



## **Part I: A Strange Discovery**

I first heard about the *Book of AM* from Lali, who lived in Deia throughout the 1970s. Except she couldn't remember the name of the album. She just knew she'd sung on something or other. It was only when I saw a dog-eared copy of the *Book of AM* in my friend Dave Templeton's collection of Deia-related vinyl that I realised this was what Lali was talking about.

The *Book of AM* has four parts so it seems right that my telling of the *Book of AM* story should also be in four parts, or blog posts. If you can't wait and want to read the story all at once, here it is.

### **I wish I was**

I was with Lali Shepherd for seven years, until, far too young, she passed away. We both loved to sing. On long car drives, we'd try and harmonise on country songs like Gram Parsons and Emmylou Harris's "Love Hurts" and George Jones and Tammy Wynette's "Golden Ring".

I still can't listen to the Irish traditional song "Carrickfergus", which Lali loved to sing – theatrically taking a sip of her wine when she came to the line "But I'm drink today and I'm rarely sober".

I sang in a band called The Moneyshots. Our crowning moment was playing at the Christmas disco in a home for mentally disabled people run by a friend of mine. It was the only time we didn't empty the room. Midway through one song, when I was trying for a Jim Morrison moment, a woman grabbed the mic and started making bird noises. She was better than me.

We didn't play much but we rehearsed every week. The band would get stoned, I'd get drunk and we'd do what boy-men love to do: make an incredibly loud noise in a tiny space.

When I went out to rehearse, Lali would grab a bottle of red wine and a joint, stand at the top of our stairs and sing her heart out. I only found out when I noticed burn marks on the carpet from what she called 'dropsies' – burning embers from her joint.

I always thought it richly ironic that I, who couldn't really sing, fronted a band while Lali, who could *really* sing, was too shy to perform in public unless she'd had at least half a bottle of wine.

### **Phil Shepherd's effects**

Earlier this year, when Deia character Phil Shepherd passed away, Dan, one of his and Lali's twin sons, found a copy of the *Book of AM* among his things. Phil, too, played and sang on the record.

It felt like time for me to tell the true story of one of the most wonderfully inspired records ever made. In Deia or anywhere. I started with Dave. He put me in touch with Jerry Hart, who played on the *Book of AM* and so it began.

### **Once upon a Gong fan**

Winter 1977 and punk is in full sneer. Living in the bitterly cold north of England, Jerry Hart is feeling very much in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then Jerry meets Tony Bullock, a bamboo flute player and fellow Gong freak. The pair decide to trek to Deia where they'd heard there was a "Gong creative community" with Daavid Allen at its centre.

Jerry and Tony arrived in Palma in February 1978. Disembarking from the ferry they met Carmeta Mansilla who asked the two pale hippies if they knew somewhere good to eat breakfast. To Jerry, “she was a perfect vision of the beautiful hippy girl: flowing Indian skirt, long hair, confident stride”. Carmeta, a fully qualified doctor, invited Jerry and Tony to go with her to visit her brother, jazz poet Fernando Mansilla, in the mountain village of Bunyola. Days later, Jerry and Tony, accompanied by Carmeta, arrived in Deia.

### **Welcome to Bananamoon: Jerry’s tale**

Jerry takes up the story. “A youthful Sara Raphael directed us to the Bananamoon Observatory, Daevid's house and studio. We knocked on the door and - miraculously - he didn't tell us to f--k off (a greeting I subsequently learnt he was very willing to offer to other visiting Gong freaks). Instead, he invited us in then took us up the Puig to No 3, Plaza de la Iglesia which was being rented by a young German couple. Daevid asked them if they could put us up and - miraculously - they agreed. We ended up staying there for about a month.”

Inevitably, the trio met Juan Arkotxa and his partner Leslie Mackenzie, originators of the *Book of AM* who were renting the house next door. Juan and Leslie had named this the House of Am on the Hill (Ca'n Am des Puig) after their own house in Ibiza. The band who recorded *Book of AM* is sometimes known as Ca'n Am des Puig.

(I must admit, I had thought it was ‘AM’ as in ‘I am’ – some sort of esoteric philosophical statement - and, according to Juan, “AM is the root sound of the Chakras which ascend from Lam to Vam, Ram, Yam, Ham and end with the Om at the top of the head,” so perhaps it was just serendipity.)

Within days, Jerry and Carmeta joined the rehearsal sessions of the *Book of AM* singing the songs from the book and jamming on guitar, tambura, flutes and percussion with Pat and Stephanie Meadows and Lali and Phil. As did Jean-Paul Vivini, who contributed modernist sounds with a synthesizer.

