

ABOUT US – FOUNDERS

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David Gordon

Composer / Lyricist

A poet, songwriter, self-taught religious philosopher, David is intensely proud to be perhaps the original founder of Peace Child. It was his oratorio, [*Alpha Omega \(Parts I & Part II\)*](#), that sparked the interest of first, Michael and Eirwen Harbottle, then author of [*The Peace Book*](#), Bernard Benson, that led the birth of the idea of a Children's Musical celebrating how peace could come to our world.

David was born of Greek Cypriot father and Swedish mother in Soho, London. He grew up during the Second World War in one of the most heavily bombed parts of the city.

He entered the music business in 1966 by launching the career of his brother, Cat Stevens, who went on to become one of the most internationally acclaimed singer/ songwriters of the 1970s.

In 1969 he started his own song-writing career working with Terry Sylvester of the Hollies and went on to write the song, Child for a Day, which was recorded by his brother, and used by UNICEF in the International Year of the Child in 1979. 1980 saw his arrival as a classical composer, lyricist and oratorio writer, with the premier of [*Alpha Omega \(Parts I & Part II\)*](#), in Coventry Cathedral, with Edward Woodward playing the part of the Narrator.

In October 1981, David Gordon worked with Brigadier Michael and Eirwen Harbottle of the World Disarmament Campaign, and David Woollcombe and Rosey Simonds to produce *Peace Child*, a musical adaptation of Bernard Benson's [*The Peace Book*](#). With Rosey Simonds, he co-produced the premiere production of Peace Child at the Royal Albert Hall, London in October 1981.

In September 1985, David co-produced the United Nations Peace Day Festival to launch the United Nations International Year of Peace at the Royal Albert Hall in London. In 1988, David founded [Peace](#)

[Child Israel](#) which brought together Arab and Israeli children in theatrical and musical workshops dealing with conflict resolution.

In 1990, David went to the USA and worked with Peace Child International and others to create various local programmes in and around Princeton and Trenton, NJ.

He continues to manage some of his brother's business affairs and play an active role in various philanthropic causes.

David Woollcombe, author, talks with David Gordon, the composer and lyricist, about the songs of *Peace Child*

David Woollcombe: Everyone who-ever worked on the Peace Child musical, myself included, feels that your songs are the beating heart of it. Their energy, their timelessness, their majesty drives the story forward. Maybe you could tell me what you were thinking when you wrote some of them. "Peace Day" for example?

David Gordon: That song is two songs spliced together, Peace Day, and an old song of mine, Peace Enough through making that beautiful half-tempo bridge. They had integrity together. Peace Day is the song I wrote totally for Peace Child. I just wanted it to be a very, very happy song: a song for children, but it works for older people as well. It amazes me when I see it on stage to see older people enjoying it as well.

David Woollcombe: There is a strange sophistication about it. It should never be "kiddified" - made into a kiddies' song.

David Gordon: That "Celebrations" section gives it a bit of sophistication - it lifts it up so that it can be anybody's song! The way I wrote it was by visualising the kids all together singing it. The moment I thought about that, I could feel them singing it. That's why it was so easy - it wrote itself very quickly. The lyrics I had to work on a little at the end, but the music played itself out on the piano in real time. Very easy. Also I imagined kids jumping around, enjoying themselves in a modern day barn dance - "Take your partners!" I was so influenced by things like "Oklahoma" - the joy that was in some of those songs! That's what influenced me and made me feel it was OK to sing in the streets, anywhere. I saw that musical so many times - I loved it!

David Woollcombe: Let's talk more about your feelings about children. You say "Peace Day" was written for children: "Child for a Day" clearly wasn't, but it reflects your vision of what it was to be a child. You have a very strong feeling of the innocence of a child. Can you talk about Child for a day?

David Gordon: I cannot ever see anybody without seeing a child. I see everybody as a child. I see them putting on their coats of sophistication, I see them playing their roles in life - even Presidents! But underneath, I see their vulnerability as a child. I always see that. I also see that they never reach their dreams - never! But they never let go of them either. Somehow their eyes are always full of sunshine, and if you could just lift off some little layer, you will see this beautiful child in everybody. They are full of the spirit, full of life, full of sunshine, full of the tears - 'cos I see also the sorrow. They've lost that innocence that everybody told them they had to lose when they became adults. And they said: "I know I have to be an adult, but I want to be that child as well in me always..." I believe there is a wonderful argument to tell people that they don't have to be that adult that the world imposes on us. We can retain that beautiful sacredness and innocence of childhood throughout our adult life.

