

Travel Diary of a Bibliomaniac

When asked to play bass on David Sylvian's tour of Europe last fall, Keith Lowe saw it as a paid opportunity to visit the storied bookshops of London.

By night (and some days) Seattle's Keith Lowe is a professional musician much in demand by a wide range of artists on both sides of the border. By day he is a chronic collector—motion lamps, robots and most especially books, with a particular emphasis on early-20th-century editions of fairy tales and the works of Arthur Rackham. His bibliomania has become sufficiently advanced that in recent years he has been studying bookbinding.

In 2000, on the recommendation of guitarist Bill Frisell (on whose album *The Willies* Keith played), David Sylvian invited Keith to join a tour of Europe. Sylvian's career started in the mid-'70s with the band Japan. Over the past 25 years he has pursued a wide variety of solo projects, continuously challenging and moving farther away from common notions of pop music. In 2005 Sylvian asked Keith to participate in the recording sessions for his latest project, an ensemble group to be known as Nine Horses. Keith's upright acoustic and electric bass playing contributed to the unique sound on both the album *Snow Borne Sorrow* and a follow-up EP.

When Keith was invited to join Sylvian's tour of Europe last fall, *Amphora* knew where his mind would be when not on stage. We asked him to keep a log of his adventures in book scouting and agonies of choosing what to buy.

7.10.07: Today I learned rehearsals for the upcoming tour would be in London. A month in London! Wonderful bookstores...And the home of Arthur Rackham! Filling my free time (if I have any) won't be a concern.

7.12.07: I did an Internet search for bookshops in London that I should visit. Found a few. A couple of must-sees are Peter Harrington's (which has an amazing bindery associated with it!) and Henry Sotheran. Should be able to find some very nice (albeit expensive) illustrated books.



*David Sylvian and Keith Lowe in performance.
Photo by David Susa.*

7.13.07: Wrote Peter Harrington's an e-mail telling them I'm a collector of Rackham and would be in London for the month of August rehearsing with David Sylvian for an upcoming tour, and was looking forward

to visiting their lovely shop. A bit of shameful and not so gentle name-dropping, but you have to do these things every so often if you want a chance at some good Rackhams! I also said I was a bookbinder and asked if it would be possible to get a tour of the bindery. We'll see what they say.

7.17.07: Good news. The person who received my e-mail at Harrington's was a friendly fellow named Adam who happens to be a big fan of David Sylvian! He extended a cheerful invitation to visit the shop and the bindery. Very much looking forward to that. Glad I wrote the e-mail!

7.25.07: Spent a few hours looking over all my books to remind myself what I have and don't have. Forgot I had a Rackham edition of *Peer Gynt*. So, not only a fun way to spend the afternoon, but a good reminder to look at my books more often!

8.2.07: Spent some time chatting with good friend and fellow Rackham enthusiast Charles van Sandwyk about my trip to London. Always fun to talk Rackham with him. Very knowledgeable and enthusiastic. He had some good tips on shops and also suggested I visit Rackham's home. Perhaps a visit to the Llewelyn-Davies gravesite would be a good outing as well. After all, they did inspire one of my most favourite stories, *Peter Pan*!

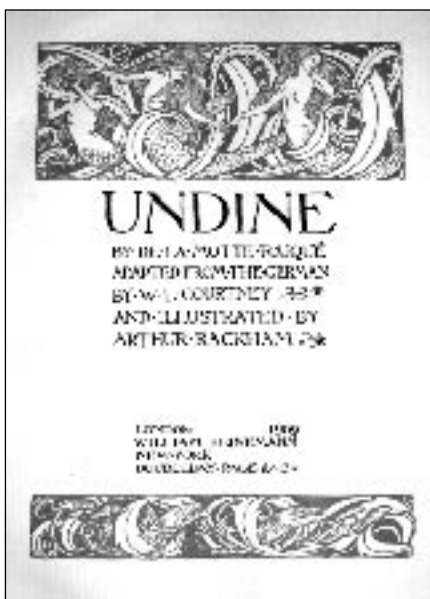
8.12.07: First day in London...the adventure begins. Rehearsals start tomorrow for what should be a very fun tour. Did some

more research online for what Rackham I should look for. I'm thinking I'll keep an eye out for a first of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. That one is chock full of beautiful plates.

