

# Wise Children's Tea & Biscuits

## Emma Rice & Tanika Gupta

Emma:

Hello, I'm Emma Rice, the Artistic Director of Wise Children, and you're listening to Wise Children's Lockdown.

Our lockdown project is about us finding ways of staying close to each other. On this show, I call up an old friend, play some records and most importantly, get to chat and reminisce. Come and join us for Tea and Biscuits.

Hello, and welcome to Wise Children's Lockdown Tea and Biscuits, and today I'm having tea and biscuits with my friend, an amazing writer, Tanika Gupta. Hi.

Tanika:

Hello.

Emma:

How are you doing? Before we get on to any other business, can you tell me what your preferred biscuit of choice, virtual or real.

Tanika:

Well actually, I managed to find a couple of Jaffa Cakes in the cupboard. Which are very illegal aren't they? Because they're far too sweet and they're really for children but.

Emma:

Oh it's retro-tastic though.

Tanika:

I know. Very lovely, very lovely.

Emma:

Isn't there something about a Jaffa Cake, that it's not a biscuit?

Tanika:

It's, yeah.

Emma:

Yeah, there's something in European rules or something, that it's-

Tanika:

Yeah, probably, probably but it's still sold as a biscuit and I eat it as a biscuit.

Emma:

Oh brilliant, brilliant choice. And how's lockdown going? Tell me where you are, and paint me a picture.

Tanika:

Okay well I'm actually in my study, which is just a bedroom in my house, which overlooks out into the back of [Shots 00:01:38]. It's very light, very open. I get to nose in on all the neighbours, what they're up to. I hear all their conversations on their phones. It's a bit like Rear Window actually. So it's quite good for writing because you spend a lot of time staring out the window.

Yeah, that's where I am, in lockdown, in my study.

Emma:

And whereabouts in the world are you? Or in England?

Tanika:

I'm in London, I'm in London in East Finchley. I'm very close to Highgate Wood so I go and have a little stomp around the woods every day for my one hour exercise, which is beautiful. It's like just a big canopy of green in the middle of London. During lockdown, we've been watching the leaves coming

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out on the trees, it's not the sort of thing I ever noticed to be honest but I've been noticing it very, very cutely.

Emma:

I've been stomping by the river near us and I've noticed all the blue bells coming out, all the flowers, it's made me realise how little I notice.

Tanika:

No, totally, totally the same.

Emma:

And are you getting loads of work done? Cause I feel though as a writer, it might be sort of heaven for you.

Tanika:

Well, I have to say for the first few weeks, I was so discombobulated, I didn't know what was going on [inaudible 00:02:51]. I think like everybody, just very very anxious, thinking when's this going to end and is this the end of theatre? Will we ever work again? All that kind of stuff and lots of people phoning up and just sort of... Getting very anxious on the phone.

And then after about three weeks I thought, oh well, I've got work to get on with, I've got plays to write and, so I've just got back to my desk and I've kind of been... It's quite nice to be able to write without the huge pressure of somebody going, when is it coming in, when is it coming in.

Emma:

Yeah that's true. Pressure is vanished, doesn't it? There's like no pressure happening [crosstalk 00:03:26].

Tanika:

Yeah but I have four plays to write. So they're all commission plays. So, yeah I've been quite enjoying it. I mean, the thing that... yeah well obviously, I think we all miss is seeing friends. Be able to go out and have a coffee and a little drink in the pub, that kind of stuff.

Emma:

I know.

Tanika:

The thing that was very funny was I sat and watched with my youngest, we were trying to find films to watch that weren't contagion or people killing each other. And so the one that we both plumped on, and he's 20, was Ratatouille. [inaudible 00:04:03] absolute brilliant, so enjoyed it. And then halfway through, we both went, oh wouldn't it be nice to sit in a restaurant and eat.[inaudible 00:04:14] not with a [inaudible 00:04:16] rat.

Emma:

Simon loves Ratatouille, he's got his thumbs up in the back, he loves that film.

Tanika:

The animation is amazing in it, absolutely amazing.

Emma:

I've never cooked as much in my life. Because in our world, I'm always in Pret A Manger or Pizza Express. Yeah, just the sheer drudgery of being at home is... I mean you kind of want things to do but it's a new world for me.

