

**FRANK
TURNER THE
ROAD
BENEATH
MY FEET**



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ONE MORE SHOW

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Time stood still.

As my feet rooted into the grass underneath me, on the steep slope of a fake hill in the corner of a sports stadium, my terrified eyes rolled inexorably around the stands, drawing in the many thousands of bored yet curious spectators, who were collectively dragging their attention from the other end of the massive open space towards my solitary, exposed figure. I could almost see the rumbling sound-waves of the announcer as they rolled like a tide over the endless seats on either side of the oval, the indistinct syllables set to smash into each other and onto me in a mere matter of seconds. And yet, there was a problem. My microphone was not, as far as I could tell, plugged into anything.

This constituted a problem, specifically, because I was stood on an ersatz Glastonbury Tor at one end of the new Olympic Stadium in London, preparing to sing my song ‘Sailor’s Boots’ to the crowd. True, it was a dress rehearsal, but there were still somewhere in the region of 60,000 people in the building. The song in question also happens to have an unaccompanied vocal introduction – an a cappella verse that was about to sound decidedly underwhelming, if my vocal mic wasn’t connected to the sound system.

I had my in-ear monitors snugly fitted into my ears, and through them I could hear the busy chat of my crew, who were holed up underneath me, inside the hill. There were no wings for them to hide in, so we’d gone for the subterranean option. I could hear the small but rapidly rising note of panic in Johnny’s

voice as he tried to make sense of what was happening.

My instructions had been simple; walk out from the back of the hill, while the audience's attention was focussed on the preceding act at the other end of the stadium; plug in my guitar, give it a strum to check everything was working; then a word or two into the microphone to check on that, and I was ready for showtime. The previous dress rehearsal, two days beforehand, had gone off without a hitch, so I was relaxed, despite the tight timings required by the show. Today, the guitar part of the line-check had gone swimmingly, but when I'd tried to say something jaunty and casual to Johnny, to lighten the mood, no sound had been forthcoming. The tilt of the hill sloping down in front of me suddenly felt much steeper, my stomach tightened and started trying to escape through my mouth.

Some context for you. Earlier in 2012, I'd been playing a solo show at the book festival in Hay-On-Wye. Matt and I drove up from London, across the Welsh border and up into the picturesque hills. During the long drive up there, Charlie had called and told me that I'd been asked in for an intriguing meeting the following morning. Director Danny Boyle wanted to talk to us about an idea. We both knew he was in charge of the Olympic Opening Ceremony, but immediately assumed that he must also be working on something else – a new film, perhaps. Either way, he didn't want to discuss anything over the phone, and he wanted to meet the following morning in his office, which was in East London.

Getting from Hay-On-Wye to Stratford for a 10am meeting is what we in the business call 'a massive ball-ache'. I played a slightly ramshackle solo set for a few hundred literature enthusiasts and local kids, drank too much whisky, slept fitfully and not long enough, before getting back in Matt's car and hightailing it back across Offa's Dyke towards Bristol train station. There I transferred to a train, made it to Paddington with my hangover starting to crack its knuckles, and took the tube out east. The offices were situated in a complex of old converted warehouses, Victorian dock relics made over into open-plan hipster pens, and I rolled in with a few minutes to spare.

On arrival, I greeted Charlie while trying to ruffle the evidence of alcohol out of my hair, and then immediately made my way to the toilets for a much needed piss. While there, it occurred to me that I didn't actually know what

Danny looked like, so I took out my smartphone with my free hand and did a quick image search. It was with some embarrassment that I realised that the face that popped up on my screen was also popping up behind my phone and waving hello from the next urinal. Danny is nothing if not a friendly man.

He's also something of a mega-fan of my work, which was a disarming discovery. He waved me and Charlie into a video suite and played us an animated mock-up of a work-in-progress section of the Opening Ceremony. The clip was peppered with grainy live footage of me and the Sleeping Souls ripped from the internet – we were already part of the show. Danny explained that he felt that the music I made fit in with the vision of our country that he was trying to present to the world, and asked if I'd be interested in being part of it. He told me not to rush the decision, so Charlie and I retired to a smaller disused office to discuss it. There wasn't much to talk about. The potential reservations I might have about it – the government involvement, the patriotic overtones – were neatly punctured by the kudos of Danny's involvement. And anyway, when would I ever get asked to do something like this again? In life, I try to say yes. And so on this occasion, I did.

Being involved in the Olympics was a fascinating, overwhelming and often farcical experience. Everyone in my team had to sign Non-Disclosure Agreements and promise not to discuss it with anyone. For about two months in the summer of 2012 we were constantly and furtively running back and forth to the nearly-completed stadium to grab a few minutes of time with over-worked production managers and sound crew, trying to fit our mechanisms into their system. Perhaps the strangest part of the whole thing was how normal the chaos started to seem after a while. I regularly found myself leaning against plastic trees sharing cigarettes with someone half-dressed as a Harry Potter character, discussing which parts of the show would be seen by millions, and which part by billions, without even blinking.

