



# Steve Turner

**Pioneer of the English concertina and stalwart of the folk scene, Steve Turner recalls some of the highlights from his first (and second) career in folk music.**

I was born in 1950 and brought up in Chorlton cum Hardy, Manchester, where I lived until the age of 28. My mother sang a very limited repertoire of songs from various musicals of the period, in what I later realised was a rather fine untrained contralto voice, but at the time it never registered with me. I never heard my father sing or play a note, but what he did have was a Jones English baritone concertina which lived in the shed throughout my childhood, and which I was told belonged to my grandfather, who had died a long time before I was born. Every five years or so I would open the case and have a look at the concertina, until one year I decided to take it out of the box, pulled a bit too hard, and one half came out and the other half stayed in the case!

My musical abilities extended to standing in front of my primary school year during rainy lunchtimes around the age of seven and singing the only two songs that I had in my repertoire, *There Is A Green Hill Far Away* and *We Plough The Fields And Scatter*, encouraged by an enthusiastic dinner lady who wanted the children to help pass the time by doing their party pieces. At secondary school I was put reluctantly into the school choir, whose repertoire I found to be not to my taste, and having failed to learn the required songs got thrown out after a few weeks.

Musically, as a child I continued to be a disappointment, having been sent for piano lessons by my mother and finding them boring, didn't practise, and was again dismissed. The same result occurred with violin lessons offered by the school, for which I also seemed to have no talent. The unexpected epiphany occurred when at the age of about 15 I finally got a record player and moved away from musical silence after buying a Beatles record. The ability to actually play records led me one day to bump into a fellow pupil who lent me an LP by the American folk singer, Caroline Hester. This seemed to have an effect on my dull pubescent consciousness, and I enquired what else might be available along the same lines. The answer was Bob Dylan, whose first album I borrowed from this progressively musically aware new friend, and that was it. I was now hooked on Dylan, Leadbelly, Buffy St Marie, T Bone Walker etc., and thus had to have a guitar, which came from Barratts in Manchester for

£7, the cheapest model available (preceded by several attempts at playing the tennis racquet in cap, dark glasses and harmonica holder in front of the mirror in an attempt to look like Bob Dylan!).

After what seemed like an eternity I finally managed to teach myself to play three chords in the key of C and there was no stopping me; I joined the school "folk society" which consisted of myself and two others and made my first ever appearance with this group of three at a folk club at a school in Hulme around 1967 - in those days a pretty dismal suburb of inner Manchester. I seem to remember we sang three songs, the first of which was *The Leaving Of Liverpool*. Shortly afterwards I read an advert in the Manchester Evening News for a talent contest at a working men's club in Cheadle Hulme. This was my second ever appearance. One of the songs I sang was Dylan's *Girl From The North Country*. I was told by the judges that this was absolutely not what they wanted, and that they were looking for the next Frank Sinatra!

So it was a question of finding somewhere to meet people who did like folk music, and I was pointed in the direction of the Noel Timpson Centre in Cheetham Hill, where I gazed in awe at the residents, people like Rosie Hardman, Tony Downes and Tony and Arthur, which in turn led me to the M.S.G. (Manchester Sports Guild) - a well known club at the time in the centre of Manchester which ran three nights a week and booked national guests on Saturdays and Sundays, and where I saw the likes of Mike Seeger, Jasper Carrott, Alex Campbell, Jeremy Taylor, Ewan MacColl and a host of other influences.

Monday night was singers' night, and you got two songs. One night I decided to go along and make an impression, so I started with a short Tom Paxton song, then hit them hard with 11 minutes of Dylan's *Desolation Row*, after which Drony, the compere, who had never deigned to speak to me before, came up and whispered in my ear: "If you ever f\*\*\*ing do that again, you're banned!"

So I continued to wander round the folk clubs of Manchester in my torpid teenage daze, and finally got my first booking via an agent called Dave at a folk club in Styal in Cheshire. Here I met a "character" called Paul Connor,

who introduced himself to me at half time by saying: "You should be an opera singer." Of course, I thought he was bonkers at the time, and it was just about the least cool form of music I could think of, but 40 years later I found myself in love with opera and realised it might have been what I should have been doing 40 years earlier. I still sing it for pleasure, preferably when no-one's listening.

