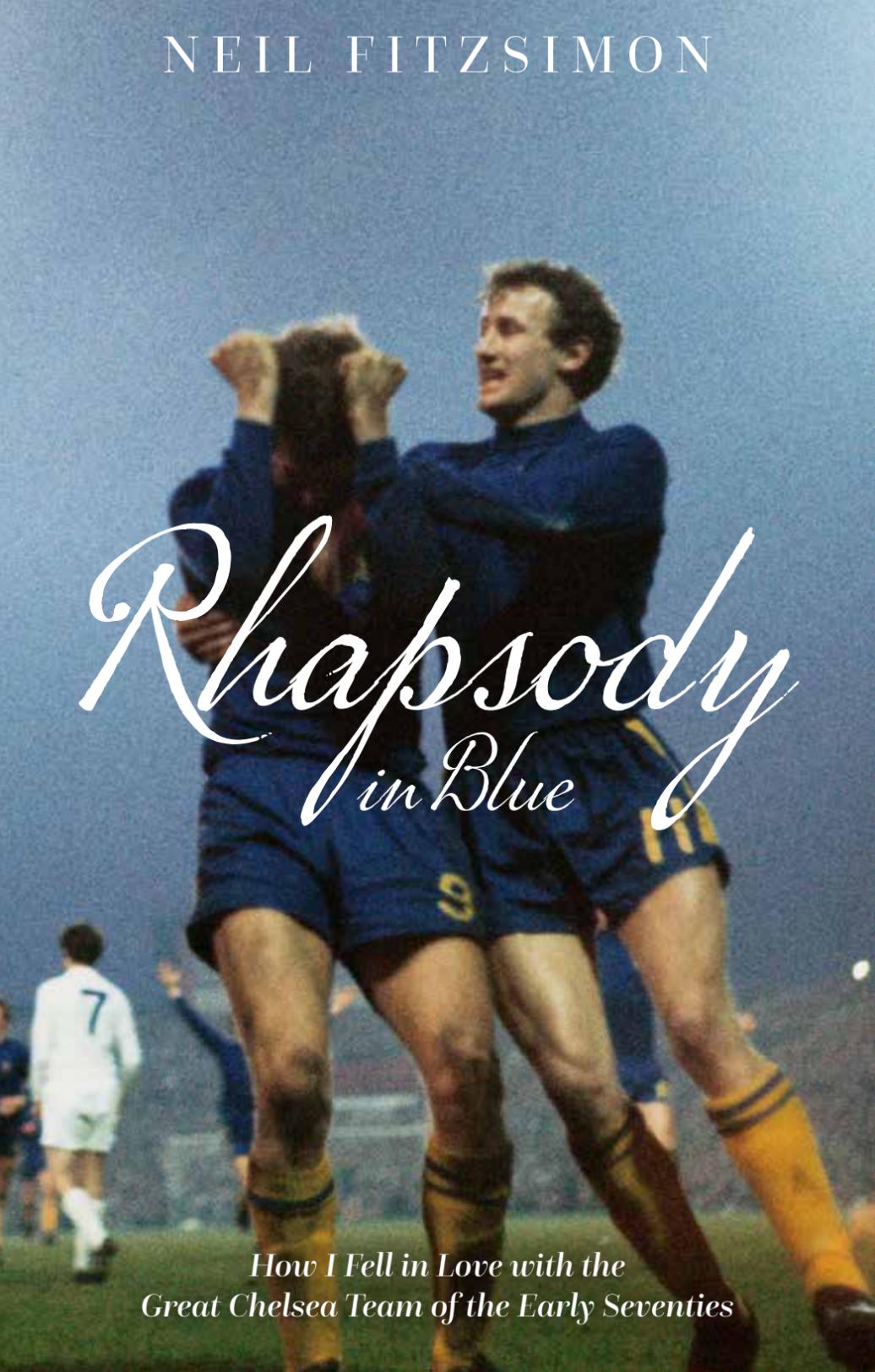


NEIL FITZSIMON



*Rhapsody  
in Blue*

*How I Fell in Love with the  
Great Chelsea Team of the Early Seventies*

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## Chapter 1

# An Innocent Abroad

IT WAS during the 1968/69 season, when we lived in the Elephant and Castle, that I started going to Chelsea on a regular basis. I'd been a few times that year, with my dad, but that wasn't enough for me. For one thing, I didn't want to sit in the stands. As far as I was concerned, there was only one place to be, and that was in the Shed. Even though the prospect of standing there scared me half to death, I was determined that that was where I had to be.

Eventually, I persuaded my mum and dad to let me go on my own. Seeing as I was only 13, and the trip across London was a long one, they were a bit concerned for my safety. As for my nan, she was beside herself with worry. When I left on the day of the game, she hugged me tightly and told me, 'Don't talk to strangers ... don't do this ... don't do that ...' For a split second I almost decided not to go as the guilt that she was laying on me and all the worry that I was going to cause the family, made me feel like a selfish little shit. But at that age, that feeling lasted for about five seconds.