Tanika:

Have you been cooking any delicacies or?

Emma:

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Well, no because the anxiety around shopping is contagious isn't it? The first time I went Sainsbury's, my heart rate was right up and I surprised myself how anxious I found it. I've suddenly gone a bit wartime. It's basics and we're having the same meal over and over again.

Tanika:

Yeah, yeah. No I totally get that.

Emma:

Kick us off with some music. What's your first choice and why?

Tanika:

I can't remember what my first choice was, was it [inaudible 00:05:17]. Was it... no no no. Burning Down the House by Talking Heads and it just takes me back to my days at university because my friend, who we shared a house with, he worked at the local cinema and he made us all go down to watch a film with him that he was screening and it was Stop Making Sense by Talking Heads and we all sat and watched it together and I just... every time I hear that tune, it just makes me think about wonderful, time the sort of, 10 of us all sat and watched it and danced in the cinema together.

And then a couple of weeks later, I was obsessed with Burning Down the House and I was listening to it as I fell asleep and I threw my pillow onto the fire and I literally set fire to my room whilst I was asleep. Can you believe? That's such a student thing to do, I must have been drunk, I don't know. And I had to wake everybody up, we all phoned the ambulance, the fire brigade, the fire brigade came out, it was snowing. Burning Down the House is still playing in the background.

Whilst they put the fire out, we were all fine. It was just one of those silly student things but for some reason it makes me feel very happy.

Emma:

The brilliant Talking Heads. So, we met... well I don't know exactly when we met but we were put together for a project that was going to run alongside the Olympics in 2012. Part of the... there's no laughing yet is there Tanika... So we were partnered, I was with Kneehigh at the time, with Sadler's Wells and Stratford East. And to create a British-Bollywood musical that would run alongside the Olympics in the Cultural Olympiad. And we made a musical called Wah! Wah! Girls and that was when we met. I know. And I mean I suppose it's so interesting to reminisce a little bit and think back because it was a... oh my goodness, from beginning to end it was a tricky project.

Tanika:

It was bonkers wasn't it?

Emma:

It was absolutely bonkers, we sort of couldn't afford it, it was too ambitious. I mean cause at one point, it was going to have Bollywood dancers and there was talk of their being 30 to get the scale of Bollywood and I think we ended up with three didn't we?

And I think, didn't we have a meeting once where somebody said if we had lots of mirrors, would it look like there were more dancers?

Tanika:

I mean they were talking about fountains and dancing in water and, but basically they didn't have the money and it was all rubbish but I think we had an amazing time, I really loved working with you.

Emma:

I feel it changed my life.

Tanika:

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Well the [inaudible 00:11:26] the actual production even though it was quite hard to work, people loved it. It was on at the Peacock and then it went to Stratford East and, I don't think it was ever like not absolutely packed to the rafters.

Emma:

It was fantastic, I mean, it was the most crazy ride but it definitely changed my life. I met you, I went to India with Keith Kahn. We had amazing ridiculous adventures, what with Nirasha, met lots of actors that have become longterm friends and colleagues.

Tanika:

Rina Fantani yeah.

Emma:

Absolutely. Rina, Tony, amazing. Jajjit Kapur. And I feel that it was a real change in my life, that wasn't really about the show, although I loved the show and I loved, sort of getting into the world of Bollywood and the history of Bollywood with you. But actually what it did was so much more than the show, it sort of changed... I've had an enduring love affair with India and all things Indian ever since that's been really facilitated by you and my relationship with you so I want to thank you for that.

Tanika:

Oh thank you. Well you know bizarrely, I mean, I didn't really know much about Bollywood beforehand. I'd watched a few films here and there but because it's not my language, my mother tongue is Bengali and not Hindi so I don't really... I mean I understood as much as of the Hindi in the Bollywood movies as you did. So, it was often they kept saying "Oh, can you explain? Can you explain this to Emma?" And I'd be going, no I was hoping that Emma could explain it to me. I mean obviously I understood the sort of storylines little, they were more or less the same.

