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Stirrings

folk, roots and acoustic music in South Yorks and beyond



steve
TURNER

late developer

bellingring: the
forgotten tradition

hall change at
birdsedge

**news, reviews,
diary dates, sessions
& club listings**

incorporating

SRFN
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NEWS



Late Developer

The early 1980s... A time beset by mismatched neon tube socks, a musical landscape populated by the twitching androgynous creatures of electro-pop picking the lukewarm corpse of punk whilst the digit-wagging oddities of American hair metal stalked the horizon. It was a time of darkness for traditional music in general, and English music in particular, sending many seasoned performers in search of the sunnier climes of world music and a sense of context. As a result, you could be half forgiven for not remembering the rare flashes of brilliance that peppered this most barren of musical decades, and names which perhaps should have become household ones remained somewhat more obscure.

Steve Turner is certainly one of those who should have made his mark more indelibly than the quirks of musical taste allowed. With a superb new album, *The Whirligig Of Time* (reviewed on page 30), he looks set to finally redress that injustice.

Stirrings caught up with him to ask some all-important questions.

STEVE TURNER'S
back in business...

GAVIN DAVENPORT
enjoys the crack with the
man who went missing

Stirrings: *Your name will be familiar to some, but unfamiliar to others. Can you fill people in with a little basic biography and what brings you back to the world of performance after what feels like something of a hiatus?*

ST: I'm originally from Manchester, now living in Nottingham. I've been around the folk scene since the late Sixties. I made ➤➤

two albums in the Seventies with the
Geordie band Canny Fettle and won the
Melody Maker "Stars of the '80s" national
competition in 1979. I turned professional in
1980 till 1991, and made four solo albums
with Fellside. I guess I disappeared in 1991
to concentrate on the violin retailing
business and came back in a part-time way
in 2004.

I came back gradually. Going to Irish tune sessions and then a few floor spots, etc. I suppose there must be an instinct to sing somewhere in there. I'd been having classical singing lessons since 1998, so I'd been diverted a bit musically, but folk was always the first love deep down.

Stirrings: *What did you do in your time out and how has it fed back into the material you're performing now? You've previously mentioned a somewhat nervous return, which seems perhaps at odds with the full and confident sound of the CD. Did you feel the scene had changed? What made you take a step back?*

ST: Basically I ran around the world, and still do, dealing in violins. I have two violin shops. For the first four years after I gave up in 1991 I didn't pick up an instrument or sing a note. I suppose I was disillusioned or sung out or something. You should bear in mind that I'd been a professional singer through the Eighties, which was probably the most difficult time for a fairly traditional solo singer to make a living. Everyone said I was mad to go professional



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at that time because no-one wanted my kind of music. Audiences wanted singer-songwriters, comedians and bands, and trad stuff was unfashionable. So I spent eleven years fighting against the odds, but things have changed now and what I do seems to have come back into fashion a little more.

I certainly was nervous making a comeback at the beginning, not having faced an audience for all that time, but you soon get used to it again. The reason I came back, I suppose, was partly to test the new vocal techniques I'd learned during my classical singing lessons and see if I could sense an improvement. I knew I was too long in the tooth to start a career as an opera singer, which I probably wasn't good enough to do anyway, but the lessons have given me a greatly enhanced knowledge of the basics of singing; and music is my only talent, so getting back on the folk scene was what I had to do, and I felt more confident knowing the basics of how to sing, which has the bonus of allowing more concentration on the structure of the song and how to accompany and put it over.

Stirrings: *You've assembled a great, in fact some might think daunting, line-up of guests on the CD. To what degree did you want to bring friends in and how did you make the decision of where and when to stick to a solo delivery?*

ST: When you're a solo singer, doing an album is always a great chance to make the most of a song using other musicians, and I've always done it on previous recordings. One of the great things about not playing guitar, for instance, is that you can invite the greatest guitarists to accompany you on an album, if they're up for it. I've been lucky enough to have worked with people like Nic Jones and Martin Simpson on previous recordings and Martin Carthy has always been one of my favourite guitarists, and I had an idea for a couple of songs that I would have liked him to play on and was extremely honoured when he agreed to do the job.