Juan shared his and Leslie's idea about developing an album to accompany an exhibition of the *Book of AM*, a large book of engravings and watercolours they'd created in the style of William Blake. Each engraving incorporated a poem and the

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whole project was arranged to represent the states of mind a man can go through in a day.

## Part II: Making timeless music



The *Book of AM* musicians March 1978

*The Book of AM* was recorded on a Teac 4-track reel-to-reel Daevid Allen sold to the musicians. Working almost non-stop, the group managed to record 90 minutes of music in less than two months. The first 45 of these were released as the original album.

“Juan had already started to put rudimentary chords together and he could sing,” Jerry says. “Carmeta turned out to be a very gifted vocalist who could improvise over almost anything and was eminently capable of taking the lead vocal role, as you can hear on the album. What I brought to it was discipline, some basic intuitive skill as an arranger and a bit more technical ability on the guitar.”

Once he’d told me his part in the story, Jerry asked if I’d like to talk to Juan Arkotxa. I said yes, of course.

### According to Juan Arkotxa

Originally from the Basque Country, Juan – somewhat bizarrely to me – studied Automatic Control Theory, the basis of computer and telecommunication systems, at Edinburgh University in 1966/7. Here, he met Leslie who was studying Political Science.

*The Book of AM* was born out Juan and Leslie's travels in America, India and Europe and their developing worldview.

For both Juan and Leslie, "Buddhism was the unifier – it was like the awakener into the Void and the Mind. No other religion gives such a clear study of the mind and its tricks. From Islam we loved the music. Christianity had the most overlays for us. Robert Graves firmly opened that door – and it keeps on opening. In India we were deeply impressed by the Indian Saddhus because theirs is a living tradition. The ancient Egyptians had power over the cosmology of Time. They were ready for it and lived their lives accordingly. Then we loved the Northern Icelandic poetry since it was such an opener into the land of dreams and ice and wit and violence and magic. We did not become religious practitioners as such. We wanted to be at the creative centre of our own world. That was why we created the *Book of AM*."

### **So, what is the book of the *Book of AM*?**

Juan explains:

The *Book of AM* is a collection of inspirational songs, poems and stories relevant to the meaning and direction of our lives in those wide-open times. It follows the cycle of day from early Dawn to late Evening.

The written and graphic material is drawn from different parts of the world and spans thousands of years. It expresses core themes from Eastern and Western philosophical and religious traditions. The book has 25 copperplate engravings with graphics and text. They are set in an engraved border of medieval Islam and Christian design. Accompanying these engravings are 64 hand-written and water-coloured pages set within the same engraved border. These contain longer versions of the same and related songs. 19 pages of sources and explanatory notes bring the book to a total of 108 pages."

The *Book of AM* is nothing less than the attempt to create a universal work that Juan and Leslie hoped would cross the East-West divide and move the world beyond sectarianism.

It is, as Juan puts it, "a big heavy kind of medieval book".

## Arriving in Deia

In 1977, when Juan and Leslie had completed the handmade version of the actual *Book of AM* they tried to have it published in Barcelona. They were unsuccessful and, on their way back to Ibiza where they lived, they decided to visit Robert Graves in Deia and show him the parts of the book that related to his *The White Goddess*, “The Song of Amergin” and “Under the Apple Tree”.



“Robert and his family were very welcoming,” Juan says, “and the Deia artists and musicians were so enthusiastic about our *Book of AM* project we decided to record the music there. I think we managed to arrive at the right place at exactly the right time. Deia provided the setting for where our plans were realised”.

Graves also allowed Leslie to do research on the Moon Goddess in his library for the couple’s next project, the *Book of Intxixu*. “Sometimes Robert would appear at our house on the Puig,” remembers Juan, “and we would talk of trees, Amergin and muses”.

## **The original album release**

The original album was released on Jean Karakos's Disques Labo Lab label, who released Daavid Allen's albums, and distributed by Musique et Communication of Paris. Daavid had told Karakos all about Juan and Leslie and the *Book of AM*. Armed with Karakos's address, Leslie went to Paris and finally found Karakos's house on the outskirts of Paris.

“Leslie gave him the master tape, the artwork with the three etchings along with the lyrics and the musicians credits,” Juan explains. “Three months later we received four boxes containing 500 copies of the album. Karakos was as good as his word! And all of this without a contract! Those were the times!

## **Timeless**

Asked what he thinks of the *Book of AM* album now, Juan says “We knew that the theme was quite exceptional and universal as well, but we were not professional musicians so it was hard to judge what we were doing. But, there's no doubt that when you deal with Quality, in this case Universal Quality, something is produced that touches the inner core of quite a lot of people and since it's Timeless its afterlife could go on forever.”