But I think what was really lovely about working on that was just, I'd never worked with a director that just had such a massive vision. I mean usually it was sort of, I was working with directors who were picking through my script and trying to make each word work and changing lines and you never did any of that. You were thinking about the theatricality of it which was so exciting because that's what, that's what it was meant to be. And then of course, we went on to do *The Empress* together, which was at the RSC which was equally enjoyable and probably for me, one of the proudest moments being at the heart of the beast in Shakespeare land.

Emma:

Well we sort of got onto a roll and we had to continue. Before we go on to *The Empress*, which I do want to talk about. The Wah! Wah! Girls, The thing that I think I smile at most when I think about it, although I have so many happy memories of the whole thing. But I can remember having absorbed myself in the whole Bollywood culture, and yet we were setting it in sort of gritty London, that we had to have a big finale and it was really late in the day I decided to bring down a massive massive 12 meter big glittery pigeon.

Tanika:

Pigeon was wonderful. The pigeon was wonderful. I remember the first time I saw it, I thought, oh my days, what is this? That was extraordinary and my bloke said to me afterwards, he said "You've never had a giant pigeon in any of your plays." It flapped its wings as well.

Emma:

It did flap its wings. I mean [crosstalk 00:14:52]. Yeah it was [crosstalk 00:14:57]. And the other thing to think about the pigeons is we had, I think we had nine pigeon puppets made that came [crosstalk 00:15:03], in and out and those puppets, Kneehigh ended up with custody of and I think they've been in almost every one of my shows since. So for the [crosstalk 00:15:12] just sort of filters through the work.

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Tanika:

Well Rina, who was in that playing a sort of old woman who was watching telly, and of course she's not an older woman, she's a young woman but I think one of her lines was bloody pigeons and every text she sends me, it always ends with bloody pigeons to this day.

Emma:

Well to celebrate Wah! Wah! Girls, I've chosen [Chooli Ke Peeche 00:15:39], which was one of the existing Bollywood numbers that we created in the show and I loved it.

Oh it's such a distinctive sound, isn't it?

Tanika:

Yeah it's just, a very saucy tune because the words and lyrics are literally, do you want to see what's underneath my Sari blouse?

Emma:

Well there's only one answer to that, yes please. And yes I would like to see what's underneath your Sari blouse. So yeah. So we went on... loved working together in all its Olympic chaos and the... we went on to work on the Empress. Now I remember that you offered me this, or you got in touch with me and said "I've got this play, it's going to happen at the RSC, are you interested in directing?" , and I always say no to offers, I always feel that I'm too busy and I said no... and-

Tanika:

You didn't do-

Emma:

I did. And then I couldn't stop thinking about it, I was waking up thinking about it and I suddenly thought-

Tanika:

Did you read it? Or did you just say no straight out? Did you read it or did you-

Emma:

I did read it because that's what I was thinking about but I just thought I don't have time, I was working at Kneehigh... I'm really careful about taking on projects outside of Kneehigh and I just thought no don't, keep it simple, stay... on one path. So I said no to you, and then couldn't stop thinking about it, was waking up in the mornings thinking and then I just thought, I cannot bear somebody else doing this. So I rang you up and said "Tanika, can I change my mind?" And thank goodness, I don't know how complicated it was or if it was but thank goodness, it wasn't too late and I worked on that [crosstalk 00:21:53].

Tanika:

I was delighted to get that call. We don't usually get that one, when people say no, they mean no. So it was very nice that you changed your mind.

Emma:

Well I, always mean no except in this instance and it was such a thrill to work on that play. Epic, classical structure. Three storylines weaving together that sort of cracked open a part of British history that I didn't even know about. Had no idea that there were so many Indians in London at that time. We were so used to seeing bloody BBC costume dramas without a single brown face in them that you completely smashed that myth and it is a myth and it was amazing. Talk to me about that story and how it came to you.

Tanika:

Well, it actually came to me from a photograph I saw which was in a, some book coverup when I was about 18. It had a picture of a bunch of Indian ayahs. So ayahs are like nannies who look after

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children. In Victorian Britain, think it was 1887 or something, and they were all sat there, wearing these sort of Victorian outfits with these little sort of nanny caps and they were basically... It was a refuge for these ayahs who had been dumped at Tilbury Docks. So they come over with their English families to help them settle in England. They come over on the boat and they've been looking after the kids on the long voyage over. And then of course when they got here, the English colonial families didn't really want them anymore because they had their own English nannies and they literally just... got rid of them and they just said "No, there's no job for you, sorry."