The wilderness years...



.....
*AT THE MOMENT I'M ON A
MINIMALIST KICK, TRYING TO
USE AS FEW NOTES AS POSSIBLE
BUT IN THE RIGHT PLACES...*

Olly Knight, my producer, is a man with a great network of contacts and suggested people like Nancy Kerr and James Fagan, who I knew and admired anyway, so it went from there. I thought, if I'm going to do this album, it's the first one I've done for twenty two years so I want to get it right and I wanted to ask the best people to help make it that way.

Having said that, there are of course a number of songs that don't need that depth of accompaniment. I suppose you get to the stage of experience where you just know

which they are and sing them solo.

Stirrings: *Does the retail business carry on alongside the revived career or is the gigging pushing the other stuff to one side?*

ST: Both the violin business and the singing are pretty labour-intensive. So knowing when to stop with the singing gigs is difficult. As a professional singer I was doing 160-180 bookings a year. Now I'm at full stretch doing fifty to sixty. I could easily let the amount of singing work get out of control but I have my other business to consider. But I can pick and choose a bit and do the bookings I want to do rather than having to do as many as possible to stay alive.

Stirrings: *What is it about the concertina that grabs your imagination?*

ST: I've got a very good accompanying concertina, which does most of the work for me and inspires me to try to accompany different types of songs—blues, ragtime, classical etc, as well as traditional stuff in different ways. I just try to exploit the potential and extend the boundaries a little, mainly by trial and error.

When I run concertina song accompaniment workshops I tend to emphasise the need to get away from just using big chords, which it's very easy to do, and can get fairly boring. At the moment I'm on a "minimalist" kick, trying to use as few notes as possible but in the right places!

I think the concertina is probably not the greatest instrument for accompaniment but it has a more important role than it gets credit for at the moment, and I realise that and I suppose that's what I'm working on.

Stirrings: *You have a reputation for being a great performer of ballads. How do they speak to you?*

ST: I think you can discount the majority of the big Child, Border Ballads and the like ➡

as being unsingable to a modern audience in their archaic format unless you want to take the story and completely rewrite it. But the minority which remain are the ones that concern us. You have ballads like Barbara Allen, which has almost two hundred different tunes, and Young Waters, which has one, that still hold a fascination for singers, and I think it is these songs with human interest—relationships between people—which have stood the test of time and to which we can still relate. But we still have manipulate them to make them accessible to modern audiences. Despite some magnificent tunes and timeless stories I think it is important to judge the concentration level of the audience, and how far you want your career to progress, before you impose too many on them!

Stirrings: *With the hopefully revived interest in your music and the deserved praise the new CD is winning, are there any plans to reissue the earlier albums?*

ST: People are always asking me that question and I think apart from the fourth solo LP *Braiding*, which got the top review from Ian Anderson from *fROOTS* in 1987 and some of the third one *Eclogue*, they're all too long ago and far away as far as vocal technique is concerned.

There is a lot of good material on them but I can't even bring myself to listen to the first two! I've probably got enough new material already for a sixth album and I would probably hit the back catalogue and record a few of the old songs with new arrangements if I get a chance.

Stirrings: *What inspires you when choosing material?*

ST: I always try to choose songs with good tunes and a good story and if it's a song someone else has done I try not to listen to their version, but get the dots and take it from scratch to put my own hallmark on it.

Stirrings: *Where next with the music?*

ST: The main thing that's different in my present incarnation is that I'm singing a lot more stuff with the cittern, built and kindly donated to me by my friend Kai Dase—you can hear some of it on the new CD. I am tending to do four or five songs and tunes with it on a gig so it makes for a good variety. Also having had the singing lessons, I'm constantly trying to improve the vocal technique and quality and working on broadening the horizons further with the type of songs I can sing with concertina.

This year alone I've had more recognition than I've ever had in my entire career. Pete Heywood did an interview with me in *Living Tradition* in March with my picture on the front cover, but before that I'd never had anything like that at all in forty years. This year I've had, in addition to this article, another in the *International Concertina Association Journal*, as well as national and local radio plays, so things are finally beginning to move forward a little. Mind you I always was a late developer!

