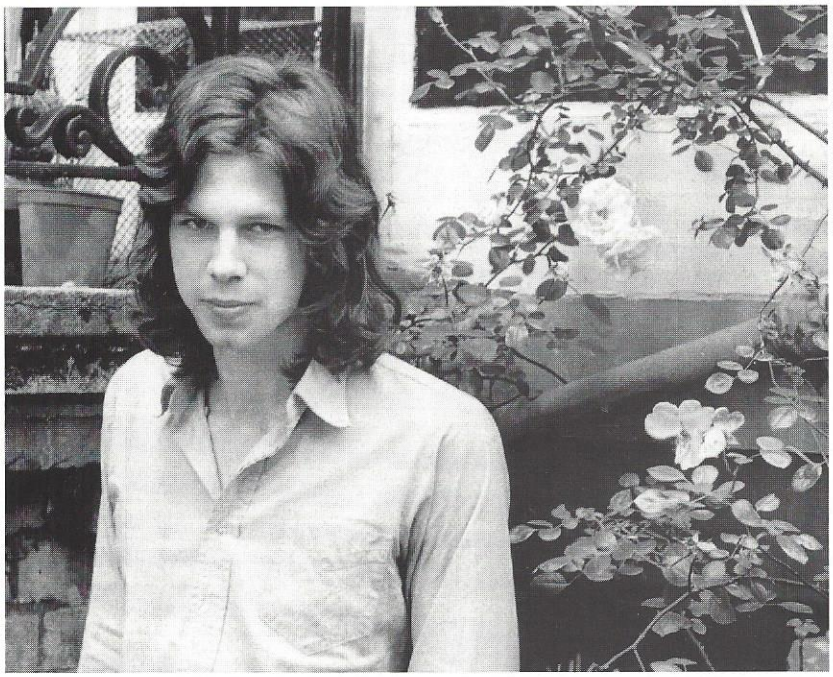
Daniel Durchholz

Nick Drake



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Surely you saw the Volkswagen commercial. In a clip that was fairly ubiquitous in the spring of 2000, four demographically correct twentysomethings cruise a country lane in their snazzy new VW Cabrio, its top down, a full moon and a million stars shining. They reach their destination—a party—but rather than join the gathering, they simultaneously hit on the same idea and head back to the car, instead preferring to continue their idyllic nighttime drive.

It was a memorable ad, but it wasn't the visuals that stuck in most viewers' minds; it was the soft, seductive music playing in the background: a lightly strummed acoustic guitar and a lonesome, whispery voice singing something about a pink moon—whatever that might be—being on the way. *Who is that singing?* viewers wondered. *And what is that song?*

Fans of relatively obscure British folk music of the late '60s and early '70s knew the answers. The voice was Nick Drake's and the song was "Pink Moon," the title track of the third and final album that the singer—who died in 1974 at the age of 26, of an overdose of the prescription antidepressant Tryptizol—would release during his lifetime. Drake was a struggling artist who pined for commercial success and the validation it would bring to his work, and debate still continues as to whether his death was deliberate—the endgame of the crippling depression he'd suffered for some time—or merely an accident.

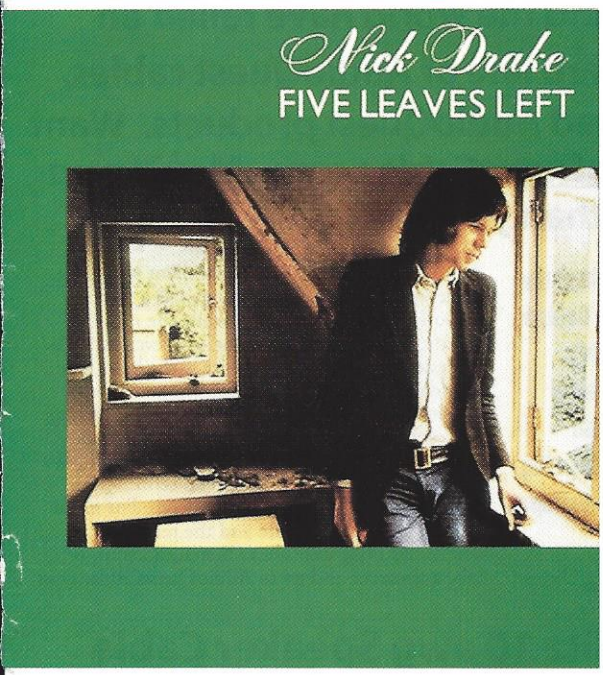
Drake is buried in Tanworth-in-Arden, the small town outside Birmingham where he grew up and where, two years before he died, he returned to live once again with his parents. The epitaph on his tombstone borrows a line from one of his songs, "From the Morning": "Now we rise and we are everywhere."

