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He's endured divorce, death, disaster... and a feud with Richard Branson. Now Mike Oldfield's back – and he's plotting a gleaming new Tubular Bells

By ADRIAN DEEVOY FOR EVENT MAGAZINE

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Gazing out onto the deep turquoise ocean, Mike Oldfield is in a reflective mood. 'I don't think I'll ever be up for a knighthood,' sighs Britain's most successful multi-instrumentalist composer, whose 16 million-selling Tubular Bells remained on the UK album charts for a record-shattering 280 weeks. 'Nobody's ever offered me any kind of award. I'm like the black sheep of British music.'

'I'm still very patriotic. I'm very proud of being British. I was watching the Brexit vote live and I was hoping Britain would get out of the EU.'

'I admire the Queen greatly. And I've met Prince Charles a couple of times. Unluckily, I made the mistake of speaking to him without being spoken to. I asked him how his cello-playing was coming along. You're not supposed to do that. Stupid me. So I think I've blown my knighthood there.'

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Music has always meant escape to Oldfield. As his mother's alcoholism and mental condition deteriorated throughout the Sixties, he would remain in his room patiently practising the acoustic guitar

Last October, Hurricane Matthew blew through the Bahamas, toppling trees and power lines, causing nearly £500 million worth of damage. Oldfield's sturdy, bunker-like house in Nassau held out, but the musician has also had to survive his own personal storm.

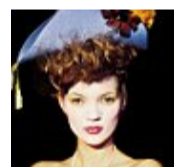
In 2014, the musician's 11-year marriage to Fanny Vanderkerckhove, a French horse breeder, and mother of his youngest sons Jake, 12, and Eugene, eight, ended, taking its toll emotionally and financially.

Then in May last year, his eldest son Dougal Oldfield, one of three children Oldfield had with PR woman Sally Cooper, died suddenly of natural causes, aged 33.

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'My son tragically passed away,' he says in a small, distant voice. Oldfield's own father Raymond also died last year, at 93.

Asked if Oldfield will divide his money between the children when the time comes, his response is surprising.

'I'm not sure if there's going to be anything to leave, to be honest, after the past four years,' he exhales. Oldfield lost much of his fortune through divorces and poor property deals, so reluctantly sold his 68ft yacht Sea Dragon, and now sails a modest 17-footer. In the boat-conscious Bahamas, which subtly discriminates between the haves and have-yachts, it was a humbling exercise.

Oldfield grimaces and leads the way to his ramshackle recording studio, which comes with a soothing sea view.

He's a Bahamian citizen now. 'I feel as if the Bahamas is an outpost of Britain,' he declares. 'This used to be a British colony – it still is part of the Commonwealth. It reminds me of Britain back when I was growing up in Reading – there aren't cameras everywhere watching everything you do.'

Oldfield has opened his shuttered doors to talk about Return To Ommadawn, a companion piece to 1975's original Ommadawn, recorded in the wake of the phenomenal Tubular Bells.

Such was the insanity that followed the

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global success of 1973's Tubular Bells, it seemed almost normal when its eccentric young creator, then living in Gloucestershire, adopted a year-old male lion named Clyde who had free rein around the house and even slept in Oldfield's bed.

“*'Nobody's ever offered me any kind of award. I'm like the black sheep of British music'*”

'I suppose he was an extraordinary pet,' says Oldfield, now 63. 'He was dangerous beyond belief and so strong and fast. He could shunt you aside with one paw. Eventually I told his keeper to take him into Virgin Records offices. "Bad Clyde! Go and see Richard!"'

Sir Richard Branson, whose empire Tubular Bells effectively kick-started, managed to avoid the beast, having heard the shrieks emanating from reception upon Clyde's unscheduled arrival.

The irony is not lost on Oldfield that Branson gobbled up the lion's share of Tubular Bells's considerable profits.

'I worked it out one day,' Oldfield says of their unequal fiscal arrangement. 'I made about £180,000 from the first five years of Tubular Bells.'

When asked how much Branson collected, Oldfield lets out an agonised yelp, unsettling his snoozing Bahamian potcake (mixed breed) dog, Mac.

