

'Look up Brother, there's a sky above you . . .'

The real story behind a poem that became a song

Josh Spencer sent me this story after reading my version of what happened to this wonderful song – Look Up Brother – clearing up the mystery, 43 years later. Poetic justice, can we say?

Here's the link to what I wrote (badly) some 10 years ago, that prompted Josh's response:

<http://www.3rdear.com/hyarchive/hiddenyearsstory/hookupbrother.html>

In 1968 I was a young photographer living in a Parktown artists commune. Having left art school in Durban I had made my way to Joburg, then the centre of all things trendy and Parktown was the trendiest of all, a veritable Height Ashbury crammed with wild and wonderful characters. I was one of the lucky few that briefly inhabited the now legendary 'Friedora', a huge Victorian mansion that stood on Oxford Road. Sadly, the magnificent house was slated for demolition and we were given notice. A group of us ex-Friedorians, determined to stick together, found a much more modest house in Yeoville and moved there.

The house in Hopkins St was also home to several new faces, one being the young, beautiful and charismatic Leslie Ann Humphris, pictured below left, a poet and artist. Another was Frank Cassell, a much older and somewhat sinister character who soured the atmosphere of the new commune. Other residents included Tom Dennen, an American writer and musician and his girlfriend Estelle, Reg Pennington the painter and sculptor with his wife Megan, Gaby Boules and several others. Regular visitors included Arthur Cantrell also a painter and sculptor and his girlfriend Jenny Tannahill, who had been at school with Leslie. The house soon became a focal point for all sorts of wierdos and the kitchen the scene of almost nightly spontaneous parties.

In this crazy atmosphere Leslie and I were thrown together and fell in love. I read all her poetry, in fact everyone did, and one poem in particular. This was scrawled on a sheet of paper and pinned up in the kitchen, our communal meeting place. *'Look up Brother'* was seen and read by all who entered that kitchen, including dozens of visitors. People really connected to it. It was the most accessible of all Leslie's poems, being a simple, memorable 'sixties' style Beat poem with the same meter as 'People get ready, there's a train a-coming'. Frank was so impressed by this poem that he must have copied it out for himself or taken the copy from the wall.



Frank scraped a living doing all sorts of stuff and one assignment he landed was making busts and heraldic devices as decoration for the new Nobleman restaurant in Hillbrow. I photographed Frank working on these plaster busts in his improvised workshop on the back verandah of the Hopkins St house, above right. Tom Dennen assisted Frank in casting some of these decorative pieces. Later, I remember visiting the restaurant just prior to its opening. Frank was putting the finishing touches to the décor, mounting the busts on the walls and there on the freeze of the wall I vividly recall seeing, written large, the verses of Leslie's poem *'Look up Brother, there's a sky above you'*. For some unfathomable reason Frank, never the sanest person, had decided to incorporate the poem into the décor, without asking or telling the author!

At the time neither I nor Leslie thought much about it. In fact, I suspected that the verses would be painted out as soon as Frank's back was turned. Sixties Beat poetry hardly suited the faux classical pretensions of the restaurant. Leslie and I left the Hopkins St commune shortly afterwards and found digs back in Parktown. Late in 1969 we fled SA to sample the dying gasp of the 'swinging sixties' in London. However, we returned in 1970, Leslie then six months pregnant.

Whilst we were overseas, the SA music scene had experienced an extraordinary flowering of creativity so, back in Jo'burg, I was kept busy photographing the live concerts of **Abstract Truth**, **Freedom's Children**, **Otis Waygood** and other groups then performing in and around Jo'burg.. Virtually all these acts were being managed by Clive Calder, I often bumped into him at these concerts. He later produced an LP with **Hawk**, an afro-rock outfit and incredibly, one of the tracks was a song entitled *'Look up Brother'*! Apparently, the Nobleman restaurant had become a popular hangout for muso's. Clearly, the poem had not been painted over and the song was plagiarized, word for word, from Leslie's poem still on the wall.

I arranged a meeting with Clive Calder to discuss this. He told me that authorship would be difficult to prove and it was not worth pursuing anyway as the **Hawk** LP had not been a success. Neither Leslie nor I were keen to pursue the matter. It just didn't seem important. We put the matter out of our minds and moved on.

Now after a lapse of forty years it has come to my attention that all sorts of people are claiming authorship of the poem. I know that all such claims are absolutely spurious. Obviously, for music publishing purposes, **Hawk** claimed copyright. The music is certainly theirs' but the lyrics are indisputably plagiarized from the poem written by Leslie two years *before* their record was released. Here's what Tom Dennen, now resident in Durban, said recently: 'I'm pretty sure that Leslie wrote *'Look up Brother'* because it was pinned up on the fridge (in the Hopkins St house).

Final words from the author herself, now living in Hermanus: 'I remember *'Look up Brother'* was written one evening at the kitchen table in Hopkins St, Yeoville. I left it in my notebook on the table and one of the others (Tom? Reg?) thought it was great and tore it out of the book and stuck it up on the kitchen wall where it stayed. The only people who knew it was mine were the others living in the house. There was a bit of an outcry when it was claimed by someone else, but being me and not thinking much of the poem myself. I sort of let it go. It's no big deal – *'Look up Brother'* was hardly Dylan!'

'nuff said!

Josh Spencer. Cornwall Sept 2011.