

## Road To Moscow - Al Stewart's Masterpiece

Written by Andy Owen



I first came across Al Stewart, when I worked at RCA Records in the seventies.

He has been a massive part of my musical life ever since. Hardly a day goes by without an Al song or album playing in the house, office or car.

I have every album he has ever done, plus DVD's, concerts, bootlegs and many interviews. I have seen him live over a dozen times.

He is a supreme lyricist and a musical craftsman of the highest order.

So many of his songs are timeless classics, notably Year Of The Cat, On the Border, Merlin's Time, Lord Grenville, Time Passages, Soho Needless To Say, Between The Wars and many, many more.

A particular favourite of mine is 'Road To Moscow'.

In fact, I think it's a *masterpiece*.

I wanted to share the lyrics of this song with you - and the story behind it - as it is really fascinating.

It first appeared on the album Past, Present and Future and was over eight minutes long. It tells the story of Operation Barbarossa - the invasion of Russia by the Germans in 1941.

The story is told through the eyes of a Russian soldier, who AI has told us was none other than Nobel-winning writer, **Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn** who served in the Red Army artillery during the war.

It is a truly wondrous piece of work.

In an interview in the Santa Barbara Independent in 2018, AI said:

*"Roads to Moscow" is pretty much influenced by Solzhenitsyn's novel 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'.*

*The novel follows Solzhenitsyn's experiences - and so does the song.*

*I'd read lots of biographies of the various commanders on each side. I'd read Guderian's 'Panzer Leader', and Zhukov's memoirs, and all kinds of other things, like 'The Deserted House' by Lydia Chukovskaya, Arthur Koestler's 'Darkness at Noon' - and about 40 different books that went into that one song.*

*The German Invasion of Russia, on the 22nd June 1941, was one of the greatest single events in the history of the world.*

*The hero of 'Roads to Moscow' fights his way first backwards towards Moscow - and then all the way to Berlin, only to be imprisoned by Stalin, as were incalculable millions of others at the end of the Second World War".*



Each verse of the song covers a different phase of the campaign.

First, you hear of the initial blitzkrieg, the virtually complete destruction of the Soviet Air Force on the ground by the Luftwaffe - and the panic and retreat by soviet troops in the face of most powerful army the world had ever seen.

The next part of the song describes the continuing German advance and the Russian retreat through the Ukraine during the summer and autumn of 1941, which included the significant fall of Smolensk.

It seemed that nothing could stop the German war machine - and Moscow was very much in their sights.

Operation Typhoon was the name the Germans gave to the strategic offensive to finally take the city, in October 1941.

The next phase of the song covers the onset of the vicious winter, with snow and mud giving the Germans so many problems and, in the end, insurmountable obstacles, following which they were forced to retreat.

In the song, Al describes the German soldiers as walking "in the footsteps of Napoleon", a reference to his disastrous invasion of Russia in 1812, that cost nearly a million lives.

The song then mentions the effectiveness and bravery of the Soviet partisans, who successfully waged their own war against the Germans behind German lines. The key battle of Stalingrad is then referenced.

This was, of course, the turning point of the Second World War for Germany, which ultimately led to the destruction of the German Sixth Army in Russia and ultimately sealed the fate of the Nazis in the conflict.

Al vividly describes two destroyed Tiger tanks with open hatches, both on fire, signifying the destruction of the German armoured forces at Kursk and other battles during 1943 and 1944.

The song then describes the Soviet invasion of Germany, the ineffective resistance offered by "old men and children", leading to the final battle of Berlin and the end of the Third Reich.

The song finally turns to the protagonist, who is dreaming about returning home after four desperately hard years fighting the Germans. He crosses the border, but is detained by the NKGB - the Soviet Secret Police.

They were suspicious of him when they found out he had been captured earlier in the war by the Germans, but released after only one day, when they started to retreat.

He is then cruelly separated from his companions and sent to the Gulag, where the song ends as he contemplates the "forever" expanse of the "steely Russian skies" that are so depressing him above his camp - and offering him little or no future.

*A final footnote. It seems crazy, but winning the war had made Stalin's murderous paranoia even worse - and he felt that anyone who had contact with westerners, be they Axis or Allied, was considered likely to have become a spy.*

*That's why Solzhenitsyn was jailed, tortured, tried, convicted and shipped off to the Gulag for 8 years. Millions died in the Gulags. But he managed to survive, was released, but then put in exile for criticising Stalin. He was finally freed by Krushchev along with thousands of others in 1956.*

Here are the lyrics to Road to Moscow:

**They crossed over the border, the hour before dawn  
Moving in lines through the day  
Most of our planes were destroyed on the ground where they lay**

**Waiting for orders we held in the wood  
Word from the front never came  
By evening the sound of the gunfire was miles away**

**Ah, softly we move through the shadows, slip away through the trees.  
Crossing their lines in the mists in the fields on our hands and on our  
knees**

**And all that I ever, was able to see  
The fire in the air glowing red, silhouetting the smoke on the breeze**

**All summer they drove us back through the Ukraine  
Smolensk and Viasma soon fell  
By autumn we stood with our backs to the town of Orel**

**Closer and closer to Moscow they come  
Riding the wind like a bell  
General Guderian stands at the crest of the hill**

**Winter brought with her the rains, oceans of mud filled the roads  
Gluing the tracks of their tanks to the ground while the sky filled with  
snow**

**And all that I ever, was able to see  
The fire in the air glowing red, silhouetting the snow on the breeze**

**In the footsteps of Napoleon the shadow figures stagger through the  
winter. Falling back before the gates of Moscow, standing in the wings like  
an avenger**

**And far away behind their lines the partisans are stirring in the forest.  
Coming unexpectedly upon their outposts, growing like a promise**

**You'll never know, you'll never know, which way to turn, which way to  
look, you'll never see us. As we're stealing through the blackness of the  
night, you'll never know, you'll never hear us**

**And the evening sings in a voice of amber, the dawn is surely coming. The  
morning roads lead to Stalingrad, and the sky is softly humming**

**Two broken Tigers on fire in the night. Flicker their souls to the wind. We  
wait in the lines for the final approach to begin**

**It's been almost four years that I've carried a gun. At home it will almost  
be spring. The flames of the Tigers are lighting the road to Berlin**

**Ah, quickly we move through the ruins that bow to the ground  
The old men and children they send out to face us, they can't slow us down**

**And all that I ever, was able to see  
The eyes of the city are opening, now it's the end of the dream**

**I'm coming home, I'm coming home, now you can taste it in the wind, the  
war is over. And I listen to the clicking of the train wheels as we roll across  
the border**

**And now they ask me of the time that I was caught behind their lines and  
taken prisoner. "They only held me for a day, a lucky break, " I say they  
turn and listen closer**

**I'll never know, I'll never know why I was taken from the line and all the  
others. To board a special train and journey deep into the heart of holy  
Russia**

**And it's cold and damp in the transit camp and the air is still and sullen...**

**And the pale sun of October whispers the snow will soon be coming...**

**And I wonder when I'll be home again and the morning answers "Never"...**

**And the evening sighs and the steely Russian skies, go on forever...**

