

Roly and Rosie - First Meeting 1982?

Thoughts and memories,,,

It was a sunny day in Northiam, on Main Street....I was wearing a white peasant blouse and my jumble sale green wild silk harem pants, don't remember the shoes; and as I walked into the church hall my eye was caught by a red-headed guy with glasses who was very busy indeed, seemingly setting up a whole load of musical equipment all on his own. I remember thinking how focussed he was on his task, and the degree of attention he was giving to it – I suppose I knew that he was Roly Johnson Bell, and he was scheduled to give a concert that evening for the Youth Group; but my attention was claimed by the girls in the kitchen, who I had come to help in some way – perhaps I had brought some food for the kids, seems likely, but I don't recall. I had a joke with them all, and left. Roly says he remembers my laughing.....

I was asked if I would let Roly park his caravan in front of my house, as there was plenty of room to turn it around, and I willingly agreed. I had realised he was quite a remarkable guy, and was very willing to get to know more about him, and his music. I must have asked him in, for I remember him stalking around the house with his boots clack- clacking on the timber floors (I recall thinking how Roly reminded me of the "Traffic" song, "The low spark of high-heeled boys....."., as he was busy telling me his likes and dislikes- hot curry was a like, I think . I DO remember when he walked in the front door for the first time that he pronounced, "A BLESSING ON THIS HOUSE" – and I FELT the blessing rest on me in a real and tangible way, it was remarkable!!

Roly inspected what was left of my collection of vinyl records – definitely sadly depleted after the fire in '71 which had destroyed most of the Thatched Cottage; which, by this time, had only just finished being rebuilt. But he seemed to find a number of favourites there! I think he was one of the very few people I had ever met who had even HEARD of Little Feat, let alone knew and admired them! As he walked about, chatting and offering opinions on many religious and secular subjects, he was very frankly and uncompromisingly Bible- rooted in his views; after saying that he "liked my strides", by then I had donned a skin-tight pair of Spandex trousers, as I recall . I thought that I really liked his honesty, and the way he talked to me as if I was a person of value, and looked me straight in the eye, not covert ogling like so many Christian men. I suppose I was a rather glamorous addition to the church in Northiam, and a rather dangerous one, being a notorious rock n roll divorcee; but I never got the feeling that Roly was looking at me wrongly. Interestingly, at that point, Roly knew nothing of my colourful past; he only learned that later! He was obviously very married indeed; but I DO remember thinking rather wistfully, "LORD JESUS, couldn't you find a husband like this one for me?" There must have been a few angels nudging one another and laughing behind their hands at that point, I shouldn't wonder!! But more of that later.....

Second Meeting.....

Not By Might.....

There were to be a series of Tent Missions on various village greens in our neighbourhood, with Alf Lavender, a seasoned veteran speaker at such occasions, I gathered. Roly was coming to do the music. Great stuff!! My Swiss friend Charlie(Charlotte) was staying with me at the Thatched Cottage at the time, and Roly's caravan was parked in the big garden at the front of the house again. He had somehow persuaded Charlie and me to perform the backing vocals on one of his songs – a cracking Gospel holler called “Not By Might”- which we did, in the tent on Northiam Village Green!! I remember the way Roly engaged the youth on these occasions – he fearlessly got the bad lads, who were heckling at the back, well involved – and on the last night of the Mission, on the playing field at Broad Oak Brede, the ringleader of the gang stepped forward to give his allegiance to Jesus Christ. I was watching effective musical evangelism in action, and was I impressed! Roly had a single out at that time, called “Does HE Know Your Name?”, and he played the song with remarkable effect, every time. What a man!! As another of his songs said it, he was “Souled out to JESUS”. I thought he was great; but I swear it was all absolutely proper feelings; the LORD had cleaned up my heart as well as my act!!

Every time Roly visited, it seemed there was another addition to his family (there were five, at the latest count); and I do remember that his children had the most beautiful manners of any I had ever met. I never really engaged with his wife at all; Polly was a very quiet woman who always seemed to be in the background – I don't remember talking to her at any length about anything important the whole time she was in my orbit. Probably my fault – I have never been very interested in women, unless they are quite out of the box!! Like Roly's daughters – but more of them later.....

We gradually lost touch; the yearly Christmas card with news from the Midlands and Roly's Christian exploits finally ceased when I moved house to live in Brede, and for several years I heard nothing from the Johnson Bells; there were apparently no more missions in the area to bring Roly down to East Sussex, and so our lives continued on separate tracks until 2005.....