



# SOUTH ATLANTIC BLUES

Renegade musician **SCOTT FAGAN** enjoyed a dreamlike boho upbringing, was courted by New York musical giants Doc Pomus and Bert Berns, recorded scores of demos for Screen Gems Music and created the first rock opera to be staged on Broadway, one which lambasted the music industry and resulted in Fagan being blacklisted.

But his musical legacy hinges on a pair of complex, soulful albums recorded eight years apart in the '60s and '70s that have touched the lucky few who've heard them.

**HUGH DELLAR** salutes this mysterious figure and asks why he isn't as celebrated as countless less worthy contemporaries

I first stumbled across the music of Scott Fagan back in late 2005 as a result of one of those serendipitous moments with which anyone who's spent a disproportionate slice of their life sifting through boxes of old records will be familiar. It had been one of those crisp, clear autumn days where the sunlight takes on a silvery slant and the air contains the first hints of the cold to come. The old and much-missed Greenwich Market in south-east London, a stone's throw from the Meridian line, was slowly winding down; racks of old vintage coats were being shunted back into vans, tourists were wending their way back towards

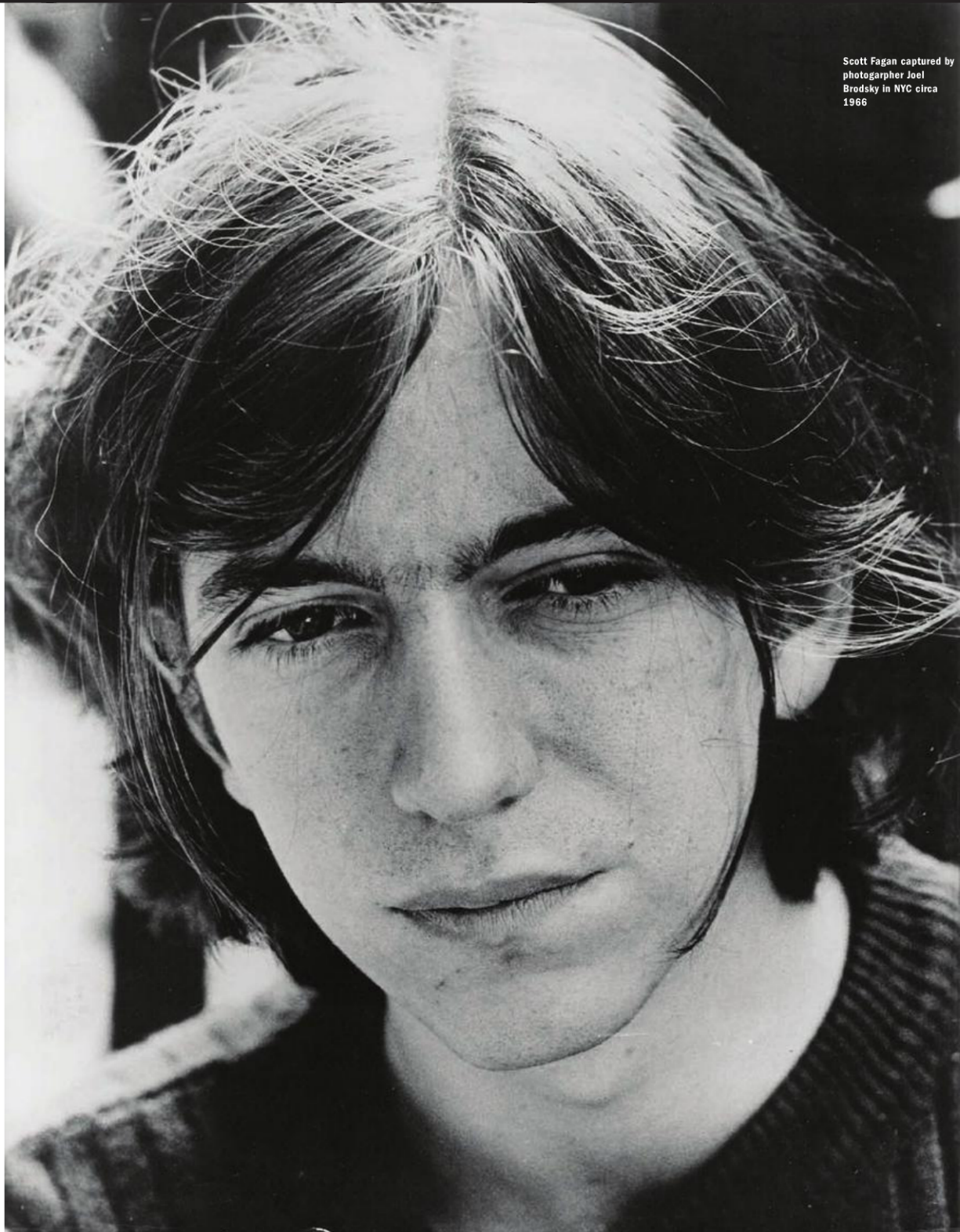
the overground station and I was dutifully dirtying my fingers in one final box of unpromising old LPs.