It's hard to imagine that jumpstarting his career by having his music featured in a popular television commercial is what Drake had in mind when he wrote "Pink Moon." Still, thanks in large part to the VW spot, suddenly Drake *is* everywhere. His albums have never been out of print, it's true, but not because of steady and continuing sales. It's only because of a contract stipulation insisted upon by Drake producer Joe Boyd when he sold Drake's catalog to Island Records in the early '70s. Drake's oeuvre has been reissued in various ways over the years, including the *Fruit Tree* boxed set (1979), and the anthologies *Heaven in a Wild Flower* (1990) and *Way to Blue* (1994). Most recently, the individual titles of *Five Leaves Left*, *Bryter Layter*, and *Pink Moon* were reissued by Boyd's Hannibal label. But on balance, there hasn't exactly been a crushing demand for Nick Drake product.

Nor is there now—but there's more demand than ever before, just as there is more awareness of the artist himself. Articles about Drake appear fairly frequently these days, and he was the subject of a 1997 biography. Numerous musical acts have shown evidence of his influence on their own work, and some have expressed admiration for his songs. These include R.E.M., Tom Verlaine, Kate Bush, Belle and Sebastian, Elliott Smith, Beth Orton, Everything But the Girl, the Cardigans, Lucinda Williams (who proved she was ahead of the curve by covering Drake's "Which Will" in 1992 on *Sweet Old World*), and Duncan Sheik—who, with guitarist Gerry Leonard, performed the *Pink Moon* album in its entirety last year at Joe's Pub in New York.

All in all, Drake's is a fairly remarkable legacy for an artist who, in his lifetime, never had a hit single, sold fewer than 20,000 records, played only a couple dozen times in public, and gave just one interview. Some might argue that his current popularity, however belated, is another case of death continuing to be rock's most consistently dependable career move. After all, dying made legends of Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Brian Jones, Jim Morrison, Duane Allman, Gram Parsons, Tim Buckley, and, more recently, Kurt Cobain and Jeff Buckley.

But consider this: By the time they died, those artists were already established stars. Drake stands alone in having become a star a quarter century after he threw off this mortal coil. Part of that may have been a fluke, sure.



(Volkswagen initially intended to back their commercial with The Church's "Under the Milky Way.") But if Drake had had no talent or good material to go along with his tragic story, he'd have remained a mere footnote in the annals of rock history. That he is an artist whose influence and importance continue to increase speaks to his originality and the inherent value of his small but significant body of work.

Perhaps the most exotic fact about Nick Drake that can be dredged up is the place of his birth—Rangoon, Burma—on June 19, 1948. His father was employed there by the Bombay Burmah Trading Company, which exported teak from the island nation. As England lost its grip on the country, the Drakes repaired to India, then to England, where Nick and his older sister, Gabrielle, later an actress in the British TV series *Crossroads*, enjoyed an upper-middle-class upbringing that included posh boarding schools. Nick began playing piano at an early age, and showed a talent for composing songs, but at that point rock'n'roll was still far from Tanworth-in-Arden.

At age eight, Nick was sent to Sandhurst, a prep school located in Berkshire. He later attended Marlborough, as had his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather. As reported by Patrick Humphries in *Nick Drake: The Biography*, what marked Drake's school years was how utterly normal they were. Drake was a happy, good-natured student who, his fans may be surprised to learn, was quite athletic—he ran track and played rugby and field hockey.

Drake also was intent on developing his musical talents in those years, and learned guitar, clarinet, saxophone, and piano. For a time, he played in a Rolling Stones/Yardbirds–style band, somewhat unfortunately called the Perfumed Gardeners. He also traveled to London to see bands, and, when school was out, hitchhiked across France.

France held a special place in Drake's imagination, and he returned there for much of 1966, when he had a year between secondary school and his matriculation at Fitzwilliam College in Cambridge. He also traveled to Africa briefly, and tried drugs for the first time. There has been much speculation about whether Drake ever tried LSD or heroin, and whether such drugs had anything to do with his declining mental state in his last years. Mostly, it seemed, he was merely an avid pot smoker, but it is unknown how much that may have contributed to his becoming more and more socially withdrawn.

