revealed herself as a reader of Sylvia Plath rather than *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Following the news was “too much like homework”. “I feel blissfully ignorant of agendas going on around me and I’m quite happy to stay that way,” she said.

Born in 1969, Ms Harvey grew up in a Dorset village. Her father was a stonemason, her mother sculpted. The family also owned a farm. As a child, young Polly helped deliver lambs and wring chicken’s necks, while in an interview earlier this year she spoke knowledgeably about castrating rams (“It’s a very delicate operation”).

Alongside the blood and guts there was rock music. Her parents were bohemians with a wide circle of musician friends: a founding member of the Rolling Stones, Ian Stewart, was a frequent visitor to the family house. Ms Harvey moved to London to go to art college, intending to follow her mother in sculpture, but quit her course at St Martin’s to write songs.

Her first album, *Dry*, came out in 1992. Chronicling the collapse of her first serious relationship, its scorched-earth riffs and songs flaying male sexual failure made for a startling debut. Onlookers marvelled that this small, fragile-seeming young woman could produce such an intense blast of noise. It was as if the volcanic emotions of Mississippi Delta blues had erupted in the age of grunge.

Dry led Rolling Stone magazine to name Ms Harvey the best songwriter of 1992. But she reacted badly to the exposure. Life in London unsettled her; the failure of another relationship tipped her over the edge. There were rumours of anorexia, and she later spoke of suffering a quasi-nervous breakdown. It appeared the catalyst was a roadie being rude to her at a rock festival. Ms Harvey retreated back to the west country and made an even more abrasive album, 1993's *Rid of Me*.

Like another great English maverick, Kate Bush, she's an outsider who has benefited from establishment support. *Rid of Me* was released by the major label Island Records, to whom she is still signed. U2's powerful manager [Paul McGuinness](#) has represented her since the mid-1990s.

In comparison to Adele, her rival for this year's Mercury Prize, Harvey's sales are puny: *Let England Shake* debuted in the UK at number eight. Yet she has been allowed to pursue her own path, experimenting with music and appearance. She has a Bowie-esque penchant for image manipulation, from the pink catsuit and fright wig she wore at a celebrated Glastonbury festival appearance in 1995 to her current black-clad angel-of-death look.

Although she's a feminist icon her musical heroes are mostly men, cussed misfits such as Tom Waits and Captain Beefheart. She rejects attempts to crowbar her songs into the confessionals of the stereotypical female singer-songwriter, once claiming she'd rather talk about sheep-dipping than emotions.

Yet her desire to guard her privacy goes in hand with an exhibitionist streak, the theatrical bravado to stand on stage in a tiny red dress crying, "Lick my legs, I'm on fire." Ever since her London breakdown, she has successfully fought to create a free space in which these inconsistencies are allowed to coexist.

Let England Shake is her crowning achievement. It's the culmination of her interests in violence, mortality and role play, channelled into one of the great themes of art – war. Typically elusive, Harvey doesn't make her own opinion about Iraq or Afghanistan explicit. But as she told the FT, "you'll probably find it in the spaces in between".

Protest music was explicit during the Vietnam war because of the draft: Country Joe and The Fish and Edwin Starr addressed audiences for whom combat overseas was all too real. The contrast with now, when many in the west struggle to engage with the wars waged in their name, is profound. Ms Harvey, rock's self-designated war artist, has made it her job to bridge that gulf.