**"...in early 1991 I gave up, and didn't sing or play a note for four years while I was building up my new violin business. But as the business got going and the violin shop began to settle down, I realised that the music gets in your blood and the urge gradually returned..."**

Epiphany number two came in 1969 when I was 19 and still fairly directionless, though enjoying singing a few traditional songs. One Saturday night I went to do a floor spot at a club called the Three Legs of Man in Salford, and I was the first to arrive. I went upstairs to the club room, and found the landlord there asking me where the resident band was, as they'd failed to turn up. Not knowing the answer, he said: "Well the club's got to go on, we need an organiser - you'll do!" Hence my unexpected move into the role of folk club organiser. As usual, I hadn't got a clue what to do having no experience, but I bumbled along. Fortunately, there was already a list of guests booked and a week or two later I turned up on the night when Dave Burland was booked. I was waiting to meet him when Mike Harding walked into the room and said: "Dave's in hospital and can't do the gig, but I've got a young lad downstairs who's doing his first tour of the northern folk club circuit, and will stand in for Dave. He's downstairs in the bar - come and meet him." It turned out to be Nic Jones. Incidentally, Nic's fee that night was £10, which he gave to Dave.

One night in 1970 I went to watch a Geordie band called Canny Fettle play at Broughton Park Rugby Club. I did a couple of

songs as a floor spot before they came on. At half time, Bob Diehl the fiddler came up and asked me if I wanted to join them as their singer was leaving. And so my career took a new turn. Bob Diehl, from London, was a top class fiddle player, writer and arranger of tunes. Gerry Murphy from Durham was the other international class musician in the band. He played tunes on Northumbrian pipes and English concertina and had gone

to school with the likes of Alistair Anderson and Dave Richardson of Boys Of The Lough. Gerry had met Bob at Manchester University and they decided to form a Geordie band, which originally consisted of Bob, Gerry, Anthony Robb (also a piper) and John Williamson (the singer who I replaced). Guitarist and singer Bob Morton from South Shields was recruited to add some genuine Geordie flavour to the band when Anthony left as I would have had to (and did) sing all the Geordie repertoire in a Manchester accent. (Nobody ever said anything - maybe they didn't notice!) I was with Canny Fettle for seven years, during which time we recorded a compilation album, *Room For Company* in 1971, on which I sang half a song, not being considered good enough to sing a whole song! I listened to the album recently and, by God, they were right! Next was a group album, *Vary Canny*, in 1975 on the late Brian Horsfall's Tradition label. Bob and Gerry then unearthed the Joshua Jackson collection of Yorkshire fiddle tunes, highlights of which we recorded on *A Trip To Harrogate* in 1977. Soon we made our first trips away from the North West, doing a tour of London and the South East organised by Pete Woods when he was teaching in London and where we played Ewan MacColl's Singers' Club at least twice in two or three years. I

was later told that this was a pretty prestige gig, and many great names failed to get the gig once.

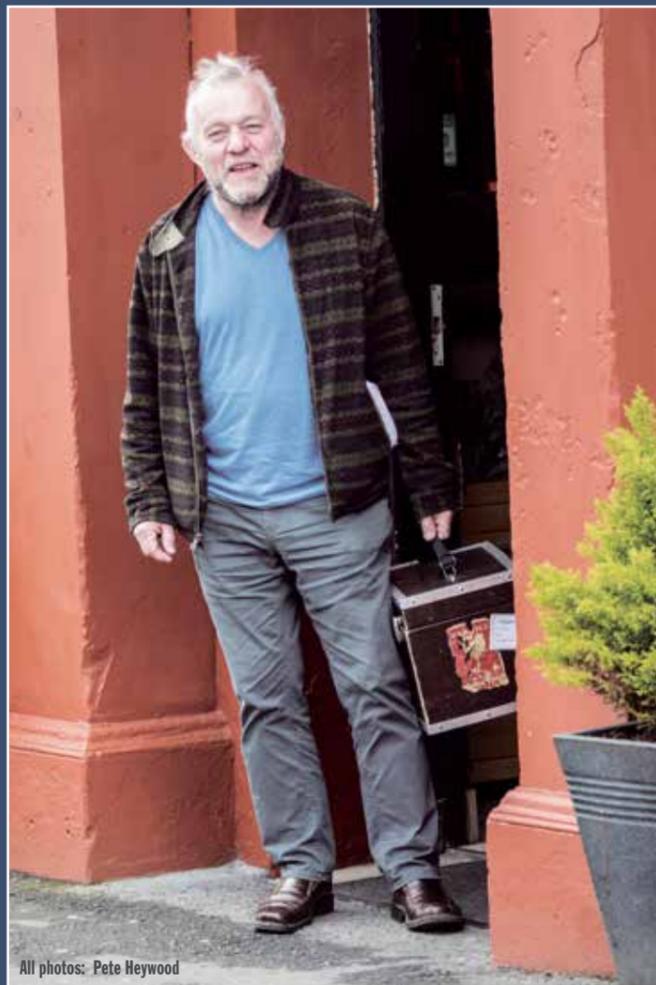
Throughout my time with the band we worked closely with Harry Boardman, one of the founding fathers of the North West folk revival in the 50s and 60s, and we were privileged, though I didn't realise it at the time, to be residents at his folk club. Harry chose the highest quality singers that he could find as guests at the club, from all over the country, so I was lucky to see people like Kevin Mitchell who turned up for one of his gigs covered in paint saying he'd been working up a telegraph pole that day! I also heard people like Tim Lyons, Alison McMorland and The High Level Ranters, most of whom I recorded on my portable cassette recorder and was influenced by in different ways.