Finally, I was off! And with the aid of my trusty little underground map, I found my way to Stamford Bridge. The opponents that day were Sunderland. After the two sterile draws I'd watched earlier in the season with my dad, I was hoping for something better. I wasn't let down. The whole day was a fantastic experience. The Shed, to me at the time, seemed the wildest and most exciting place I'd ever been to. As for the game, Chelsea destroyed Sunderland 5-1 with my hero, Bobby Tambling, getting four of the goals. I could hardly wait for the final whistle. I was practically bursting with the need to get home and tell my mum and dad all about the game.

That night, my mum, dad, nan, grandad and my sister listened to endless retellings of the day's great events. My nan even cooked my favourite tea – bacon, chips and tinned tomatoes – to celebrate my 'homecoming'.

'There,' she said, 'get stuck in! You're home now and I'm sure your dad will take you again soon.' There was a silence. My dad looked guilty. My nan said, 'What's going on?'

'Actually, Mum,' my dad replied to my nan, 'I've said he can go again next week if he likes.' My nan looked crestfallen and said to my dad, 'Johnny, how could you!' My nan was too shocked to speak to me. Me? I was triumphant. I was on my way!

## Chapter 2

# The Hidden Menace

BY THE time Man United visited the Bridge in March 1969, I'd been to about half a dozen games on my own. My mates at school were dead jealous that I was going to all of these matches by myself. Two of them finally pressured their mums and dads into letting them go with me, telling them that 'Neil will look after us – he knows what he's doing'. Talk about the blind leading the blind.

So, on a grey, overcast March day, Kevin Dalton, Jeff Stagg and myself set out on the journey to the Bridge. Kevin was a Man United supporter: a forerunner I suppose of all those cockney reds you get today. Though to be fair, his family were from Northern Ireland, where you do tend to get a lot of people supporting United. And as his dad had always followed them, it was pretty much determined from birth who he would support. Kevin's dad, by the way, was one of those mad Irishmen who could sink about 20 pints a night and still manage to get up for work the next day as fresh as a daisy. Kevin idolised George Best and, especially, Willie Morgan. He tried to emulate their way of running and dribbling with the ball

and I must say that at the level we played at, he was an excellent player. He also possessed his dad's wild streak and had a quick, fiery temper that got us in and out of a lot of scrapes through the years.

As for Jeff Stagg, he was a very quiet, thoughtful type who was at ease with his own company. It came as no surprise to me to find out many years later that Jeff had ended up working as a bus driver. Although Jeff supported Liverpool and loved football, he didn't seem the type to rough it in the Shed and I was surprised when he said he'd like to come along. I think he wanted to prove to himself that he could go through with it. I've no doubt that after the day's events, he wished that he'd stayed firmly at home.

We got to the ground at about 12 o'clock – nice and early to get a good view. When the gates opened at half twelve, it was already apparent that this was like no other home game I'd ever been to. The streets around Stamford Bridge were packed. Queues for the turnstiles went all the way back to the tube station. Man United, as they are today, were the biggest draw in the country. Although this United side had been in a state of gradual decline since their European Cup win the year before, they still hadn't started on the enormous job of rebuilding the side, and a lot of the current players were now coming to the end of what was a glorious career. It was to be Matt Busby's final season in charge and, apart from the holy trinity of George Best, Bobby Charlton and Denis Law, their team basically wasn't up to much. Not to put too fine a point on it, they were crap. In fact, Chelsea had annihilated them 4-0 at Old Trafford earlier in the season. Before that game, United had paraded the European Cup and then Chelsea proceeded to completely rain on their parade. What a laugh! In the next five years their decline continued and United were relegated in 1974, much to the amusement of

the rest of the football world. And though they bounced back a year later, it wasn't until 1993 that they finally won another championship.

Getting into the ground that March day was terrible. The entrance to the turnstiles was narrow – and the crowd huge – the result being that you were virtually carried along on a seething mass of humanity towards the turnstiles. It was pretty frightening. Jeff and Kevin looked shocked at the way people just shoved and pushed their way forward. It was the survival of the fittest. The relief you felt when you were through the turnstiles and finally managed to get into the ground was brilliant.

The first thing you had to do was find your way down to the front to get a good view. I reckon there were at least 30,000 in the ground by one o'clock and by the time the game kicked off, there were 61,000 people crammed into Stamford Bridge. The atmosphere was electric. The whole of the North End was a cauldron of the red and white scarves of Man United. The Shed were taunting them mercilessly. Just before the kick-off, Kevin opened his jacket to reveal a Man United rosette pinned to his jumper. That's one thing you don't seem to see now at grounds – and this one was pathetically naff. In the middle of the rosette was a horseshoe with 'Good Luck Man United' written underneath it. Me and Jeff pissed ourselves. Kevin said he didn't see what the joke was.

The game kicked off on a pitch that resembled a beach. It makes me laugh when you hear the modern-day pros moaning about the state of the playing surfaces they face every week. In those days the players were just as talented, tougher and got on with it. After 15 minutes, Chelsea went one up through David Webb. United were pinned back in their own half and the pressure was relentless, so it came as no surprise when Chelsea scored a second goal,

when Ian Hutchinson, that season's major discovery, hit an angled drive past Alex Stepney. With United reeling and taking a right battering, I still wasn't shocked when, despite all of this, United pulled one back on the stroke of half-time. So, it was 2-1 to Chelsea.