So you'd get all this destitute ayahs wandering around London and these evangelical women pick them up and put them in a refuge in Hackney off all places and I've... but the photograph was so extraordinary because it just sort of captures just, a moment and I thought I got obsessed with wanting to tell that story and of course as with most women of that time, there was very little written. They didn't write letters, they didn't written diaries. So it was just sort of like piecing together a story and trying to follow a trail and then of course I got obsessed with Queen Victoria at the same time, had her Indian man servant.

So those two stories became, sort of intertwined and I did develop it with the RSC for about four years. Between each draft, it took them a year to read it. Just the slowest feedback I've ever had. So it was so frustrating but then they eventually suddenly decided, yes we're going to do it and yes we're going to ask Emma Rice, I was like astounded really.

Emma:

Oh and it was amazing but it is Shakespearean in its form because it was really classic in that you have the monarchy and the really domestic servant, those two stories working together, as well as the Dadabhai Naoroji story in the middle, the political story. I mean it was thrilling in terms of its historical sort of surprise, I found it explosive but it was really emotional as well. I have such happy memories of that show and the cast and I can't quite believe, we didn't do it again.

Tanika:

No, neither can I. Well we were going to, weren't we?

Emma:

[inaudible 00:25:16] shows on you and then it didn't quite happen.

Tanika:

I mean, it's interesting with that play because it was actually only on for about four weeks at the RSC and it never went on again and it was back in 2013 or something like that. And it's just been picked up on the national curriculum. It's now a Set Text GCSE Student. Which is quite funny so I've had to go and talk to 16 year olds a few times about, 15 year olds I should say, about the play and had to read out the scenes. And my favorite scene is always the one where I play Queen Victoria.

Emma:

We should have done that. In fact both us are very quite good to play Victoria [crosstalk 00:26:02]. It was the curry eating scene which always made me want to... eat it every night.

Tanika:

E-shirts printed which said "We like Curry".

Emma:

What's your next choice of music and why.

Tanika:

My next choice is Salif Keita, who is a Malian singer. He's sort of basically is an albino singer who never really wanted to be a singer but he was ostracized by his community for being albino and he sort of stumbled into singing. I just think his voice is just extraordinary and I love all that sort of Senegalese, Malian music but he for some reason just transports me to a different place.

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Emma:

That does something almost physical to me, it like... lifts my heart up, it's like a primal joy, it's stunning.

Tanika:

It is beautiful. And all those singers from that coast, they're just extraordinary cause they tell a story. I was going to choose another one whose Ali Farka Toure, you must've across him. And I remember going to see him play at Ronnie Scott's 100 years ago and he basically didn't speak any English, he just spoke French and he just played, just came on with this tiny little guitar and started just singing and then every song, the guitar would get bigger and bigger and bigger and the song would slightly change and it was only halfway through that I realized that what he was doing was he was telling the story of the journey of the African slave from Mali to the States and he ended up playing blues and Ry Cooder came on and played with him.

You know one of those things and you think, I can't remember I actually did that, I can't believe that I did that but it's all those... cause it's that carrying of that music across the seas to the States and the music [inaudible 00:32:12] basically, it was brilliant.

Emma:

How amazing. Well one of the things that I feel that you've done for me, is really influence my knowledge and enjoyment of music and the shows that we've made together have really extended my musical taste. So I'm going to surprise you, we've been working really hard to try and retrieve something from the Empress because we never recorded it and we found a really early bit recorded by Stu Barker and Sheema Mukherjee. This is the theme from the Empress.

So I've just played you a bit of the theme and you were about to tell me about a WhatsApp you'd got.

Tanika:

Yeah no, it was very sweet. It was about a month after we'd come down and the two women Rina and the actor playing Ronnie, what's her name, Anika. They'd gotten into South Bank and they were lolling around in these sort of long skirts pretending they were in The Empress, by the river, and they were singing this song that you just played me and they sang the whole song and acted all the parts including all the men's parts as well. And they said "We're missing it so much, we wish we could be still doing it." I've really felt for...