I played guitar and banjo in the band, and only started learning the concertina at the age of 23. Inspired by Gerry, I wasn't able to play my grandfather's concertina because it was away with a repairer (who shall be nameless) for eight years, having new bellows made. So I had to find another one to learn on. I put out a mournful plea around the Manchester folk scene and a kind lady came to my rescue with a very basic English concertina with a small problem – it had no straps to hold it with, and, being the world's least practical person, instead of making temporary thumb straps with tape or string or the like, I learnt to play by gripping it firmly between my chin and my knees.

The time came to make a decision one morning in Holland after a festival concert. We sat around deciding whether to give up our jobs and turn professional. The answer from the others was a resounding "No", so that left me as the only one harbouring a romantic desire to travel round the world sleeping on people's floors and scratching a living as a full time folk singer.

I had to go round doing floor spots and hustling for work and at that time the scene was going through one of its regular lulls, when comedians ruled and traditional singers with the concertina were not flavour of the month (and interestingly enough, still aren't, and never have been!) However, I persevered, and having made my first solo album, *Out Stack*, which was released on the Fellside label in 1979, I managed to survive.

Things started to come together when Frank Harte and Tony O'Halloran noticed me at a singing session with Nic Jones at Norwich festival and offered me a tour of Ireland, and over the next couple of years I ended up doing four or five tours there ranging from a week to a month. These started to tie in with the odd tour of Germany, including the BFPO bases, and my next album, *Jigging One Now*, came out in 1982. By then I was beginning to do a bit of work on the east coast of America and in 1983, just as my third album, *Eclogue*, was



All photos: Pete Heywood

and travelled from the top to the bottom of the country on the bus, doing 12 bookings in 12 nights, including the famous Bunker Folk Club situated on top of an extinct volcano overlooking Auckland harbour - surely the best view from any folk club in the world, but not quite as weird as Darwin Folk Club in Australia. It took place on the narrow walkway surrounding a massive empty WW2 gun turret emplacement, where I peered across a 20 foot chasm to the audience 20 yards away on the opposite side of the walkway in the pitch black tropical night.

to get enough air to keep them functioning, and feeling very glad for once that I wasn't Alistair Anderson!

1986 saw me making my fourth and last LP with Fellside, which was released in 1987 to the greatest acclaim I'd had so far. This seemed to do the trick to a certain extent, and I appeared to be moving forward. I got a phone call from Paulo Nuti in Italy, saying that he wanted The Steve Turner Band to play at a major festival at Fiera del Primiera in the north of the country that summer. When I told him that there was no such band, and that the four musicians he wanted (George Faux, Dave Walters, Steve Czwortek and Bill Martin) who'd accompanied me on the album, had never actually all been in the studio at the same time, he wasn't fazed and offered me a fee the size of which was hard to imagine at the time (and even now) with our fares and a top hotel included, to play one concert during a three day stay at the festival.

I managed to get the guys together with ease, taking the fee into account, and we had a couple of rehearsals. Coach loads of people from all over Europe arrived for the festival, and we, being the headline act, were to go onstage for our hour-long set as the last act of the three British bands. And that's where it started to go downhill. The two previous bands overran, and instead of starting at 11pm to finish at midnight, we started at 11.55pm. We were halfway through the first song when I felt a tap on my shoulder from George Faux who was playing the fiddle just behind me. He pointed to the wings where the organiser was making frantic cut-throat gestures; to such an extent that we thought it best to stop immediately. That's when the lights went out, and the sound system cut out, leaving 2000 drunken Italians stumbling around in the darkness of the huge marquee. It turned out that there was a bylaw in that village which said that there should be no music after midnight, and the police had come and shut everything down. The organiser quickly assured me that we would get our full fee, for basically doing nothing, with the proviso that I, as leader of the band, should go back on stage a few minutes later when the lights were back up and apologise to the audience for the abrupt halt to the entertainment, as the organiser didn't feel like doing it himself! I came back off stage unscathed, which must say something for my persuasive charm or my innocent trust in human nature!