Kevin was convinced that United would pull it back. And though I put on a brave face, I'd lost count of the times I'd seen Chelsea lose two-goal leads. The one bright spot at half-time was the news that Arsenal were losing 1-0 to third division Swindon in the League Cup Final. A deafening cheer went up from both sets of fans. Surely Swindon couldn't hold on?

So, the second half started and again Chelsea were pushing United back. This pressure finally paid off when Bobby Tambling scored a brilliant goal to put Chelsea 3-1 ahead. It really was a great goal. As Tambling ran on to a through pass, he hit the ball first time and beat Stepney. The execution of the strike was so sweet and perfect – the ball flew past Stepney before he could move. The noise in the Shed was so great that it seemed as though the terraces were shaking beneath your feet.

And there stood poor Kevin. A splatter of red in a sea of blue and white.

As for Jeff, he was just wide-eyed at the whole spectacle he was witnessing.

Chelsea continued to dominate but with ten minutes left, United pulled themselves back into the game when they were awarded a penalty which Denis Law duly dispatched. Those last few minutes seemed to go on forever, but Chelsea held on, to my relief, to win 3-2. In all fairness, Chelsea had dominated the majority of the game and in my eyes, the scoreline flattered United.

Kevin took it really well. We even shook hands! What a pair of twats!

As for George Best, well he hardly had a kick. Ron Harris stuck to him like glue. In fact, years later, Best revealed that he always hated playing against Chelsea, as Harris followed him everywhere. He said that at half-time, in the changing rooms, he half expected to find Harris sitting next to him.

The scenes outside the ground were unbelievable. You could hardly move for the crush of people trying to get to Fulham Broadway. That, coupled with fights breaking out between rival supporters, meant the situation was total chaos. In those days at the Bridge, they used to let the away fans out at the same time as the home crowd. The result was a battlefield – at the tube station especially as the away end was right on top of it. I can clearly remember seeing a United supporter, his face battered and bleeding, trying to buy a hot dog, only for the vendor to tell him to sod off as his blood was dripping on to the onions!

When we finally got on to the platform at Fulham Broadway, we pushed our way to the front of the crowd – that was our first big mistake. When the train pulled in, the crowd surged forward. I lost my footing as the doors opened. As I was pushed forward, I cracked my shin on the step into the train. Looking back, I was lucky that I wasn't crushed to death. It was a wonder in those days that there wasn't a tragedy earlier than the one that happened at Ibrox 18 months later. Inside the train, it was hot and stifling. We were packed in like sardines. You could hardly breathe. Kevin and Jeff looked to me as if to say, 'What now?' They must've been bloody joking. I was just as scared as they were. To our relief, the train emptied out when we got to Edgware Road. Then we made our next connection to get the train to Euston Square – thankfully, this train was virtually empty.

As we came up out of the station to make our way to the main Euston terminal, a kid stopped us on the stairs and said, 'If you're Chelsea, I wouldn't go up there – there's loads of Man United waiting to kick your head in.' With the total bullshit and bravado of youth, we announced that we'd take our chances. He just said, 'Suit yourself', and disappeared down into the station.

When we got on to the street, there didn't seem to be anyone around. Obviously, a wind-up. But then, all of a sudden, three United supporters jumped us from a doorway. They were about three years older than us and one of them decided that I was to be his victim. He actually started to strangle me with my scarf. As he was behind me, and a lot stronger, I could do virtually nothing. Kevin, meanwhile, was holding his own with one of the others, whilst Jeff was pressed up against a wall – crying. I wondered what the hell was going on when the United supporter that was strangling me, let out a cry of pain. He suddenly let go of my scarf. I turned round to see Kevin's Man United rosette pin stuck in his leg. Kevin had plunged it in, up to the hilt. I think the other two United supporters were as shocked as us as their mate was hopping around and crying in absolute agony, not knowing what to do with himself. We quickly made a run for it. To our horror, we saw that they were running after us. Well, two of them were. The one with the rosette pin in his leg was hobbling behind them. As we ran on to the concourse at Euston, at about 100 miles per hour, we made for a bunch of coppers and the three United supporters, glaring at us from a distance, finally gave up the chase. Despite all that, we didn't leave those coppers' sides until our train turned up. Even the sight of the United players arriving at Euston to get the train back up to Manchester did not persuade Kevin to leave the sanctuary that the

police provided, in order to get his heroes' autographs. I did see Bobby Charlton and Denis Law gladly giving theirs – as did the rest of the United players. The only exception was George Best, who told one kid to 'fuck off!' I suppose he might have thought that it was Harris, still following him!

As the train pulled out of Euston, we breathed a sigh of relief. The journey home was uneventful, apart from one thing. We stopped at Wembley and picked up some Arsenal supporters who'd just seen their team lose 3-1 to Swindon in the League Cup Final. The sight of their stupid, miserable faces is one of the most abiding memories I've carried through the years. All in all, it had turned out to be a great day – Chelsea beating United and Arsenal losing a cup final. Brilliant!