

In his younger days, Jimmy Webb once wrote a song for a girl in England he was in love with, but she told him, 'Don't be silly'. The 'silly' song later became a huge hit in 1973 – *All I Know* - sung by Art Garfunkel. Silly girl. Jimmy Webb is now wealthy, successful, famous and still writing love songs, but not for her.

In 1972 I was lovingly given Webb's album *Letters* by a nice young man who was mad about music, and also called Jim. It was similarly unrequited love; I was another silly girl. Like many of my ilk, we can now re-capture our dreams and heartbreaks listening to the haunting ballads of romantic regret written by the man who is a legend in popular music.

The boy who came from farming stock in West Texas, and who was thrown out of college because all he wanted was to write music, had to have a thick skin in his early years. The songwriter Harry Nielsen (*Midnight Cowboy*) even told him his voice stank. But luckily Webb had the strength of mind not to let such insults get in the way of his career, and he found millions of fans in the end, some of them highly influential like Sammy Cahn, Frank Sinatra, Johnny Cash and Glenn Campbell.

It was Webb's partnership with Campbell that brought his music to the world – *By The time I Get To Phoenix, Galveston, Wichita Lineman*. They had had 3 big hits together before they ever met, but even so Campbell's first greeting to Webb was, 'You need to get your hair cut.' Webb took no notice, and has just completed another cabaret-style tour of the UK with defiantly long locks. Although he has lost the beard and moustache which featured on his early albums, he still has pleasing traces of the baby face which was so appealing in the seventies and which presumably helped him get close to women. "Once you've got them on the piano bench, they're dead ducks," he commented. Webb is now a stoutish sixty-something and he has worn well, defeating a drink problem in recent years. He is one of those true professionals who sound the same in a live performance as they do on recordings and his distinctive voice is still strong – he can even hit the top notes tunefully and has the stamina to give one-and-a-half hour shows night after night.

Webb came to fame nearly 40 years ago - although he now says he can't remember the seventies – with *Words and Music*. The complex and unusual *McArthur Park* was first recorded by the hellraising actor Richard Harris, who was the person who first brought Webb to England. Harris then took him on a memorable tour of Ireland, which included "the bed where I was conceived" – a tourist attraction about which the young Jimmy had

mixed feelings.

His latest album is his first in a decade and, in praise of rebels, rogues and renegades, called *Twilight of the Renegades* but to his equally rebelliously-ageing fans he seems more high summer than close-of-the-day. He's again working with Glenn Campbell and hoping for another hit with *Lightning In A Bottle* which he's been testing out on his British audiences – to unanimous approval. His oldie fans are delighted – they turned out in droves in London, Milton Keynes and Edinburgh to re-live the memories of *McArthur Park, Up, Up and Away, Campo de Encino* and to be enchanted by newer ones such as the poignant *No Signs of Age* (actually written in 1987). Webb is a star with a former hellraiser reputation, but *No Signs of Age* is a delicate and wistfully romantic song.

The appeal of Jimmy Webb's music to oldies lies partly in what one critic has called its "bittersweet maturity", as well as its complex harmonies, unexpected phrasing and poignant words. *Twilight of the Renegades* is a reminder of the solo albums of thirty years ago; just Jimmy, his piano and his poetry. "Your beauty endures...And love never dies...It will not disengage...In my memory tonight...You show no signs of age.... Now *that* is truly music to the ears of fifty-somethings.