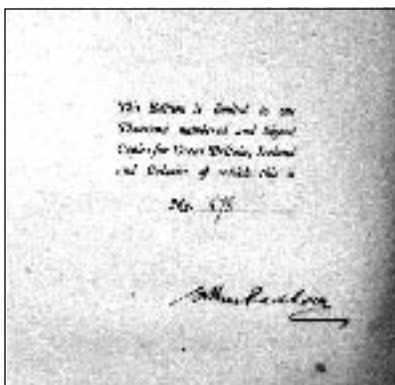
8.13.07: Today was spent mostly setting up our gear and greeting old and new friends. A nice bunch of people. Lovely to see David and Steve Jansen [percussionist and Sylvian's brother] again. After much scouting about on the Web sites of various London shops, I found that a first of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is going to be pretty expensive... Actually *everything* is going to be expensive here. There is a huge selection of Rackham available, but wow, the prices are about double what I've seen everywhere else. I found a copy online from a shop in Wales for £200... About half what they are going for here. I think I'll go for it.

8.17.07: The book I ordered from Wales was on my bed when I got back to the hotel after rehearsal. I excitedly opened the package, peeling back the paper and bubble wrap. The once-white book was grey and mottled with age and wear—no surprise for a book 100 years old. I sat down to look at all the glorious plates, ready to lose myself deep in the fairy-tale world of Arthur Rackham. But as I flipped through the pages, I noticed a rather unpleasant smell: the book reeked of mould! Ugh.

8.18.07: Hmm. Not sure what to do about the book. I love having a copy, but is this the right one? How can I enjoy the story and beautiful plates if I can't even stand to open the thing? I spoke with Charles and told him of my dilemma. He told me he owns lots of Rackhams that smell like "puke or stinky undies, or someone's unwashed poopy bum," and that smell should not put me off a well-priced Rackham, or even a high-priced Rack-



Title page to the limited edition of Undine that ate up all of Keith's book budget.



The limitation page from Keith's covered edition of Undine, illustrated by Arthur Rackham.

ham (or better still, an exorbitant van Sandwyk). But if it is downright smelling mouldy, he said, then that is something you may want to exchange or return. Hmm. While my book is not so bad as unwashed bum, I'm not so sure I can live with it. We'll see...

8.19.07: I'm having a hard time enjoying the book. Another call to Charles confirmed my thoughts. I must try to return the book. What good is a book that I cannot enjoy? I guess you really do get what you pay for.

8.21.07: Bookseller not thrilled I want to return the book. He said he's never heard of someone returning a book due to smell, but in the interest of transatlantic relations he will accept the return. Phew!

8.23.07: I awoke early and had time for a bit of book browsing before heading off to rehearsal. Took a cab to Henry Sotheran's on Sackville Street. It's one of the oldest shops in London and has an excellent collection of illustrated books. I found many I would love to have in my library, but alas, I had to choose carefully

Stinky Book Tip

Alcuin encountered the following recipe for rehabilitating noxious books: seal the pungent offender in a plastic bag with a few cups of diatomous earth (translation: cat litter) and leave for a few days. The minerals should act to absorb the stench. Though it would seem desirable to keep the book and expunger physically separated in the bag—the very idea conjures images of Stimpy's cat box—strategies for accomplishing this were not included in the recipe.

KEITH LOWE

and wisely. I decided on a small book, *The Twilight Fairies*, by Marion St. John Webb. It contains six short fairy stories with six beautiful colour plates and numerous black and white illustrations by Margaret W. Tarrant. The price was fairly good, not taking too much out of my book fund. With the charming stories and wonderful colour plates, the bang-for-the-buck ratio was pretty high. This purchase should hold me for at least a little while. Wish I had more time to browse the shop!

8.25.07: Went to Peter Harrington's with Yuka Fujii, my dear friend as well as David's long-time artistic partner. Met Adam, the young man who answered my e-mail. A very gregarious and outgoing person, quick to smile and laugh. Everyone there was much the same and made us feel right at home, even offering us cold drinks. Remembering my interests, Adam showed us the Rackham section...Quite an amazing collection...The most titles I have ever seen in one place. Some original, some gorgeously rebound in leather by their Chelsea Bindery.

Yuka had never really seen Arthur Rackham's work, so I had a wonderful time going from book to book, showing her all the lovely plates. Yuka is a young spirit who experiences joy easily, so it was very thrilling to share these works of art with her. After spending about two hours looking at all the books, I found a book I might be able to buy. A signed, limited, vellum-bound edition of *Undine* cheaper than the others, but still rather expensive.