Right near the back, a cover caught my attention. It didn't ring any bells. I'd not heard of the artist or, to the best of my knowledge, seen the record anywhere before, but there was something intense and inviting about the stark black and white cover shot of a well-tousled young man, eyes slightly downcast and with a hint of the young Bobby Gillespie about him. It featured all originals, was from 1968 and on Atlantic Records offshoot, Atco, home to plenty of well-known goodness. The loose lines on the back

mentioned Scott was of St Thomas in The Virgin Islands, which made some sense of the intriguing title – *South Atlantic Blues* – and there were also hints of an impoverished background, a Doc Pomus connection, and time spent in New York. To top it all, the seller muttered "£2 that, mate" in my ear – and it was sold.

I got it home, stuck it on the deck and by the time I was halfway through side one, my jaw was almost on the floor: a voice that veers somewhere between Scott Walker, Tim Hardin, early Bowie and Donovan – yes, THAT good! Deep, sonorous, arrangements on the horns

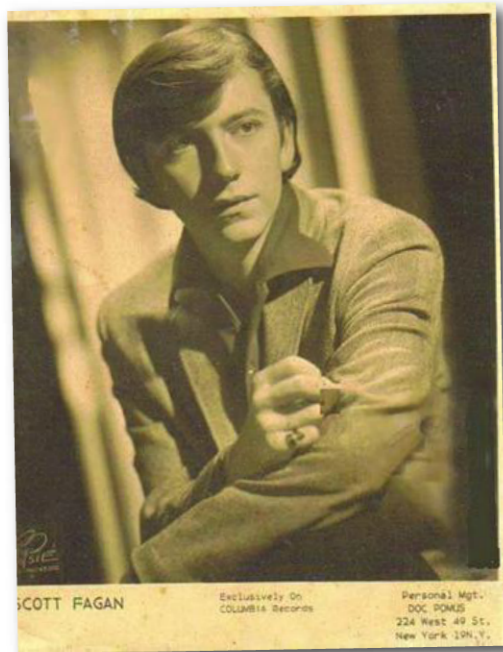




Scott Fagan captured by  
photographer Joel  
Brodsky in NYC circa  
1966







was an orphaned barroom singer named Sally Travis who'd left Scotland for the States at the age of 18, been impregnated by a married Irish politician from the Bronx and died eight years later, leaving Scott's father to be raised by The Christian Brotherhood. His parents wound up on 52nd due to their immersion in the nascent be-bop scene. Frankie played with Lester Young and Lady Day, whilst Leila, along with identical sister Lea were modern dancers come nightfall. Fagan's earliest memories are of endless hours spent sitting in smoky rehearsal halls and dance studios soaking up music. And nicotine, of course, incidentally!