No but that was a very special show and I remember because you were saying how much you'd enjoyed it but for me what was really interesting was forever after that, every time I wrote a script, director would come back to me and say "I think you think I'm Emma Rice?" I say "why you say that?", and they say, "Because you've just written here, you know, somebody flies across the stage and you haven't explained it or anything. You have to write stage directions Tanika." Oh yeah yeah, sorry about that, sorry about that.

And I think that the whole... your vision and the theatricality of your work and the fact that surprising things happen that us writers never even think about, writing into the script, that was what was so exciting about working with you because it was not just that you were bringing my words to life but that you were bringing another whole other life to it that I hadn't even imagined which was very exciting.

Emma:

Oh, well that goes both ways, both ways. So we carried on... I went to the globe and you came with me and helped me adapt Midsummer Night's Dream. I don't know what else would help me, I didn't do it, you did. I was so terrified of Shakespeare because it was so heavy and you did an amazing job on just... Because you are a phenomenal playwright but you also do amazing adaptations and you

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once gave me a bit of advice, I don't even know whether you knew you were advising me, which is... to be as delicate as you can, to keep the original in as much tact as you can but to make small changes and I think you did a phenomenal job on Midsummer Night's dream for me.

Tanika:

Oh, thank you. I didn't really feel like I did very much, there was a couple of times when we sat there and read... I think we read the whole thing out to each other, didn't we?

Emma:

We did.

Tanika:

We tried to cut a few lines and kept thinking, I don't know what this means, let's cut this. And then when we got into the rehearsal [inaudible 00:39:09] Where's that line gone?

Emma:

Just impossible to cut a line for an [crosstalk 00:39:14] Shakespeare, they've always got a reason.

Tanika:

There was that line, I wooed you with my sword and we went, oh no that sounds like rape, let's take that out. We went straight back in [crosstalk 00:39:28]. That was fantastic, it's on, its being streamed now. For the next four months.

Emma:

Well it was a real moment in time, wasn't it that? I feel like we sort of, we landed like a spaceship in that Globe with that [inaudible 00:39:44].

Tanika:

Again, people just adored that show. Even now, when I tweeted only last week that it was going to be streamed, I've never had so many kind of, hurrah's and it was just like, I don't know, about 50,000 responses or something mad like that. I thought, oh God, I must tweet about Emma Rice more often. No, so yeah. It was a very popular and it was on like 99.9% box office hits and people still talk about it.

Emma:

Oh it was phenomenal, wasn't it? and such a joy and such surprise. It was brilliant. What's your next choice and why?

Tanika:

So, of course my next choice is Maar Dala, which is from... well it's actually from the film Devdas and we had that amazing, nutcase of a Bollywood choreographer who came over [crosstalk 00:40:34]. 1-2-3-4-5. Who came and he, he did actually do quite a good job even though he was quite eccentric. He choreographed Maar Dala exactly how it was in the film and I love the choreography of that from the original film but whenever I watch it, I always think of you doing the moves. Do you remember the one when they're all on the ground and they're sort of, half-crawling...

Emma:

[inaudible 00:41:09] floor, yes.

Tanika:

It always makes me laugh, it always makes me think of you because you always used to join in with the dancing as well, which was hysterical because none of us could do those moves, could we? But you always tried. You were great.

Emma:



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Well I know, I love to dance so I was not going to let a Bollywood choreographer go without having a go at it but that particular movie used to make me laugh so much because it reminded me of Maggie in The Simpsons, you know the baby that has no legs.

Tanika:

It was a wonderful show.

Emma:

I want to pull myself along the floor and [crosstalk 00:45:33].

Tanika:

I know you do, don't you. You [inaudible 00:45:35], while I be doing Pilates in my room every morning to try and get some exercising done and I actually try to do to that move just to sort of see if I could do it and I actually got stuck.

Emma:

Take a video next time. So one of my proudest moments was in my second and final season at The Globe. I actually managed to commission one of your plays which was presented in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse. It's a play called Lions and Tigers, which was very personal to you and was phenomenal. Directed by [Pooja 00:46:09]. I feel like you cracked open that Jacobean playhouse with a whole new world. Talk to me about that play.

