

Steve & Julie Wigley – Finding the Midnight Road

Julie and I first met at a youth club in Derby around 1968 and by 1971 we could occasionally be found in a quiet back room, with our guitars, attempting to play songs by Simon & Garfunkel.

My first guitar was an Ecko Ranger 12, 12 string, which we still have to this day and Julie's was, I think, a nylon strung six string.



I began learning to play, with the help of a chap at work, in the lunch breaks and he taught me a few basic chords and the beginnings of my finger style, enabling me to do a passable version of Ralph McTell's classic 'Streets of London' while Julie played a beautiful version of Paul Simon's 'Bleeker Street'. We were very much influenced at the time, by the contemporary folk songwriters, including Ralph McTell, Gordon Lightfoot, Joni Mitchell, Tom Paxton, Donovan, Cat Stevens, Simon & Garfunkel, Bob Dylan etc and our exposure to 'traditional' folk was probably limited to The Spinners, who were very popular at the time and The Corries.

Julie and I lost touch for a time, but a chance meeting in Derby town centre one Saturday morning, would lead to us getting together and our first date was to see Pentangle at De Montfort Hall, Leicester. Featuring the prodigious talents of Jacquee McShee, John Renbourn, Bert Jansch and Danny Thompson. Derby's folk scene was thriving at the time, with a very popular folk club called Peasemouldia operating in a number of venues including Derbyshire Cricket Club and subsequently, The Station Inn on Midland Road, where we would spend many happy Thursday evenings entertained by artists such as The Furies and Davey Arthur, Barbara Dickson and local stars such as Jack Hudson with his ever ready smile, rich voice and fine Americana style songs.

I was also particularly fond of the harmonies of North East band Magna Carta and soon found myself intrigued by the storytelling style of Al Stewart. Derbyshire's own Ripley Wayfarers and The Lonesome Travellers were an ever popular draw to the clubs, which were usually packed and the audiences were mainly in their twenties at this time.

Julie and I played a few Saturday night gigs in local pubs and teamed up with one of my workmates, Dave Sutton, who was a fine guitarist and singer, and for a time we became a folk biased cover band.

The pressures of working lives began to get in the way of evenings at folk clubs until around 1980 when we discovered a club at The Bridge Inn, run by Mike Dilley and the three of us began to do floor spots there until the club relocated to a new venue, The White Hart in Duffield. We soon became regulars at the club and began to take on the role of residents, enjoying starting the evening for many fine guest nights, including The Tom Topping Band from Liverpool, Clive Gregson & Christine Collister, Whippersnapper, Maxi & Mitch, Sally Barker and Johnny Coppin to name but a few and with regular visits from The Ripley Wayferers, whose Mick Peat would go on to become a guiding light behind the Derby Folk Festival and the Derbyshire Folk music scene.

Mike Dilley was very encouraging and contributed to the production cost of our first recording attempt in the late eighties, by which time, Julie had begun to write her own songs. 'Apologies to Those Still at the Bar' was the album title, inspired by Mike's regular call to the audience on club nights, when the second half was about to begin. Recording took place at Doug Porter's Darley Abbey Studio. Doug was the front man of local band the Lonesome Travellers and he quickly became a good friend for many years until taken by ill health.

'Apologies' was soon followed by our second album 'The News from Radio Moscow' which again contained a number of Julie's songs and which earned its title by some freak of atmospheric conditions in the recording studio. When we replayed the first song after recording, it had picked up from the ether, the words 'and here is the news from Radio Moscow' just before the song began. We were so amused, we decided to leave it in!

By this time our line-up had expanded to include a number of friends. Dave Sutton had stepped back from performing and we were joined by Julie's friends Pat and Dot with whom she had also been singing ladies' barbershop and by brothers Phil and Greg Lawrence. Phil is a fine guitarist and Greg an excellent bass player. So began a few years as 'Lighterman's Hitch'

By the mid nineties our busy working lives led us to step back from performing and gradually, local clubs were closing, but Julie and I looked further afield and discovered a fine folk club called Keyworth Folk Club in the village of Plumtree, Nottinghamshire run by Jill and Bernard Blackwell, where we soon became regular visitors and performers. It was at this club, where we would celebrate Julie's fortieth birthday by booking Huw and Tony Williams as guests.

Eventually Julie and I both managed to take early retirement. In my case in late 2009 and in Julie's in 2012 and while for a time, we both took some part time work, Julie was able to begin songwriting in earnest. Her output of fine songs since then, has been staggering.

Our first CD album:

2015 'The Last Rose of Summer' featured only eight songs of which six were her own, but subsequent albums came on an annual basis-

2016 Hares & Graces – 13 songs

2017 The Mermaid's Pool – 14 songs

2018 Robinson's Hill – 17 songs

2019 Rich Threads – 16 songs

2020 Only a Wingbeat Away – 17 songs

2021 At the Passing of the Storm – 16 songs

2022 Sixteen Buffaloes- 17 songs with a Lincolnshire theme

2023 Time Train – 17 songs

2024 Three Thousand Stars – 17 songs

and we're currently recording our next album 'Midnight Road'

In addition, we recorded an album with our acapella trio Stonestrow, featuring our friend Tony Fowkes 'Gag the Parrot' is a mix of contemporary and traditional songs in three part harmony. The title coming from a comment made by our Cambridge friend Jeremy Harmer, during a zoom session in the covid lockdowns, when our Amazon parrot, Jade was contributing to our vocals!

Our musical journey continues and hopefully, the road will go on for a good while longer yet.

I've been in awe of Julie's development as a songwriter and am eternally grateful to the many friends we've made and met on our journey, especially those who have encouraged us and provided bookings to start us on the road we are travelling.

The folk club scene has changed enormously in recent years, as the 60s folk revival generation become older and club venues become harder to sustain, but we are encouraged by the many clubs still operating and providing a platform for the talents of those working to keep acoustic music and story telling through songs alive.

Songwriting competitions have also proved to generate a wealth of original material to add to the priceless catalogue of 'folk' and we're very grateful to the organisers and volunteers of Watford Folk Club, The Milkmaid Folk Club, Ludlow Folk Club, Song for Lincolnshire, Lymm Folk Club, The John Birmingham Cup, Derby Songwriter and many others, for encouraging this precious well of talent.