However this bohemian idyll was soon to be shattered as his parents separated over the extra-curricular attentions from the chippies – '40s groupies – that Frankie found so hard to resist. Leila fell in with a modern art sculptor / painter and, together with her twin sister, moved first to the beach at Rockaway in

heaven, it was hell, it was music filled, colourful and beautiful often violent; real life."

As previously stated, the one ever-present factor was always music. Leila's most prized possession was her old steamer trunk full of jazz 78s: Billie Holiday, Billy Eckstein, Sarah Vaughan, The Count, The Duke, Dizzy and all the rest. Jazz filled the house. Outside it was calypso, mambo, pachanga, charanga, and beautifully sung boleros, bumping up against the stirring martial music of Armed Forces Radio. At night, fading in and out with the trade winds, would come southern gospel, country and western and – God preserve one and all – rhythm and blues and American rock 'n' roll! It was a fabulous time, full immersion in every kind of music; all of it stirring away at the emerging soul and imagination. Scott listened and sang and began to dream about songs that could change the world. Throughout his adolescence, whenever

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and strings; a smidgen of Erma Franklin's 'Piece Of My Heart'; a touch of the soul mysticism that informed *Astral Weeks*; the occasional steel drum; soft evening winds in the palm trees on the beach; bare feet treading the deep black sands; New Orleans radio picked up down in the Caribbean, with its saddest, truest songs hitting home the hardest; subtle psych touches – an echo or two here, a hint of phasing there; acoustic guitars that stroke and stone you to the very core.

I was stunned that such a remarkable collection of songs could've remained off the radar for so long. Almost a decade down the line, the mystery of this great enigma has only deepened, though hopefully if the current provisional discussions about reissuing the album bear fruit, that may well change at last. Lord knows it's been a long time coming.

Born in a basement apartment in jazz heaven, 52nd Street New York City, on the 26th of August 1945, to a broke young tenor saxophonist Frankie Fagan and his teenage jazz baby dancer girlfriend Leila Kelly, Scott was part of a family as complicated and fraught as it was musical. His paternal grandmother

New York and then on to the long-established arts colony in St Thomas in The Virgin Islands.

Life was about to take a turn for the stranger. Over the coming years, Leila would struggle with drinking issues and marry a total of eight more times, mostly to alcoholic West Indian men. Two more kids – Larry and Lonnie – arrived and the ragged troupe moved over 20 times, always staying one step ahead of the debt collector, hopping all over the islands, on to Puerto Rico, back to New York and then south again! They were as broke as broke could be, and for many years Scott and his sister Gale (whose godfather was none other than Dizzy Gillespie) were the only white kids in the Island public school system.

Looking back on his peripatetic childhood today, Scott insists that they "learned a great deal about fairness and living, and about love, but very little about academics. All in all, our childhood experiences as impoverished white children in primarily black and Spanish societies were invaluable, and I wouldn't change them for anything. We were loved and nurtured by people of every kind colour, sexual orientation and cultural background. It was

he found himself in a spot of local bother, Fagan would quite literally jump ship and go hang with father Frankie back in the States. By this time, leader of The Tic Tac Toe Trio, Frankie more or less lived on the road, touting Dixie Jazz round the southern supper club circuits, and watching the emphasis his pop placed on phrasing helped nurture Scott's own latent sense of voice.

Back in the Islands, there was a dearth of local rock 'n' roll bands, but a surplus of doo-wop groups, all sweet close harmony singing and playing on the other side of the beat, a habit that clearly seeped into Scott's own unique delivery. What other live music there was came mainly from Puerto Rico, with the most popular act being the mighty Cortijo Y Su Combo featuring Ishmael Rivera, who blasted out mambo and meringue and the birthing of salsa.

