

Mick Houghton: *I've Always Kept a Unicorn – The Biography of Sandy Denny* (Faber, £20)

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WHAT, HYPOTHETICALLY, would have happened if Sandy Denny had tried out for *The Voice UK*? Would Rita and Ricky and Will.i.am and Sir Tom have turned at the sound of her artless and piercing mezzo-soprano? Or would they have deemed it too natural, not showy or melismatic enough? And if any of them *had* turned, would they have been disappointed by the dumpy, unglamorous gal in the floral smock and bellbottom jeans who stood there in the glare?

Perhaps those questions are unfair and the swivelling foursome *would* have responded to Denny's voice as so many have since she started out in the folk dens of southwest London. (Lord Jones of Pontypridd would, one assumes, have been aware of her anyway.) They might have thought, "Thank God for singing

that's human and real, that doesn't treat music as some sort of gymnastic exercise".

A woman who transcended folk-club purities to become one of the great singer-songwriters of the '70s, Alexandra "Sandy"

Denny was as vulnerable as she was commanding. Fairport Convention fiddler Dave Swarbrick nicknamed her Boedicia, but producer Glyn Johns – who oversaw the Fairports' 1975 album *Rising for the Moon* – thought her "a rather sad character and quite disturbing".

Her stock was low at the time of her death in 1978. Punk and postpunk were laying waste to ladies in smocks who sat at pianos and sang of sea captains and sweet rosemary. Revered by her folk peers and by a subsequent generation of American troubadours, Denny hadn't made the mark she should have with the sequence of great solo albums that began with 1971's *The North Star Grassman and the Ravens*. Those collections included some of the best songs and performances of the era – Late November, Next Time Around, It'll Take A Long Time,

'Listen Listen', 'No End', the exquisitely soppy 'Like An Old Fashioned Waltz' – but they weren't Carole King or they certainly weren't Lynsey de Paul. For the most part they were broodingly poetic, grandly sweeping ballads, sometimes smothered in strings though generally interspersed with contrasting moods: Denny could sing jazz or country as well as she could sing traditional folk. "When I sit down at the piano, the words come in their thousands," she said in 1972. "Doomy, metaphorical phrases, minor keys, weird chords... and I can't do a thing about it."

Like John Martyn, her labelmate on Island Records, Denny was an often-infuriating mix of mystical artistry and boozy bonhomie: one of the lads, as many attest in Mick Houghton's respectful and affectionate biography. The pubs of Wimbledon, where she grew up, are to this day full of dissolute middle-class bohemians like her, but few of those bohemians can break your heart with a single verse of 'Bruton Town'. Out of suburban drabness and art-school rebellion came the fully-formed power

of her voice – an instrument that, as Pete Townshend noted, was almost free of vibrato. "When other singers try to sing like Sandy," folk doyenne Shirley Collins says to Houghton, "they throw their voices at top lines, rather than just singing them."

Wise words from one who knows.

Denny was a kind of siren-next-door. "She sang about serfs and noblemen with the naturalism of a woman describing everyday life," Greil Marcus wrote in *Rolling Stone*. "And she sang about everyday life as if from a perspective of a woman a thousand years gone." On early recordings of songs such as ex-boyfriend Jackson C. Frank's 'You Never Wanted Me', she is as assured and charismatic as, in reality, she was shy and self-doubting.

Recruited by the pioneering Fairports she found a perfect creative foil in the brilliant Richard Thompson, using the group to master public-domain classics like 'Matty Groves' and to hone her own songs, among them the effortlessly melancholic 'Who Know Where The Time Goes'.

Rarely a careerist, Denny was always restless. After the traumatic shock of drummer Martin Lamble's tragic death in a road accident, she lurched from the Fairports to Fotheringay – whose *Banks Of The Nile* is hailed by Houghton as her defining performance – and back to the Fairports, whose *One More Chance* is another peak of her oeuvre. As the years rolled on, her core unhappiness manifested in dysfunctional attachment – to adulterous Australian husband Trevor Lucas, mainly – and eventually in chronic alcoholism and cocaine abuse.

While never wreaking the public havoc that Joplin or Winehouse did, Denny was a mess nevertheless. The unraveling of her life in the cut-off Northamptonshire village of Byfield was something we already knew from Clinton Heylin's earlier biography *No More Sad Refrains*, but not something known or honestly acknowledged by those involved in her career while she was alive. Reading Houghton's account of how Lucas abducted their baby daughter Georgia surely supports his contention that he was trying to save the baby's life. The next

time Denny drove drunk into a ditch with Georgia in the back could well have killed them both.

*I've Always Kept a Unicorn* – a line from Denny's archetypal piano ballad 'Solo' – is rich in insight from those who loved and despaired of her. While never over-embroidering the story, Houghton patiently builds it through the intelligent and sensitive recall of everyone from Richard Thompson to *The Guardian's* Richard Williams. He also draws on interviews that Denny gave to publications such as *Melody Maker*, which twice crowned her Best Female Vocalist Of The Year. (Never a rock chick per se, her rousing duet with Robert Plant on Led Zep's 'The Battle Of Evermore' lent her a status that served her well – though she was never paid a penny for the session and never asked for one.)

What would have happened had Denny not died? Would she have weathered the slick, synthetic '80s and emerged on the other side of them as more fortunate veterans did? It's horribly poignant to read in one of this book's footnotes that her friend

Judy Collins – one of many who recorded the beloved 'Who Knows Where The Times Goes' – quit drinking the day before Denny's death and has been sober ever since. It's difficult, though, to picture a happy ending to the life of someone who could so recklessly endanger the life of her own child. Putting it as kindly as one can, Denny simply never grew up. "I'm a dreamer," she sang in 1977 in her last great song. "I'm a schemer with an eye for a show..."

And therein lies the enigma of so much great art. Sandy Denny's best songs are so powerful and so healing – such cathartic outpourings of sorrow and joy – that one can't help but attribute a kind of wisdom to them. They enable us to bear the pain that Denny, apparently, could not.