Which, I guess, is how and why the *Book of AM* became a cult.

### **Part III: An astonishing afterlife**

When I first pulled Dave Templeton's copy of the *Book of AM* out of his vinyl collection and asked what it was, he said "I don't really know but it's a collector's item in Japan."

Dave's copy was one of the original albums, first released in 1978, but it was the reissue on Wah Wah Records which came a significant step closer to realising Juan Arkotxa and Leslie Mackenzie's vision.

### **Enter Wah Wah**

I contacted Wah Wah Records in Barcelona and Marc Argenter of the label told me how the reissue came about.

It seems that Jordi, boss of Wah Wah, is friends with Tomás Graves and knows Deia. In 2004 he met Joachim, an acquaintance of Juan's from those times who gave him Juan's address in Scotland. Jordi knew that the original LP was a sought after item in the collectors' market. When Juan told him he still had the tapes for the 45 minutes of Part I and also the unpublished tapes for another 45 minutes of Part II plus the artwork for the book, which had never been published, they decided the album and book had to be released as originally intended.

Two years later, 500 copies of the vinyl and 500 CD versions of Parts I and II of the *Book of AM* were released. The vinyl sold out in pre-orders and the CDs in just a couple of months. The Japanese also produced a "very nice gatefold mini-LP style CD with a CD-sized full colour book".

### **Recording Parts III and IV**

In the Introduction to the book published by Wah Wah Juan mentioned that the material for Parts III and IV of the *Book of AM* was still to be published.

Then, Will Z, folk-psychedelic-experimental musician and a member of Belgium's Cosmic Trip Machine heard the *Book of AM*. "It was a complete shock for me," Will says now. "I felt so connected with the music, background and lyrics. The *Book of AM* influences on my music are strong."

Will felt so inspired by the *Book of AM* he decided to work on a similar concept for the third Cosmic Trip Machine album. *The Curse of Lord Space Devil* used poetry, religious and esoteric texts, including a song Will had written when he was 20 called “Hear the Voice of the Bard” inspired by William Blake. Realising he’d been connected to AM without even knowing it, Will changed the title to “Hear the Voice of the AM” and, in 2010, sent the finished album to Juan and Leslie. “They loved it and asked me to help finish Parts III and IV of the *Book of AM*, using for the most part, the original musical ideas Juan had saved from the recordings done in Deia back in 1977.”

Juan sent Will the tapes of the sessions originally recorded in Deia. Will recorded basic tracks (mainly acoustic guitars, Korgi synth and percussion), trying to stick as closely as possible to the sound on the original tapes and albums.

In July 2011, Will went to Scotland, met Juan and Leslie and worked with them. Juan recorded flutes, violins and vocal lines and Leslie vocals and percussion. In February 2012, Leslie, Juan and Will met again at Carmeta’s house in Soller to record her vocals and Will discovered “Carmeta’s voice was still astounding.” The next revelation was his visit to Deia with Carmeta, Leslie and Juan.



*Juan and Leslie outside their 1977 Deia house*

For Will, Deia was always a mythic place, “where great artists I’ve loved since forever lived and made music. That’s why to see the houses of Carmeta and Jerry, Leslie and Juan, Daavid Allen and Gilli Smyth and Robert Graves while listening to Carmeta, Leslie and Juan’s amazing stories was an incredible experience for me.”

Parts III and IV of the *Book of AM*, recorded and mixed by Will Z with Juan, Leslie, Carmeta in Scotland, Mallorca and Belgium was released as a double album by Wah Wah in 2013 and sold out in a matter of hours.

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*Book of AM* musicians in Deia February 2013

## **Part IV: The music today**

Part of the pleasure of listening to *The Book of AM* was trying to identify on which parts Lali was singing. Phil's gravelly croak brought back memories of the odd little songs he'd sometimes sing when he was in his cups.

I picture crystal Deia mornings and try to imagine the thrill the musicians must have got from creating the *Book of AM* together

Whatever your taste, listening to the *Book of AM* inevitably conjures up a gentler, stranger, more romantic time when deep concept albums truly reflected the restless, endlessly searching, journeys of their creators, albeit in a charmingly ramshackle, eccentric way.

Today, when music is absolutely everywhere and has become pretty much leached of its power, the *Book of AM* is a poignant reminder of when the music mattered so much more.

## **The *Book of Intxixu***

In summer 1978, as a sequel to the original *Book of AM*, the *Book of Intxixu* was recorded in the church of San Mateu in Ibiza. Grounded in Basque mythology and the European Moon Goddess tradition, the *Book of Intxixu* featured the AM musicians, including Daevid Allen and Gilli Smyth. Again, Lali, who happened to be in Ibiza, added some backing vocals. (Leslie says that "Lali's unique, stunning one-off recording of "The Song of Songs" will be one of the 'bonus tracks' when the 4 parts of *Book of AM* are issued as a complete package".)