Tanika:

Well that was play that was the first thing I ever tried to write when I was about 20 so... By the time it got on at the Sam Wanamaker, when you put it on, I think it was about 25 years or something of trying to write it, get it done and because it was based on my great uncle, so my grandfather's youngest brother, who was involved in violent insurrection in India and during sort of freedom fighting years. So 1930, broke into the writer's building of... in Calcutta and shot and killed the Inspector General of Prisons and then tried to kill himself but managed to botch up his own suicide, so they arrested him, they operated and took the bullet out of him and then six months later they hanged him but in the six months that he was in jail, he wrote all these letters back to his family which I still had and then so those letters are the ones that initially inspired me to try and write.

So I think I must've been around the same as he was, when he died, when I started trying to write. So that's how long it took to get this story out there. So of course it was very personal, because it's one of those family stories you grow up with, your great uncle was a freedom fighter, he fought for your rights, etc. So what's really amazing to not only to get it on but to get it on at The Globe which was like opposite the... it just felt like we were in the heart of the beast, you look across the road and there you go across the river and there was St Paul's Cathedral standing there and we had all these people running around within the theater shooting at English officers. It was a very moving moment but a very proud moment and what was wonderful was trying to do it with candlelight [crosstalk 00:48:12] didn't have any lighting in there.

This is always the thing with the Globe was there was a lighting business, wasn't it? And of course Sam Wanamaker wasn't really made for brown faces, so I remember the first... think it was the first preview we did where I was sitting there, watching it and the actors were all acting their hearts out but you couldn't see them. The guy playing Mahatma Gandhi was quite dark and when he came on, all we could see were these teeth. We were going, more candles, we need more candles.

But it was a wonderful moment and it was a very proud moment, yeah nobody would take a chance on that play.

Emma:

Well it was my absolute privilege to be able to take a chance, be in a position where I could take a chance on such a brilliant play and it was so important to hear. We're so surrounded by people being

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called terrorists and no sort of context around that word, and to actually hear the words of a freedom fighter and to look at those actions through different lens, a different camera, I felt was so important and to be on the Banks of the Thames of that time, a huge proud night for me.

Tanika:

We discovered a new talent as well, didn't we? Do you remember [Shubham Saraf 00:49:36]? the actor who played him and we were searching for a young actor who actually looks 19 as opposed to just look youthful. And we found him, I think we found him and it was like final year of Guildhall [00:49:50] or something. And he was just phenomenal. I mean, he's now gone on to do massive films.

Emma:

TV, I know. I keep seeing him cropping up. But the whole cast was stellar and it was a very proud moment. And then I also, you curated a mini-festival for me in the Wanamaker in that final year, the festival of independence and I want to finish our conversation by thanking for all of the things you've brought to my life, I feel like you've curated a mini-festival for me but that festival, you brought In (Audible) [00:50:24], which was an amazing thing. Mark Steel. Amazing performances, your own play. But you also brought Nitin Sawhney and to The Globe and it... I mean, I've been a fan of Nithin forever and the fact that he played in those spaces in my final season there, I just carry with me, it was absolutely astonishing.

Tanika:

I've seen Nitin Sawhney play many, many times but that night that he played in The Globe, on the main stage, it was just magic, wasn't it?

Emma:

It was magic and when I saw the musicians arrive for the soundcheck, it was like watching the world arrive. They were so... My spirit lifted. And you've done that to me so many... You've opened my eyes, you've opened my mind. You're a treasured friend and I just really value your work and your friendship, your intellect and everything Tanika.

Tanika:

Oh thank you Emma. Oh my gosh, I'm going to cry now. I'm going to dribble all over my Jaffa cake. Well I feel exactly the same and I hope that we get to work again together in the not-so-distant future when lockdown is over and we can breathe again.

Emma:

We will. Oh gosh, tell me about it. We will. Well I'm going to play us out with the first Nitin Sawhney track that I fell in love with, which I think the lyrics are a bit pertinent for us now, which is Sunset from the amazing album Prophecy.

If you have a memory or connection you'd like to share on Tea and Biscuits, leave us a message on our phone line: 0-1-1-7-3-1-8-3-8-4-6, that's 0-1-1-7-3-1-8-3-8-4-6.

Keep checking on Social media for details of our next show. Tea and Biscuits is part of Wise Children's Lockdown, thanks for hanging out with us, bye.