David Woollcombe: There is the other side of childhood: in Child for a day, you don't talk about the scruffy little child who falls on its face, gets itself covered in mud and is dirty and vicious and mean. That surely is part of childhood too?

David Gordon: Those things I call external things. You are who you are: if you go through rain, you get wet, but the wet isn't part of you; if fall in mud, you get dirty, but the dirt isn't part of you. Even if people get into terrible situations and do drugs - the drugs aren't a part of them. They remain who they are in their essential beings. They remain that essence of purity, you cannot take that away from a human being. You can be covered in filth and grime but beneath it all is a shining human being. Even if the body is riddled with disease, that too is an external thing. The internal remains pure. It can't be touched. I've seen criminals where the mind is totally evil and yet the essence is pure: I've seen them on TV programs where they break down, and the child comes out so in need of love and cuddling and comfort. And when kids do Peace Child, I've seen that coming out everywhere. All the problems that these kids have are washed away - cleaned out by touching that true essence of Childhood.

David Woollcombe: It's interesting. At the beginning of every *Peace Child* show, there is often a lot of ego in the kids: "He's got a bigger part than me..." or "She's got the better solo!" But by the end, all that disappears in a wonderful loving spirit. Kids seem just thrilled to be a part of that communal innocence, a lot of which comes from your music. A song like "If you close your eyes" perhaps - where did that come from ?

David Gordon: That to me is a most, most important song in Peace Child. What I am trying to unlock, give kids the key to - is the amazing expanse of the inner soul. The wonderful gift of the soul! And I want to show how the soul is so beautifully linked to the world, to the universe. I want people to find the universe in themselves. This is the ultimate spiritualness - the ultimate, real journey to God. We are actually living our lives for the universe. The universe sees the life it has created in us. We are its eyes, we are its ears, we are its tongue - we taste its food,, we smell its fragrance - all these things we have because we are of its essence. We have been created in order that we may experience life. So : "Open up your eyes and behold the Universe!" Behold it inside of you! Behold it! See how connected it all is - your fingers, your breathing, your hairs, your arms. All are connected to this life in a way that is so spiritual, so sacred!

David Woollcombe: It's a wonderful unifying song for people: when you sing it together, you do feel connected to everything and everyone.

David Gordon: It is a unifying song. "Come on all you people now, all together a Brave New World!" Come on! - Let's see and experience this sacred, wonderful world again. Let's get away from the strict, logical Real World that has been imposed on us.

David Woollcombe: There's a line in there that talks about "It's happening everywhere" - what's happening?

David Gordon: This is the time of real awakening now. A great knot of confusion is being untied. We are stepping back, not regressing, but finding our source, our spirit. This is the time of the great awakening of the soul. The great religions of the world are inter-connecting in such a way, there's an overflow, an over-lap, and the waters of two seas are crossing - not just two, but five, ten seas. And they are all crossing and mingling, so the waters of all the religions are becoming one. From this mingling is coming the great spiritual awakening. The miracle of Life is becoming more obvious to everyone. It is happening everywhere, People are waking up... It's a terribly important song and I would like for it to be more included, more central to Peace Child.

David Woollcombe: Well it's there now in the new show, along with "Look at Life!" - the ultimate celebratory song, another that hasn't been much used recently. Where did that song come from ??

David Gordon: I wrote that as a poem a long, long time ago - 1968 , I think. I've got the piece of paper at home with it on done on this dirty old type-writer - exactly as the song is now. I'd forgotten about it. I found it when I was going through some papers and thought: "Perhaps this is my definitive expression of life itself!" - bringing in the trees, the flowers, the sea - saying a sort of "Thank you!" to it all. "Isn't it astonishing, all this!" That's the thing that really got me - I mean it's astounding!! If we can only walk around each day looking at Life, seeing how wonderful, beautiful - what a beautiful paradise this world

is. They're beginning to see it now as they go out in space. They look back and say "Oh Wow! - isn't it beautiful!"