'But there's no argument with Richard any more,' he adds calmly. 'We've long since buried the hatchet.'

'He came here a couple of years ago. I'd written Tubular Bells for solo on piano and there was a premiere at my boys' school. He flew in to see it in his jet and he stayed here. We had a nice meal, he drank a little bit too much and then he wanted to listen to some music. But only all the silly things I'd done, like Blue Peter [Oldfield rearranged the show's theme tune in 1979].'

He is reticent to divulge whether Branson has ever mentioned the message he buried 48 minutes into his left-field 1990 album AmaroK (a morse code sequence spelled out 'F*** off RB')?

'We don't talk about that little bit,' Oldfield says coyly. 'But I do get free flights on Virgin Airlines, first class, wherever and whenever I want. The only trouble is they don't fly here so I don't get a chance to use it any more.'

The last time Oldfield flew anywhere was to perform at Danny Boyle's Olympic celebration in 2012. 'That was such a high,' he recalls. 'I got stage-fright beforehand, obviously, but once we started playing it was just the most wonderful feeling. I felt free.'

Music has always meant escape to Oldfield. As his mother's alcoholism and mental condition deteriorated throughout the Sixties, he would remain in his room patiently practising the acoustic guitar. Maureen Oldfield died in 1975.

'I had childhood problems with my parents, my mother,' he says. 'I was depressed and I created an alternative reality in music that was everything my life wasn't. There's one bit of Tubular Bells that has got these ethereal mandolins. It sounds like you're in heaven, which was the complete opposite of how I really felt. All I can imagine is that I was doing it to compensate for the misery at the time.'

Relief from Oldfield's depression came in 1978 from Exegesis, a controversial programme briefly popular in the late Seventies, where subjects would undergo a dramatic psychological reboot. 'Bit by bit, I got to the root of all my problems,' he recalls. 'The big thing that was blocking me in my early days was so simple. Basically,

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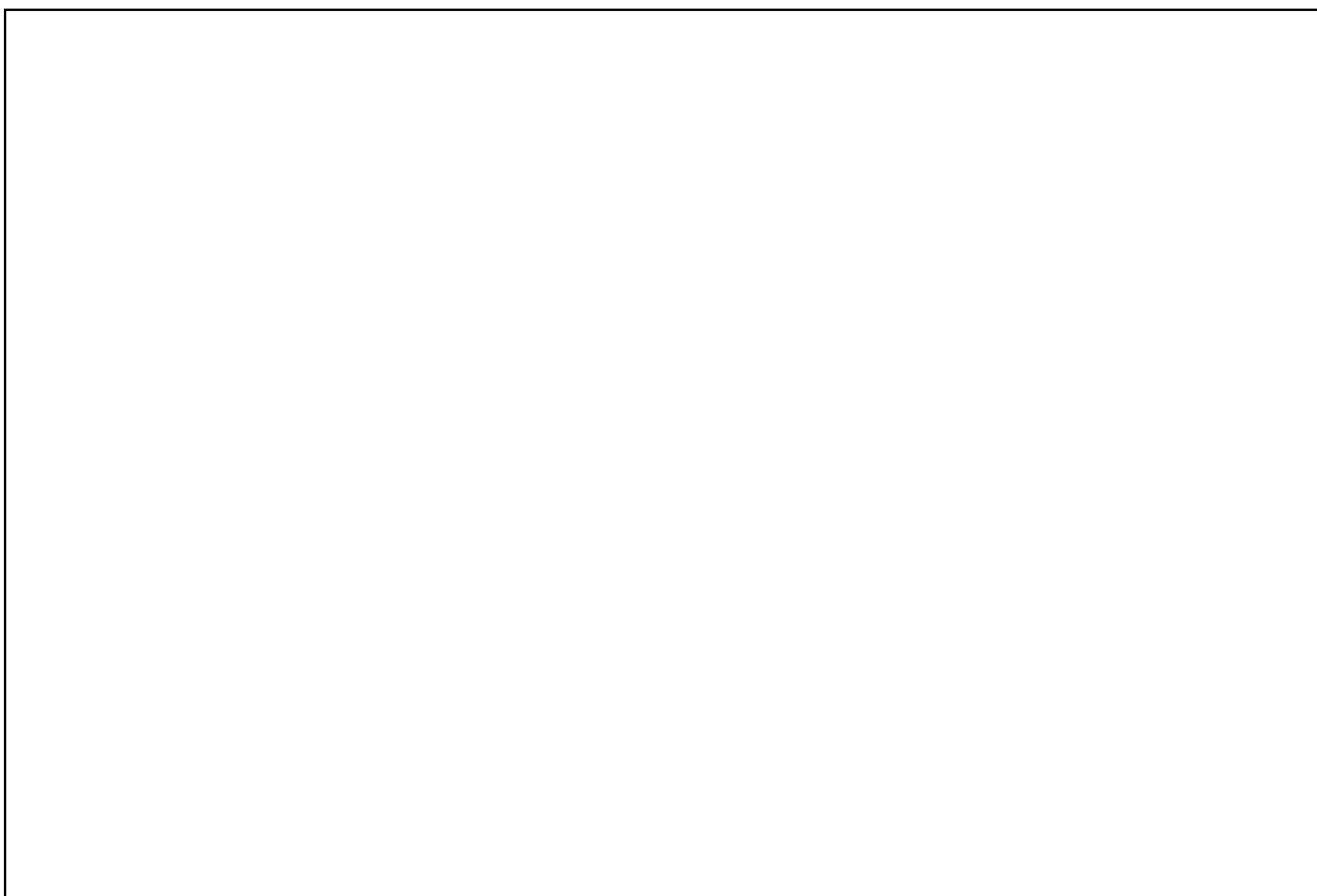
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the moment of my birth, coming through the birth canal into the real world, was still there in my mind.