By the early '60s, the shape of Scott's life to come was slowly starting to come into focus as he earned his first bucks from music. On tour with his father in Augusta, Georgia, he was touted to the crowd as "Fidel, the fucking singing revolutionary from the islands" and hauled up to sing a request – the old standard 'I Left My Heart In San



Francisco'. Playing his old man's double bass and singing his heart out on the tune earned him the princely tip of \$20 and the die was duly cast.

Once home, he put together The Urchins, appropriately named given that by this point Fagan was leading an extremely itinerant life, often crashing on rooftops or down by the beach. Playing calypso, folk, R&B and rock 'n' roll, they played every venue available, often racking up two or three gigs a night and culminating in a big concert in The Ball Park with the Great Lord Kitchener. Shortly afterwards, Scott signed on as a bilge rat on *The Success*, a 50 foot schooner heading for the States and sailed out of the harbour of Charlotte Amalie (mentioned in the title track of his first LP as a torrid place to

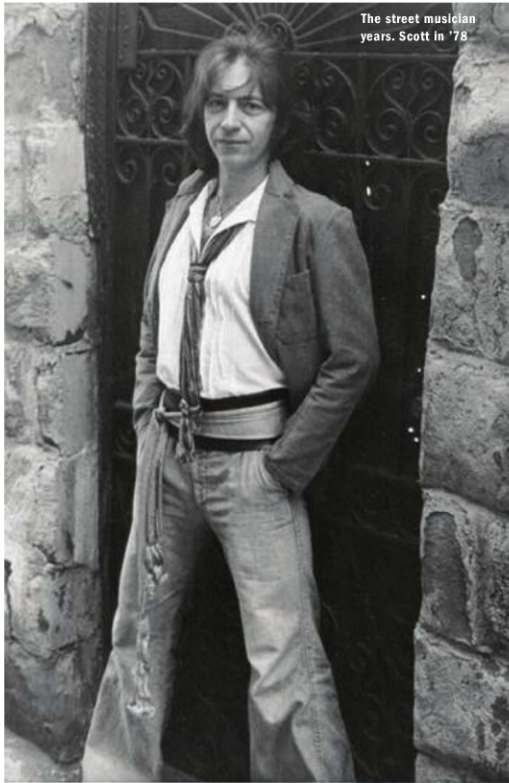
be escaped from, though also the place Scott continues to refer to as his hometown and holds in the deepest affection), at dawn on July 2nd, 1964. A month later, they arrived in Florida and Scott started gigging at The House Of Pegasus, in Ft Lauderdale. A group of girls formed a small fan club, collected \$50 among themselves, and presented Fagan with a bus ticket to New York City. He arrived in mid-October, barefoot, with 11¢ and a phone number, which he proceeded to call. An invitation to The Forrest Hotel on 49th Street to sing for the great Doc Pomus ensued.

By the mid-60s, Pomus was already very well-established, having co-written (with pianist Mort Shuman) countless hits for the likes of Dion & The

Belmonts, Ben E King, The Searchers, Elvis, Fabian and many more, and he signed Fagan on the spot after hearing a couple of his originals. He was given a contract, a room and was stuck into the studio soon afterwards. Pomus, Shuman and Fagan went on to co-write a slow-burning soul belter 'I'm Gonna Cry Til My Tears Run Dry', cut first by Irma Thomas, later by Linda Ronstadt but most powerfully by Lorraine Ellison.

Within a month of arriving in The Big Apple, a deal with Columbia Records had materialised, resulting in a dark piano-driven ballad, 'You Weren't Made To Be True', which was produced by Wes Farrell, though ended up unreleased. Undeterred, Fagan then signed a deal with Bert Burns (writer of 'Twist And Shout', 'Here Comes The





Fagan subsequently signed with ATCO but, incredibly, Jerry Schoenbaum never came to terms for his own deal and never did sign on. You can imagine how excited the next President of ATCO was to promote Jerry Schoenbaum's pet project *South Atlantic Blues*! In the end, the album was finally released as part of a batch in the summer of '68 and received next to no promotion at all.