When Juan played those original recordings to Will Z, it was decided to invite his group, Cosmic Trip Machine, to add electric music. Both Daevid Allen and Gilly Smyth collaborated on the new recordings (vocals, glissando and space whisper) and these were completed just before Daevid died this year. Everyone involved hopes they'll find a sympathetic label to release the new *Book of Intxixu*.

## **Epilogue I – where are they now?**

Marc Argenter told me that a couple of labels were interested in reissuing all four parts of the *Book of AM*, along with a fifth LP of bonus material, unreleased out-

takes and so on, presented in a wooden box. This will obviously be expensive to produce but when you think that the 1978 vinyl reissue of Parts I and II alone goes for 200€ online, it would probably be a wise investment.

Will adds that he's received many requests asking for the complete *Book of AM* to be released. He's looking forward to people being able to hear Parts I and II mastered and remixed from the original masters.

As Will says, "You can now hear sounds and lines you don't hear in the 1978 release. Everything is clear and pure and you have a coherent sound across every Part. It will be the ultimate version of the project. The bonuses are wonderful too, especially unreleased songs with Carmeta and the complete 1977 session with Lali who, sadly, didn't appear on the final recordings (her version of "Song of Songs" is incredibly beautiful!). But there is a risk producing such an expensive project like this - four LPs plus a book. The idea is for a coproduction between two or three labels but we'll see if it will happen. Keep your fingers crossed, as we are, because this is one of the most beautiful folk projects that ever existed."

Sadly, Carmeta Mansilla died in 2014. Deeply mourned, she was described by her fellow *Book of AM* musicians as the "owner of an amazing voice and perfect timing", and as someone with a "vast and dramatic dynamic range" and as "fantastic; always smiling, laughing and telling amazing stories of her life".

Will Z says simply "Carmeta will be forever in my heart. Recently, I met her children in Port de Soller and made them a promise: I'll do my best to keep Carmeta's music and voice alive."

Will's recently released album *New Start* is a project about reincarnation recorded with Juan, Leslie, Carmeta and Daevid Allen. "It is," Will says, "the last time you'll hear these great psych and folk musicians working together on new and original music".

Jerry Hart felt so much at home in Deia he stayed on for almost five years. A few months after playing on *Book of Am* he joined Gong to play the Canet Roc '78 festival in Barcelona and did a Spanish tour with Mother Gong while forming the legendary Sex Beatles with Hamish McDonald, Pa'amb oli's Jordi Ramone and later Pere Colom. When, in the mid-90, he discovered how popular *Book of AM*

had become, he was “Very, very surprised. However, listening to it again still brings back the scent of olive wood fires, cheap Spanish cigarettes and the feeling of wonder that consumed me when I first arrived in the village.”

Juan Arkotxa and Leslie Mackenzie live in Scotland running a hill sheep farm and an Animation Studio which has become a Hostel and still make original music. The last time Juan and Leslie were in Deia was February 2013 when they were recording Carmeta’s vocals for Parts III and IV of the *Book of AM* at her house in Soller. I asked Juan what he felt about Deia now and he wrote:

*It still has a feeling of suspense,  
A mystery to be revealed.  
So much past behind those hewn stones,  
But no signs left in the air.  
Some clues attached on to the walls.  
All of it under those high cliffs,  
With storm music etched on their faces  
All the way down to the sea*

*And that Dispassionate Moon.....*

## **Epilogue II - once in a Blue Moon**

It’s 31 July and tonight is a Blue Moon. I looked up what the Blue Moon symbolises and, on the Elephant Journal site, I found out that:

Everything from our past is about to be illuminated and areas that desperately need focusing on will be brought to our attention and during this blue moon, there will be no looking away.

We will meet with certain issues that have been haunting us face-to-face and rather than being fearful, we should see this as an excellent chance for growth and transformation.

As said at the very beginning, part of Lali’s magic for me was her voice. So much so that, since she died, I’ve been unable to listen to her. When Juan sent me an mp3 of Lali singing the “Song of Songs”, my first reaction was fear. I knew I had to listen to it but I didn’t want to.

When I told my new love what had happened, she said “Darling, you have to listen to it. It’s a sign. The end of the story.”

“I know,” I said.

So, tonight, under the Blue Moon, I will listen to Lali sing “Song of Songs” from all those years ago.

*The End*



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Lali Shepherd 1951-2005