David Woollcombe: '68 was the year it happened: the year they stood on the moon.

David Gordon: Perhaps that was what inspired me - men standing on the moon looking back at earth: Look at Life! Doesn't it astound you ! I wanted to talk of the earth as well - in the touch of the earth - when you feel it on your hands! "The ray of the sun" - the importance of our connection with the source of our energy! The Green of the land - Life! - Lachaim, they call it in the Jewish tradition. God put us here to enjoy life, to live it! - for Him! Through us He lives and breathes and experiences life itself. I feel it in that song when they shout "Life!! - Lachaim!!!" It's a celebration of Life.

In the middle of it, there's one of the most sacred things that is given to us in Life on earth - the thing which recreates us - the love between a boy and a girl, or an old man and old woman. This love - this beautiful thing which recreates us and recreates God - is inside this song to show that at the heart of Life is this wonderful thing of the love between male and female. Young boy picks a flower - he sees the color of the sky... because at the moment he's in love with her, all of life's whole existence and expression comes into his heart. The earth itself is involved in that love. It's very important that.

David Woollcombe: Let's talk about Reach Out - a very powerful song in the show.

David Gordon: Reach out for me is my gift to children - to help them reach into themselves, find themselves and find the courage to come out and present themselves: I am here. It's actually about Reaching IN - to find that "You are your greatest wealth!" You are a wealth to yourself and a wealth to the world. Feel yourself! Feel Proud to be alive! - stand up, and say "Here I am" and I don't want.... It makes me cry. I think of the children who don't feel worthy. I want all children to feel worthy, really worthy - feel that they are worth something! I don't want any child to feel that they are not worth anything! I learned something very long ago, I suddenly realised that if one person is worth something, then we all are. If one person isn't, then none of us are! That's my whole philosophy.

David Woollcombe: Where did you write it?

David Gordon: I wrote it for the first Peace Child.

David Woollcombe: No you didn't: I came round one evening and you played it to me amongst a bunch of other stuff and I leapt on it because it was so much the essence of Peace Child. You were rather secretive about it - I never knew where it came from.

David Gordon: Well it must have come out of that first show. I wrote it for those children in London. I remember that. I wanted to give them something to free them from all that stuff around them. To empower them. The song is total empowerment.

When I write these songs, I am trying to clear up something on this planet: I can't do it unless I am trying to do that. This is why it becomes so intense for me - why I have to claw down to the very root of a problem and see its source and clear it up. It becomes an overwhelming need for me to do this. When I see a child, weak, fragile, insecure - I just have to tell them, reach in! be proud! be powerful!

David Woollcombe: Let's go to the other extreme: "World!" What gets into you when you write a song like that?

David Gordon: We naturally know how good life can be so when we see it going wrong, we get angry - instinctively angry at a gut level. That's what's happening in "World". Children are acutely aware that it's not necessary for parents to treat them with strict control, that there is a loving, caring way. They are nearer to the truth than we. Kids can teach us how to teach them - but we don't listen. It's almost as though we want to squeeze the sacredness of childhood out of them just as it has been lost in ourselves. The parents want to enforce upon them this profane life that we are forced to live. In a way, World is a song of a child's rebellion against the process of losing that wonderful world of childhood.

It's also about the ecological issue - an attack on Man's greed. Greed - the word has come to dominate the human; the human has got to learn to dominate the word. Just because it is written, it is not sacred: we do not have to live by it. What we do in our actions, what we do to the planet - that is what matters.

David Woollcombe: I see the anger, I see that profane world the kid is being forced to accept, but I don't see in the vocabulary of the song these other things you are talking about:

David Gordon: The steeple is broken, people coming out from under, slowly rising to the thunder - this is my way of expressing the anger. The anger of people whose sensibilities are crushed. We are angry - angry with the church for not giving us what we need! We are angry with the religions 'cos we instinctively know the right religions. We have that instinct inbred in us. And it's not coming forth, and we are suffocating. As a result, we are suffocating our world. It is not out there any more. That is what is left to be done: to recreate that world which is so naturally a part of us. It's there in some primitive cultures - we call them primitive but maybe this is just another word for "Holy"!