Mike Oldfield in 1994. Oldfield's film music includes the haunting soundtrack to The Killing Fields and his eerie contribution to The Exorcist, a musical segment of Tubular Bells

'Reliving that moment freed me of the panic attacks for the rest of my life,' he asserts.

Inside the house, where Oldfield lives with Eugene and Jake, the small arsenal of nerf guns suggest that Oldfield enjoys reliving his youth in a less traumatic manner these days. His days of staying out all night and drinking all the time are long behind him. 'I haven't been drunk for years,' he says.

He also has older grown-up children: Molly, 36, Luke, 29 (siblings of the deceased Dougal) with ex-partner Sally Cooper, and Greta, 27, and Noah, 26, with Norwegian singer Anita Hegerland, 54.

Soberly assessing his life, Oldfield says he'd like his ashes scattered over the water in the Bahamas. And were a movie to be made of his remarkable career, he suggests that Eddie Redmayne could play the lead.

'What an amazing actor he is,' Oldfield enthuses. 'He was incredible as Stephen Hawking. Maybe we should ask Danny Boyle to direct it and I could do the music.'

Oldfield's film music includes the haunting soundtrack to The Killing Fields and his eerie contribution to The Exorcist, a musical segment of Tubular Bells that has become the go-to music for anything frightening ever since.

'I get a few bob for it every Halloween,' he chuckles. 'It's not huge sums of money but the royalties do spike around that time of year.'

He lets slip that there will be a Tubular Bells IV (sequels II and III went to No 1 and No 4 in the UK in 1992 and 1998 respectively), which brings us inevitably back to Branson.

I ask Oldfield if he believes the grinning billionaire will make it into space with Virgin Galactic. 'In the end,' he smiles. 'He has a way of achieving these things. But what do I know? I thought he was mad when he told me he was getting into trains. I'm absolutely useless at business.'

'I just wish I had a bit of his business acumen. I'd like to say to him, "If I could swap you half my music ability for half your business acumen, would you agree?" '

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Branson might take his old friend up on that deal but surely he would want to negotiate terms. The musician claps delightedly, his eyes sparkling like the sea before him. 'Knowing Richard, he would probably try to get my percentage down,' Oldfield hoots, and for the first time today appears truly relaxed.