Which is one of those appalling travesties of justice that litter the histories of so many of the musicians we love. Opener 'In My Head' is a slow burning ballad steeped in deep soul with typically literate lyrics ("Myself and I have always seen the sea as secret lover / But does she, does she, does she want the sky instead?"), and Scott's breathtaking voice all strangely suppressed hysteria. It sounds like nothing else ever at all. 'Nickels And Dimes' is skittering folk-jazz à la Donovan or Bob Ray, while 'Crying' weeps late into the night, tears flowing off on gossamer tides, as hard-hitting as anything Dave Godin ever selected. And so it goes on. Killer after killer after killer, it sold to no one and went largely unheard (though a few of those with

the street address, imagining a store front in the East Village.

On the appointed date, my childhood sweetie from the Islands and I got into a taxi and I gave the driver the address. I was still projecting visions of chicken bones stuck to canvases of crazy day-glo watermelons, when the cab pulled up in front of MOMA (The Museum Of Modern Art). My sweetie and I, two raw provincials from the bongo isles, were ushered into the hallowed halls, and there, lit and framed and hanging in splendid splendour, was this fantastic lithograph of the A-side of *South Atlantic Blues*, now entitled *Scott Fagan Record*. We were flabbergasted. We were surrounded by Jasper and his friends and treated like royalty."

Undaunted by most things in life, Fagan did what he has always done: shrugged and moved on to whatever it is that comes next. Which in this instance was an ill-fated satirical Broadway rock musical, *Soon*, co-written with friend Joe Kookoolis and based on their grim experiences in The Biz, with all its hypocrisy and evil money-making machinations. The original cast featured

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Night' among many others), who was in the process of setting up his new indie label Bang. Signed at the same time were Neil Diamond and Van Morrison. Not for the last time, however, fate intervened and around the time of the release of Fagan's 'Tutsie' / 'Give Love A Chance' 45, Burns died of a heart attack at the tender age of 38 and the single went nowhere.

Whilst still in New York, Fagan recorded his debut LP. The sessions were produced by Elmer Jared Gordon at Musicor on West 56th Street, not far from where he'd lived as a kid. Once completed, the madness began as Apple Records held on to the album, trying to decide whether to release it or James Taylor's debut as their first release. That mean ol' mother fate again! Meanwhile, Jerry Schoenbaum, who was the president of the hottest folk-rock label of the time, Verve/Forecast, was very clear that he wanted the album for his label, so it was passed on to him. However, just then ATCO offered Schoenbaum the company's presidency.

ears were listening: JJ Jackson subsequently cut a great cover of 'Tenement Halls' on his '69 LP, *The Greatest Little Soul Band In The Land*. The world is all sad stories. A further rare fan at the time was the painter and printmaker Jasper Johns, who apparently found the record languishing in a bargain bin, bought it, and was so smitten that he decided to produce his own version of the disc. Scott remembers well what happened next.

"I was working in my little office at Screen Gems Music in '69 or '70, when the phone rang. I answered it and heard a voice telling me excitedly about his friend who was an artist, and was crazy about my album *South Atlantic Blues*. His friend had done some kind of visual representation of my album. He was going to have a show and wanted me to come to the opening somewhere, sometime in the next few weeks. Now, just because and ONLY because my mother had taught me to always be polite, I responded politely. I took down

Scott himself in the lead, and also a young Richard Gere, and rave reviews ensued, though various pressures then conspired and the play closed – or was closed – shortly after its launch. Little of the music was ever recorded (though, bizarrely, a muzak version of the title song ended up serenading Scott one night as he did his late-night supermarket shop!), and Kookoolis was so broken by the experience he never wrote again and died in Santa Monica in '78! Various fragments and live recordings of the show exist and what Fagan describes as its "90-minute long song story, intricately woven and lovingly constructed" may yet still see the light of day in some shape or form this side of never.