By 1985 I was touring three or four times a year in the USA, with an agent in the Midwest getting me enough work to briefly move to Chicago for a few months. One of the scary experiences (which only a bellows instrument player can have) was playing in Flagstaff, Arizona, which is 7000 feet above sea level, and where the air is so thin that I found myself getting disorientated by having to pull the concertina bellows in and out twice as much as normal

After this, and other similar events, I began to wonder if I was cut out for a career in folk music. Also, in order to create the lifestyle to which I thought I'd like to become accustomed, I'd started to supplement my derisory income by dealing in folk instruments on the side. One day I discovered that the odd violin I was buying made more money than a bashed up banjo or concertina, and it escalated from there. So in early 1991 I gave up, and didn't sing or play a note for four years while I was building up my new violin business. But as the business got going and the violin shop began to settle down, I realised that the music gets in your blood and the urge gradually returned.

Fairly typically, I'd stopped smoking after rather than before I stopped singing, and after I stopped singing for a living, I started having singing lessons! At the beginning of 1996 I began to learn how to sing opera and wished I'd had the lessons at the start. I know I had a voice but I realised I hadn't known what to do with it! In the early 2000s I began to go to the local Irish sessions, just to play tunes on my banjo, which led to my getting up to sing a song (paralysed with fear, I should point out, having been off the scene for so long) at a Whitby festival singaround.

Whitby was the only contact I had with folk music in the 13 years I was off the scene, as I used to go for one day to play in the festival cricket match each year. By the end of 2004 I began making very occasional visits to the local folk clubs in Nottingham where we'd moved to start the violin shop that I currently run with my wife Liz. I'm grateful to Bernard Blackwell, who ran a club in Plumtree, for encouraging me to sing the odd song and eventually gave me the first booking of my "comeback" in early 2005.

That first booking I did for Bernard was memorable. I was so nervous that I walked off the stage in the first half, having lost count of the number of songs that I'd done; Bernard asked me what I was doing, as I'd only been there for 15 minutes and sung four songs. I made up for it in the second half, and ended up getting two more bookings at other clubs from local folk organisers who'd come to see me. And so it continued, with me gradually getting back in the swing of things and finding that most of the old faces were still

there to greet me, only they were 13 years older!

In my professional career, I was doing up to 180 bookings a year, but this, of course, was impossible with a business to run, so now I'm doing 50-60 concerts a year, which works well as I can play the clubs that I want to rather than playing to survive, like I had in the 80s, at places that weren't always suitable for a traditional singing concertina player.

Mick Peat also persuaded me to get back in the recording studio and, after a false start, in 2007 I recorded my fifth album, *Whirligig Of Time*, with Olly Knight, for Pete Heywood's Tradition Bearers label, my first album in CD format. Having had the opportunity to compare it with the old LPs it shows what a difference the new recording techniques, and hopefully the singing lessons, have made. It received some positive reviews and went as far as getting on the long list for the BBC Folk Awards.

By this time, I was going back to touring Australia and New Zealand when I could get time off the day job. The highlight was being chosen to top the bill at the Auckland Folk Festival in New Zealand in 2011, which is the prestige gig in that country. This led to the release of my "difficult second album" *Rim Of The Wheel* in 2012 which has been reviewed favourably. When asked what was the best live act she'd ever seen in her Rocket Launcher interview in Froots, Nancy Kerr said: "The best spot I've seen recently was Steve Turner – total intensive musical focus and a vast serious repertoire."

I found overall that the folk scene continues to change in many ways. There's the frequently observed fact that many folk clubs are finding it harder to continue in their old formats and with ageing audiences. There are more festivals, and more competition for bookings. There are far more recordings available, with access to material far more readily available via the internet. Also there's the growth of concert venues and the seeming preference for younger groups, duos and trios above solo singers, for reasons which cynical old fogeys like me couldn't possibly be drawn into giving views on here!

www.steve-turner.co.uk

# THE LIVING TRADITION

## Subscribe to the leading Traditional Music magazine

**Packed with information, news, reviews and features leading you to the best live and recorded music, clubs, concerts and festivals in the UK, Ireland and further afield.**

**Keep in touch with the definitive guide to the traditional music scene.**



[www.livingtradition.co.uk](http://www.livingtradition.co.uk)