Mike Oldfield's new album, 'Return To Ommadawn', is out on January 20

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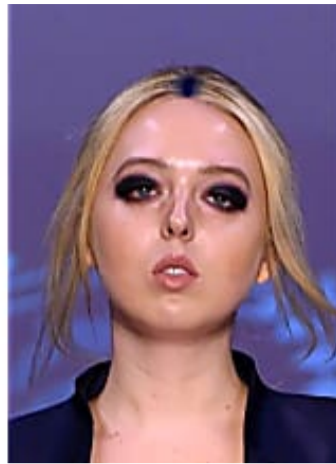
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Gerhard Vd W, Windhoek, Namibia, 45 minutes ago

Very funny anecdotes about Prince Charles and Clyde the Lion. Btw, the photo of Mike in concert is not from 1994, but rather from 1999 (on tour following TBIII and The Millennium Bell).

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belblac, Hull, United Kingdom, 4 hours ago

Caused a lot of trouble between me and my ex-husband did 'Tubular Bells'. Until it came out that Mike Oldfield went away somewhere every so often to deal with his depression and suddenly my depression meant I was not 'mad'. If it could happen to a genius like Mike Oldfield, it could perhaps happen to anyone, even a very oppressed wife. Must admit I have not listened to it since that time, when it was almost played on loop - over and over. My musical skills are zero though, I have no memory of passing through the birth canal, I have never owned a Lion or a yacht, but I did get

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divorced as soon as. Something's are just not meant to be!

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 [Uncle Tosh](#), Norwich, United Kingdom, 4 hours ago

Down and out in the Bahamas with only a house, a boat and free first class flights around the world. Life's tough for some!

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 [horridharperson](#), Brighton, 6 hours ago

Any surprise that RB shafts people??

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 [Ace5150](#), Coventry, United Kingdom, 34 minutes ago

Royally shafted The Sex Pistols as well.

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 [McLarenfan666](#), Earth, United Kingdom, 6 hours ago

Tubular Bells was one of the best things I have ever spent time and effort to hear again and again, I could get totally relaxed in the sounds.

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 [En-men-lu-ana](#), Uruk, Niue, 10 hours ago

Great piece of music - very original - I have always loved it. I am going to go right now and dig through my hundreds of old vinyl albums and see if I can find it to play. I have it on CD but without the hisses and pops it's just not the same.

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 [LofADay___](#), London, United Kingdom, 12 hours ago

So Branson is a Plg huh? Does not surprise.. Pretends to be everyones friend but is a sycho like all other who have far more wealth share than their status as a single human being should permit. But Mike, please do it with a real orchestra this time, none of that overdubbing. :-)

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 [LofADay___](#), London, United Kingdom, 12 hours ago

Ps: He endured death and lived to tell the tale?

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 [Kaz](#), Kent, 7 hours ago

He endured the death of one of his children it says clearly in the article.

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 [Wg63-Scotland](#), Elgin, United Kingdom, 12 hours ago

My wife and I have been Oldfield fans since the 70's. While Tubular Bells is the iconic album he is always noted for he has produced a number of other remarkable pieces of music over the decades. The 2008 Music of The Spheres is an ambitious classical composition which is quite superb. If you have't listened to it - please do I am certain you will be very impressed by its maturity and beautiful arrangements. I for one am looking forward to his new work.

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 [Jack Jones](#), London, United Kingdom, 13 hours ago

Go to YouTube and watch Tubular Bells Live @ BBC . Apparently , Oldfield thought it awful , but it sounds hypnotic to me . Helps greatly if , like me , you never saw The Exorcist . I've no doubt Oldfield was stitched up early in his career because almost everybody else was , but if you'd had 180 grand and invested in London property back then , you'd be worth tens of millions now . I have a website called the 20/20hindsightinvestor.com .

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 [joey](#), Edgware, 13 hours ago

Awful. I'd rather listen to 'tubular triangles' my son plays at nursery.

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 [Paul L](#), New Forest, United Kingdom, 4 hours ago

I expect you are tone deaf then.

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