Musically, Drake couldn't help but be affected by the major albums of that era, including the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, and records by Cream, Traffic, and Pink Floyd. Not surprisingly, he was more drawn to such singer-songwriters of the day as Bob Dylan, Tim Buckley, Leonard Cohen, Tim Hardin, and especially Randy Newman, whose carefully orchestrated debut album became a model of sorts for Drake's own debut, *Five Leaves Left*. Drake was also drawn to American folk blues, and English guitarists such as Bert Jansch and John Renbourn.

Performing for friends at Cambridge but seldom for the general public, Drake began putting together the songs that would comprise *Five Leaves Left*. At some point he did play in public, however, for he was seen and heard by Ashley Hutchings, then bassist for Fairport Convention, who told the young singer to send a demo tape of his songs to Fairport's manager and producer, Joe Boyd. Drake complied, and Boyd signed him to Witchseason, a company designed to supply artists with all their needs—management, record production, and promotion. At that time, Witchseason represented Fairport as well as John and Beverly Martyn and the Incredible String Band, and had made a deal to distribute their artists through the then-fledgling independent label, Island Records.

Recording for *Five Leaves Left*—the title is a reference to a warning (that supplies are running low) found toward the end of a pack of rolling papers—began in London in July 1968 and continued for the better part of a year. The album features Drake playing deft acoustic guitar figures and showing off a variety of unusual tunings. (To this day, his tunings tend to baffle guitar players trying to copy them.) Drake's voice is wispy and wistful yet absolutely engaging, even somewhat aristocratic—he wasn't one to lose his English pronunciation while singing, as did so many British vocalists.

Other musicians on the disc include Richard Thompson (then with Fairport Convention), who plays some country-tinged electric guitar licks on "Time Has Told Me"; and bassist Danny Thompson (Pentangle), cellist Clare Lowther (who had played with the Strawbs), Ghanian percussionist Rocki Dzidzournu, and pianist Paul Harris. Harry Robinson, who had once recorded novelty songs as Lord Rockingham, did the string arrangement for "River Man." The rest of the string arrangements were written by Robert Kirby, an otherwise untested talent who was one of Drake's friends from Cambridge.

The songs themselves carry a somber, autumnal mood that seems slightly out of place coming from a 20-year-old making his debut album at the end of the swinging '60s. Drake's lyrics here are not as dark as they'd become by the time of *Pink Moon*, but they do betray his feelings of isolation and his inability to communicate through conventional means. Standout tracks include "Three Hours," which features some of Drake's most dazzling guitar work, and the exquisite "Cello Song." Kirby's arrangements of "Day is Done," "Way to Blue," "The Thoughts of Mary Jane," and "Fruit Tree" are equally fine.

"Fruit Tree" produces the album's most chilling moment, when Drake intones "Fame is but a fruit tree / So very unsound / It can never flourish / Till its stalk is in the ground." Later, he muses, "Safe in your place deep in the earth / That's when they'll know what you were really worth." It seems unlikely that Drake could know his dark fate already at that point, to say nothing of

his posthumous notoriety. Perhaps he was merely being dramatic. Nevertheless, the lyric causes a shudder on every listen, which is as it should be.

The album's only real misstep is "Man in a Shed," a laughably lame come-on that, if nothing else, proves that Drake (who had no lasting love relationships that anyone can recall) was indeed a painfully shy man with no particularly effective pickup lines. "Mary Jane"—another drug reference to go along with the album title—seems very dated now but is still a pretty song.

Five Leaves Left is a mightily impressive debut. The public didn't think so, though, and, when it was released in September 1969, stayed away in droves. It garnered some good reviews but sold only a few thousand copies, and many of those were likely due to the reputation of producer Joe Boyd. Boyd had substantial cred by that time, thanks to his work with Fairport, the Incredible String Band, and others. Drake's lack of enthusiasm for touring—he did try it, but the gigs were mostly dismal failures—surely contributed to the album's lack of success, as did the fact that loud, heavy rock was the music of the day, not fey, ponderous folk. And where were the singles?

Still determined to make it in music, Drake dropped out of Cambridge and moved to London. There he wrote the songs that would become his second album, *Bryter Layter*, recorded over nine months in 1970 and released in November of that year. Impressive as *Five Leaves Left* may have been, it gives way to *Bryter Layter* in terms of being Drake's best and most fully realized album. This is due in part to its sound, which is fleshed out by jazzy melodies and full-band arrangements, including brass and strings (once again arranged by Robert Kirby), and even backing vocals. Fairport members Thompson, Dave Pegg (bass), and Dave Mattacks (drums) appear on the disc, as does Velvet Underground stalwart John Cale, on viola, harpsichord, celeste, piano, and organ.