David Woollcombe: The interesting thing that you're telling us about the song is that it is as much the internal world of the child that is dying as the external ecological world. In a sense, the two are the same.

David Gordon: You cannot separate them. The inner and outer - the world is our skin. The grass is the hair on our arms. It's all there as a manifestation - a repetition of patterns in everything.

David Woollcombe: You say sometimes that you don't really feel that these are your songs - that you cannot really feel a pride in authorship cos you feel that they are really coming from somewhere else?

David Gordon: I am a recorder - I am a listener. I pick up what other people are saying and somehow get it so deep into my system that it comes out in the way of a song or a poem. This is how I write. I do feel a little detached from them. I couldn't have experienced all that I write about, but I just see it everywhere and I record it. No more so than in the case of "I have a vision"

David Woollcombe: Talk about that one.

David Gordon: That song came out because I saw the speech on television and I got into that feeling, I got into that man's body. I felt him and I wanted to express it. I did it tightly, the way he clenched his hand, the way he held back his breath. I tried to present that in the song.

David Woollcombe: You don't use much of the imagery of that speech: he had fabulous imagery - "The red hills of Georgia....!"

David Gordon: No, No - that would have been to hang it on words. I like to use words so that you can't quote them almost because they belong to the emotion and not to the intellectual description of it. I'm trying to get his feeling in there - "Don't you feel it rising...!" His spirit. I want to give a sense of him rising to the mountain top, seeing the vision - that's why I give it these very high notes that I could never sing myself!

David Woollcombe: But wait, the Dream speech was '63; going to the mountaintop was '68: when was the song?

David Gordon: The song came at my office in Curzon Street. There was some vague talk of doing a musical about King. One of the people I was working with gave me a book about him. It must have been '78 I wrote it. It came all at once - I played it out almost as you hear it now, but after I'd written it, I realised those first five notes come from a Swedish lullaby. After that, it developed way, way differently, but I must acknowledge that debt.

David Woollcombe: It's been changed of course?

David Gordon: Yes, before it was "Praise Ye the Lord! gather all your courage!" But I love the way it is now, with Steve Riffkin's new lyrics. It is more real; it takes away from the song when it is directed

towards religion. Now it goes to the spirit of the religion which is Love - far, far more important. But it is also dedicated to Martin Luther King - and his Life!

David Woollcombe: How should we use this great inspirational song in the show?

David Gordon: The inspiration for me is, again, to have each child reach into themselves. To think of themselves as worthy - to be empowered! Find that spark of power that was there in Martin Luther King, in Jesus, Mohammed, the Buddha, Gandhi - all the great teachers and peace-makers. That same power is in each child, David - and the whole point of *Peace Child* is to help every child find that power, and reach in and grasp that spark, own it, and be it. Not to worship any body, not Martin Luther King, not Jesus, not Mohammed, not the Buddha, nor Confucius - *Peace Child* tries to lead a child to that sacred spark that allows them to be the same as them. To love life the same way. And you'll make your mistakes, even after you've found it. You're not perfect, and you're not meant to be!

David Woollcombe: By the way, you and I agree that best version of that was the one sung by Sasha Losev and Gwen Ross on the 1986 tour, yes?

David Gordon: Oh yes - it makes me cry, that! Every time I hear it, I am waiting for Sasha Losev's voice to come in. That is a superb arrangement by Steve Riffkin and I love it! People should really try to find voices like that to do it.

David Woollcombe: I remember when they first sang that song: it was at the end of a head-banging rock concert in the Olympic village in Moscow - the audience had been there for a long, long time, and I'm sure they all wanted to go home. And we came on to do some Peace Child songs. They clapped politely for the kids, but when Gwen came on... I remember she was feeling sick that night. She didn't want to sing, but the Russians didn't understand and hauled her on stage. She found a voice from somewhere and up there on stage, a short black lady from Washington DC in a Peace Child T-shirt, such an incredible contrast to the long-haired rockers, she and Sasha sang that song. And that audience stood and clapped for about 10 minutes. It was wonderful - a coming together of all kinds of things - Soviet, American, Black White, Male Female - young old. She reached in. She found that spark. She felt worthy.