As for many '60s performers stumbling into a new decade, the years that followed were long, dark and stormy. No record label or publishing company would have anything to do with Fagan, who now had three little ones to take care of and so did whatever he had to do. In his case, this meant some of



## In The Blood

The remarkable story of the son Scott Fagan never knew he had

Natural magnetism.  
Stephen Merritt, Alix  
Merritt and Scott,  
Lincoln Center, 2013

Musicality flows through the veins of every generation of Scott Fagan's remarkable and complex family. The son of a saxophonist whose mother was a barroom singer, Fagan only found out relatively recently about the existence of a son who has carried on the songwriting tradition.

Best known for his work with The Magnetic Fields, but also a prolific solo artist and member of The 6ths, Future Bible Heroes and The Gothic Archies, Stephen Merritt is widely renowned as a purveyor of dark, literate pop music. Stephen's mother was Alix Merritt, with whom a young Fagan enjoyed a brief fling whilst she was in The Virgin Islands whilst in the middle of a divorce. As he puts it, "I was singing with The Urchins at Duffy's Infamous Bar in early 1964. She was an interesting bohemian lady, making sweet eyes at me and that's the long and short of it."

Unbeknownst to Scott, the result of the brief union was a baby boy, born in '65. Blissfully he continued in his ignorance until a few years ago, when his ex-wife Annie called to say that someone on the radio was claiming Fagan was his father.

He contacted the program and tracked down Merritt's manager, Claudia Gonson, through whom an email correspondence was begun. Scott and Stephen only met in person in 2013 at a New York screening of a Doc Pomus film. They clicked, Scott recognising that the pair were "connected by experiential pain – in the soul and in the noggin."

A Kickstarter project was then started to raise funding for Fagan to record an album of covers of his son's work, a scheme currently shelved, but ready to roll any time anyone out there wants to set its wheels in motion.

everything under the sun. He sold dollar belts, rings, earrings and necklaces, hats, socks and trinkets galore on the streets of New York. He worked the phones selling office supplies, magazines, seminars. He ran a door-to-door supermarket circular crew all over the five Boroughs. He was a Greenpeace field worker, and a Sierra Club fundraiser, a construction worker, an assistant janitor and even drove a NYC taxi cab (for one night and one night only). He also did many pass-the-basket house gigs and lots and lots of street singing, with his favourite spots being beneath the arch in Washington Square and on the Staten Island ferry, both going and coming.

Finally, in '75 Warren Schatz, Scott's record producer at that time, wangled a little one-album deal with LOVE Records of Helsinki, and, with his then sweetheart Vickie Sue Robinson doing backgrounds, he set out to make *Many Sunny Places*, which ended up on RCA in the States and featured two songs from *Soon*: 'Roll Out The Morning' and 'Please Be Well'.

And then? Well, following his own long-running problems with alcohol, which can be traced all the way to back to early teenage years spent boozing in The Sand Box and Trader

Dan's in the alleys and backstreets of Charlotte Amelie where he "drank and danced and fought and fucked like... well... a crazed drunken child in a perfect never land", there was the course in chemical dependency counselling at UCLA, which led to the design and implementation of a non-profit program for artists and individuals in the industry called BIZRP, which has been in operation for over 15 years now as Musicares through NARAS, the Grammy folk, and a MAP (the Musicians' Assistance Program) through the Musicians' Union.

And then, of course, there was life. And where there is life, there is music. In Scott's own words: "I've been singing and writing and doing some kind of every skriffle and skrun in the world. I've been having and raising little ones – five extraordinary children with four extraordinary women. I've been living a most real and interesting life – gritty and profoundly human. I'm a singer, a writer and creative, defiant human being."

Scott still sings, gigs and records both on the Islands and in the States with his MAAC Island Band and is also – in his own sweet, slow way – working on preserving his legacy. [B1](#)