In the centre of it all was Danny, a shining beacon of enthusiasm, focus, and indeed kindness. He's really one of the most infectiously positive people I've ever met, and his vision kept the entire tottering edifice together. Given that disparaging the efforts of others seems to be one of the main national past-times we have, I thought that the final product was an incredible achievement, and a

worthy representation of these islands to the world.

Finally, the week of the Ceremony crept into view. There were two dress rehearsals earlier in the week, followed by the real thing on Friday night. As I've said, the first run-through went off without a hitch. Nevertheless, I was nervous walking out onto the hill in front of the stadium audience for the second time that Wednesday evening, and when the microphone stubbornly refused to fulfil its one designed function, I was close to panic.

While I began something of a personal meltdown, Johnny was, predictably enough, tackling the problem head on. The guitar was definitely working, which was good. The microphone had a wire sticking out the back of it, which was also good. As Johnny worked through mental checklists, I started shouting into the sound-hole of my acoustic guitar, something along the lines of 'Fuckinghelpyou bastardsI'mupherealoneandtheMICISOFF!!' Meanwhile, through my earpieces, I could hear Johnny talking himself through his options. Finally he reached the nub of the matter (I like to think my screaming helped): we had what industry techs refer to as an 'air gap', meaning that something isn't plugged into the thing it should be plugged into. The lead coming out of my mic ran down the stand, halfway down the grass, before petering out slightly despondently next to the box it was supposed to be connected to.

The good news was that Johnny now knew what the issue was. The bad news was that we were seconds away from the moment of truth. I knew, from the rehearsals, that the act at the other end of the emptiness would finish up, the announcer would say my name, and all eyes would be on me. So it was, as the flow of time slowed to the pace of syrup, that I saw a small manhole-sized hatch at the base of the hill pop open, and Johnny's head emerged like a crazed mole, blinking in the glare and frantically scanning for the offending end of the wire. As the very last syllables of the scripted introduction boomed around my head, he spotted his prey, leapt forward and jammed the wire into the socket, almost exactly on cue for me to begin to sing, my heart pumping pure adrenalin:

'If I had been born 200 years ago . . . '

Looking back, it's often hard to believe that I was actually part of that whole circus. The months of preparation and the actual week of the Ceremony itself stand

out from the narrative of my career, like a Pop Art piece sewn into a tapestry. The weirdness of it all lent a sense of camaraderie to me, the Sleeping Souls, my crew, and the friends we assembled as backing singers – Ben Marwood, Emily Barker and her band, Jim Lockey and his. Our mums were predictably ecstatic, the punks were tediously upset, a fair few new people noticed who I was, and most of the British public probably used my three-and-a-half minutes of airtime to make a fresh brew.

My personal favourite moment of it all was in the immediate aftermath of the performance itself. There was a pretty serious level of enforced secrecy around the performance, and so most of my friends were blissfully unaware of my impending sporting triumph-by-association. At the time I was living above a pub on Camden High Street called The Wheelbarrow, run by Dave Danger and various other Nambucca acolytes. Like any good British pub, they had a white projection screen that could be pulled down in front of the small stage for the showing of TV sports events. A few days before the Ceremony, Dave asked me if I'd be popping in to the pub that night to watch, as they were showing the proceeding on the screen. I cryptically dodged the question.

In the last few days before the event, the organisers had seen fit to put up me and my crew in a hotel in Knightsbridge. This was ridiculous for several different reasons. Most of us lived in London anyway (though I must admit I was glad of the slightly more salubrious living conditions – a clean bathroom! A light fitting without rain coming through it!). The ceremony itself was in East London, at the other end of the city, which meant we spent many hours on specially commissioned coaches crawling through London traffic to and from rehearsals. Rumour had it that the endless new hotels around the venue itself were under-booked, which made our arrangements all the more silly.

On the day of the final performance itself, I'd made a little plan. We had seen the full show itself twice before now, so I wasn't overly bothered about sticking around once my part was done. I'm really not one for celebrity parties, so there was no appeal in sticking around for that. Our moment of glory came and went surprisingly quickly, as these things tend to do. The Souls and I, plus our little gang of backing singers, took to the hill (all microphones plugged in this time) and performed three songs – 'Sailor's Boots', 'Wessex Boy' and 'I Still Believe'.

The last of these was broadcast to the UK television audiences, as we were closing the first act of the Ceremony; shortly thereafter everything went nuts in the stadium and the world tuned in.

By that time I had made it back to the dressing room, changed into my normal clothes, drunk a glass of champagne with my friends (and said hello to Dizze Rascal, who had no idea who I was and looked a little confused) and set out on my journey. I wandered through the bowels of the stadium and onto the street. Going against the grain of the crowd on a day like that is a surprisingly liberating feeling – the corridors were empty, I got a few puzzled looks from security guards, and easily hailed a taxi. I jumped in and called out my destination to the driver.

About half an hour later, the black cab spat me out onto the side of Camden High Street, and, as I had long planned, I sauntered casually into the pub, where the big white screen was down, the main Ceremony in full flow, the patrons all facing forward, glued to the spectacle. Dave was behind the bar and didn't initially notice me, but when he finally did, he gave me the wry smile I'd been hoping for.

'You cheeky bastard.'