Like its predecessor, *Bryter Layter* is marked by an intense lyrical melancholy, but this time it is belied by the music, which is vibrant and soulful, reflecting the bustling London cityscape it was created within. Exceptions are the three instrumental pieces—"Introduction," the title track, and "Sunday"—which have a more easy-listening feel.

In one verse of "Hazey Jane I," Drake asks a pair of musical questions: "Do you feel like a remnant / Or something that's past / Do you find things are moving / Just a little too fast?" Whoever Hazey Jane might have been, it's clear that he's asking himself these same things (and probably answering in the affirmative). In an equally penetrating verse, he wonders, "Do you like what you're doing / Would you do it some more / Or will you stop once and wonder / What you're doing it for?"

Drake had hoped that *Bryter Layter* would be his commercial breakthrough, but those hopes were dashed by the same factors that had sunk *Five Leaves Left*: the indifference of the music world in general, and Drake's utter inability to promote himself. Still, the album is a gorgeous document full of lines that provide occasional windows into Drake's increasingly dark soul. "Hazey Jane II" carries a foreboding tone, and a lyric about the world getting too crowded; "At the Chime of a Clock" comments most likely about Drake's own behavior, "The games you play make people say / You're either weird or lonely." "One of These Things First" deals with the impossibility of simply living in the moment: "I could be / Here and now / I would be I should be / But how?"

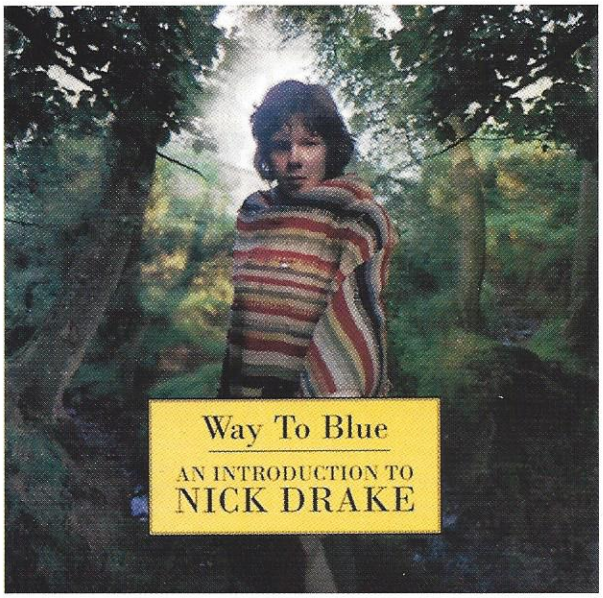
"Poor Boy" stands out mostly for its self-awareness, and the self-mocking tone in the backing vocals of Doris Troy and P.P. Arnold, who undercut Drake's self-pitying verses by singing, "Oh poor boy / So sorry for himself / Oh poor boy / So worried for his health." In quite the other direction is "Northern Sky," which is perhaps Drake's most luminous composition, thanks to Cale's dreamy keyboard figures and Drake's vision of a magical moment frozen in time. "But now you're here / Brighten my northern sky," he pleads, getting about as close to a standard-issue love lyric as he ever would.

Drake's worst fears were realized when, once again, his work failed to make an impact on the pop world. In some ways, his commercial failure seemed almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. He didn't tour, gave just one interview (to Jerry Gilbert of *Sounds* magazine), spoke in monosyllables when he spoke at all, and dressed in black as if to announce his tortured state to the world. It's not as if folk music were at fault. As Drake was releasing *Bryter Layter* to the sound of no hands clapping, artists such as Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Cat Stevens were enjoying some of their greatest successes, and James Taylor and Elton John (who at one point demoed some of Drake's songs) were establishing themselves as major stars. Further in the background, serious, less accessible artists such as Leonard Cohen and Randy Newman soldiered ever on.

Drake, on the other hand, withdrew even further. This was exacerbated by Joe Boyd's sale of Witchseason to Island's Chris Blackwell, and Boyd's move to Los Angeles to work for Warner Bros. Drake began seeing a psychiatrist, who prescribed antidepressants. They didn't help much, in part because he took them irregularly.

Drake's black depression infected his writing as well, and he seemed to dry up creatively. There was some hope after he spent time at Chris Blackwell's home in Spain, and returned ready to make another album. But instead of a group of songs that would break him through to the mainstream at last, he came back with the material that would become his most stark and depressing album, *Pink Moon* (released in February 1972).