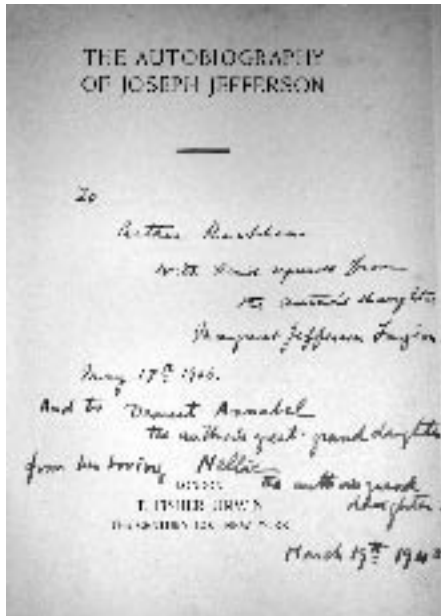
The Chelsea Bindery stacked to the gills with old books waiting to receive new life.

result should be a good tour. I'm looking forward to getting on the road and playing this lovely music with my friends.

Today I went back to Peter Harrington's for a tour of the Chelsea Bindery which Adam arranged. The eponymous (and late) owner's son Pom Harrington led the tour. Some of the other people who work there had never seen

the bindery, so they came along and it was treated as an educational staff outing. The bindery was amazing. It was stacked to the gills with tattered and old books waiting to receive new life, binding equipment and tools of all types, and a very friendly, small group of expert binders, each specialized in a specific area of the binding process. A highlight was the demonstration of their Intertype machine, which they use for setting type to tool on books' spines. I came away from the tour highly charged and motivated to continue my own adventures in binding.

When we returned to the bookshop, Adam showed me his little office area downstairs where he keeps some of his special books. He showed me a book he was not sure what to do with. It was a copy of Joseph Jefferson's autobiography. Jefferson was an actor and friend of



Two degrees of separation: Keith's obvious delight with the gift of a book that once belonged to Arthur Rackham. (Inset: detail of the author's inscription to Rackham.) Photo by Yuka Fujii.

Arthur Rackham. This was number 27 from an edition of 50 copies, bound in parchment, which was nice enough, but then I looked inside—it was inscribed to Arthur Rackham by the author's daughter, dated May 18th, 1906!

This book belonged to Arthur Rackham during his best period and must have once rested on a bookshelf at his home (which I had just visited about a week ago)! I sheepishly asked the price, but Adam shrugged, saying he didn't know what it was worth, and put it away. I asked him to please consider me when he thought of selling it. I then purchased the signed *Undine* from him—there goes my book fund for the entire tour, and we haven't even left town yet!

9.17.07: We played Royal Festival Hall in London tonight. I invited Adam and anyone else from Peter Harrington's to the show as a thank-you for their wonderful hospitality. The band merchandise on this tour includes a beautiful hardcover book filled with photos by David. I got one from David and had everyone in the band sign it, then headed off to the stage door to leave it for Adam so he could find it when picking up his tickets. When I got there, he was just showing up. We exchanged greetings and in unison held out book-shaped gifts to one another. We made some pleasant small talk and then parted since the show was beginning soon. Upon returning to the dressing room, I excitedly unwrapped my present and, to my extreme delight and disbelief, it was the Joseph Jefferson book—the one that once belonged to Arthur Rackham!! I think my book collecting on this tour is now complete, ending on a very grand note!

During September and October of 2007, Keith managed to visit a few other bookstores as David Sylvian's "The World Is Everything" tour played dates in the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, Belgium, France, Italy, Germany, Holland, the Czech Republic, Hong Kong and Japan. But as he said, his budget was blown, so it was just browsing. Information about David Sylvian, his Samadhisound label, Nine Horses and images from the tour can be found at www.davidsylvian.com. Images, clips and a few samples of Keith's varied musical activities can be found at his MySpace page (www.myspace.com/keithblowebass).

IN A SILENT WAY



Just before going to press we received a copy of *Let That Bad Air Out – Buddy Bolden's Last Parade*, a new wordless “novel in linocut” by Stefan Berg. Rushing to get mention of the book (8vo, 160 pp, sewn in wraps), Alcuin is forced to rely on publisher Porcupine's Quill's accompanying press release for a precis: though never recorded, Bolden is considered a progenitor of jazz. Berg's book “portrays the culture of New Orleans parade music through the narrative of Buddy Bolden's last parade.” Berg is a young painter and printmaker who completed his studies at the Ontario College of Art & Design just last year.

