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### Childish Pursuits

By John Mulvey

Billy Childish is contemplating the importance of art in his life. Over the past 25 years he has recorded around 100 albums, published 30 books of poetry and a couple of novels, and painted well over 2,000 pictures. He can't do anything else and, apart from an unhappy stint as a stonemason after leaving school in the mid-1970s, he hasn't really tried. Childish's life has been dedicated to putting his emotions into the public domain. But he's not about to get things out of perspective.

"Art is a wonderful thing, but it shouldn't be overrated," he says. "You can't save yourself with poetry. The most important things are life, quality of communication and being real. Art can help us move towards those things, and that is a great function of art - to make us more human, the same as the great function of suffering is that it makes us more human.

"But even with all the work that I've done, I've been close to committing murder. I planned to murder my father on a few occasions. I beat my father when he came out of prison and I had him in a position where I could finish him. That's the closest I've been."

Meeting Childish today, it's hard to imagine him having the capacity for such violence. A gentlemanly dandy with a moustache and clothes suitable for a skilled artisan between the wars - he's possibly the least pretentious Englishman to wear a beret in living memory - he has come to London for the day from his home in Chatham, Kent.

Listening to his countless crudely-recorded, alarmingly direct records reveals a far less placid soul. Dyslexic, neglected and raging at dishonesty, his abusive father, the iniquities of the modern world and all points in between, all of Childish's art - and his music in particular - has a passion and truthfulness uncommon in any era. It's a creative fire that has sustained numerous bands, notably Thee Headcoats, Thee Milkshakes and his exceptional current trio, The Buff Medways. His music has attracted the attention of Kurt Cobain, Eddie Vedder, Beck and Blur's Graham Coxon, whose label, Transcopic, is releasing his latest LP, Steady The Buffs - reckoned by some (though not Childish) to be his 100th full-length record. He's even become rather fashionable of late, thanks to the patronage of the White Stripes and the Hives and his obvious influence on their raw garage rock. He ruefully observes: "I've done 25 years, so I can weather six months of fashion."

Nevertheless, success has eluded this remarkable man, not least because of his absolute refusal to conform to the establishment's ideas of how a musician, artist or poet should behave.

"I'm incapable of doing it properly," he says. "The idea of making art is to communicate. It needs to be in a language that means something to people to enrich

their lives or illuminate a truth. If it doesn't, it ain't worth having."

Childish's message is, quite simply, "You can do it". Everyone can make valid art, but society discourages people from properly expressing themselves. When he was at school he was barred from singing in the school choir.

"I wasn't allowed to do music because I couldn't sing, but I was still made to do maths and I couldn't do maths."

He believes people would be happier if they pursued what they wanted to do as children. It was when he summoned up the courage to see a few punk shows in 1977 that he realised he could make music, too. He still believes that "every album should sound like it's your first album".

This passion has a down side. Childish became an alcoholic. "Alcohol saved me from killing myself, not art. Without that release I wouldn't have been able to go on. But then I decided that would kill me, and then you have to move on again."

It's this candour, ultimately, that is the most striking aspect of Childish and his art. In spite of all his provocative and moving work, passing this confessional dictum on to his girlfriend of the 1980s, Tracey Emin, is what has made him most famous. Nowadays, she refuses to talk to him because, he claims, she won't accept any personal criticism, in spite of purporting to lay herself bare in her art.

"The reason for me doing confessional work is to find who I am; Tracey's confessional work was to have a career. She's got the materialistic things she always desired, so now she doesn't need to do it anymore."

Billy Childish, meanwhile, can't stop himself. He hasn't had enough money to buy canvases for the past six months, so he's been painting over his old pictures, just because he must keep going.

"I've got an intense nature," he concludes, "and I don't expect everyone to be like me - God save 'em. But we all have creative natures, though a lot of them are repressed. I'm lucky because I didn't listen to teachers. I was told I was stupid all the time and I've never believed I was stupid. It just didn't sink in. I'm very resilient on some strange level. But we're all special, we're all capable of great things, and we're all capable of being tossers. It's not a big deal. It's what being human is."

Steady The Buffs is released by Transcopic on Monday.