Some regard *Pink Moon* as a masterwork, and there's little doubt that it's an incredibly pure and deliberate piece of art, especially when you consider that it was recorded in a mere two days. The



album consists mostly of first takes, and the only overdub is the piano on the title track. It's short—only 28 and a half minutes long—but even that is astonishing when you consider that, by then, Drake's illness had made him nearly incapable of normal communication.

Pink Moon shows the effects of this. Some of the songs are painfully brief. "Know" contains a mere four lines, but telling lines they are: "Know that I love you / Know that I don't care / Know that I see you / Know I'm not there." "Pink Moon" is similarly oblique and equally ominous: "I saw it written and I saw it say / Pink moon is on its way / And none of you stand so tall / Pink moon gonna get ye all."

As with Drake's other albums, you can search the lyrics of *Pink Moon* for insights into his troubled state of mind. "Now I'm darker than the deepest sea," he sings in "Place to Be." And later, "Now I'm weaker than the palest blue / Oh, so weak in this need for you." On "Harvest Bread," he sings these ominous lines: "Falling fast and falling free / You look to find a friend / Falling fast and falling free / This could just be the end."

Strangely, *Pink Moon* ends on the somewhat optimistic note of "From the Morning"; the song sounds grim only with the retrospective knowledge that the line "Now we rise and we are everywhere" will eventually grace Drake's headstone.

However profound and moving, *Pink Moon* didn't sell, either. The album did, however, provide an anecdote that pretty much sums up what Drake's life had become at that point. When the project was finished, he took the tapes to Island Records, but instead of ceremoniously turning them over to the executives, he simply left them with the receptionist. It wasn't until a few days later that the package was opened and discovered to contain the new Nick Drake album.

This was symptomatic of a life that was quickly spinning out of control. Drake drew further into himself, occasionally lashing out in attempts to change his life completely—incredible as it seems, he went to see an army recruiter (he didn't pass muster), and took a job in computer programming (he lasted one day). Eventually, he sat down to write again, but completed only four songs—"Rider on the Wheel," "Black Eyed Dog," "Hanging on a Star," and "Voice from the Mountain"—the last works he would ever compose.

Shortly after the release of *Pink Moon*, Drake left London and returned to his parents' home in Tanworth-in-Arden. Once there, he suffered a nervous breakdown and spent some time in a hospital's psychiatric ward. In the world of music, Drake, who'd barely registered on the scene at all, faded away completely. He did record his four final songs in mid-1974, and went to Paris later that year, a brief sign that the cloud hanging over him might be lifting. But it descended again when he returned to England, and several weeks later he was dead. The assistant coroner ruled his death a suicide, but Drake left no note, and whether there was any motive in his taking too many antidepressants that night has never been established.

Over the years, Nick Drake's musical stature has only grown. Island kept their promise of never deleting his albums, and in 1979 released the boxed set *Fruit Tree*—one of the first of its kind to be devoted to the work of a single artist. The three-LP set contained all of Drake's albums, with his four final tracks tacked on to the end of the *Pink Moon* disc. In 1986, Hannibal released the boxed set on CD, one original album per disc, and added a fourth CD, *Time of No Reply* (later available separately), which included the last sessions, alternate takes of earlier tracks, and previously unreleased recordings made in Tanworth-in-Arden in 1967–68.

Drake's work was compiled again in 1990 on *Heaven in a Wild Flower* (since deleted), and in 1994 on *Way to Blue*, which at this point remains the definitive Drake sampler. In 1995, with the approval of Drake's parents, Scott Appel recorded a handful of unreleased Drake instrumentals ("Bird Flew By," "Blossom," "Our Season," and "Place to Be") and reworked "Nearly/Far Leys" for his *Nine of Swords* album.

Other than that, in these days of endless B-sides and bonus tracks, Nick Drake's recorded output is startlingly finite. *Way to Blue* is the place for novices to begin, but with only three proper albums extant plus one compilation, it's not difficult to be a Drake completist. If you've read this far, chances are you already are one, or are at least a good candidate to become one.

The important thing to remember is that, just as Nick Drake's talent was stunningly underrated during his lifetime, it has become somewhat overrated since. Mostly inactive by the time he was 24 and dead at 26, Drake's artistry is forever frozen in time, arrested in post-adolescence. He never got past writing about loneliness and frustration, never grew into a fully developed artist who could take on weightier subjects. Still, his works are undeniably remarkable for what they are. All we can do at this point is listen and appreciate them, dream of what might have been, and mourn a talent whose voice was silenced far too soon.