



STEVE TILSTON

A life time at the cutting edge of Britain's folk scene has taught Steve Tilston a thing or two. He talks to Noel Harvey.

It's tempting to describe Steve Tilston as a stalwart of the British folk scene. But it's fairer still to say he's really one of the governors. After all, he's been around since the early 70s, his discography is well into double digits, and his songs have been covered by Fairport Convention, Dolores Keane, John Wright and many others. What's more, he's not just 'still around'. As he showed with his last album *Ziggurat*, he's at the top of his game. And in a business as fickle and unforgiving as music, that's no mean feat. Yet you'll still find him referred to as 'folk's best kept secret' or 'the musician's musician'. Wasn't that a bit of a backhanded compliment? Tilston shrugs but nods in agreement. 'Yes it is,' he says, 'but what can I do about it? I'm out there doing it. I'm in my 50s now and I suppose I've been taking stock of where I stand musically, and that kind of thing. I've always managed to earn a

living as a musician. It's been precarious at times but it seems to be pretty good now, and I'm still at it. Obviously it would be nice to...er...' He breaks off and pauses for a moment. 'You know, I don't know... I'm actually quite happy with the situation. I never had that real killer ambition that a lot of musicians seem to have. I remember John Martyn. Now, he really had it. I was ambitious, but not in the same way.'

And he started young too, playing his first gig at the age of 15 and turning professional in 1970. 'Wizz Jones saw me and invited me down to London,' he explains. 'He introduced me to a lot of the clubs, and that's how I ended up playing at the Cousins folk club on a regular basis. It was a great "in" and Wizz was quite a mentor in those early days.'

Was it really such a golden age? 'Yes, without a doubt. But in true English fashion we didn't realise the worth of it. I remember every

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club – every town – had its great guitar players, and there were people going round playing some wonderful songs that I haven't heard since and were never recorded. They coined the phrase 'folk baroque', and I think it suits the style well. Americans know it. They regard that period as having a particularly British stamp on it that's exotic to them, and they still hold it in high regard. When I go over there I play mostly in that style.'

Not that Tilston hasn't seen a few changes over the years, both in his music and in the business. 'At the end of the day,' he says, 'you have to earn a living. You

start off in fairly narrow confines, but you have your ears open and you're exposed to all these different influences. That's always informed my music. I mean, things like playing with Ballet Rambert – who'd have thought in a million years that would have happened? From there I got a bit of flamenco, and South American music, and then there was the rock band in Bristol. It's been a great musical journey, places I wouldn't have chosen to go, but that's just the way it's happened in the process of earning a living.'

The last remark prompts me to ask about 'A Pretty Penny', Tilston's polemical song about



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the banking-bonus culture. Wasn't it prophetic? 'Yes,' he says with a wry laugh. 'I wrote it about eight months before the crash. It just seemed such an obscenity. I was just so angry that I had to write something down, but I thought if I just fill a song with a load of invective, a load of anger, then it's not going to do it. You get the point across better if you're subtle. I try to create a kind of musical stiletto and twist it, rather than bash people over the head with a musical lump hammer. Quite a lot of my songs are protest songs, but not overtly so. It's just the way I am, really... quietly seditious.' And he gives another short, wry laugh. It's difficult to imagine Tilston as a conspirator. He's far too likable for that.

I mention that I'd seen his daughter, Martha, performing the previous evening, and taking an equally effective tack. He's instantly the proud dad. Did she? Did she have a good set? I missed it. Was it good? Ah, great! So what's it like, seeing your daughter up onstage? 'Well, I've got two daughters at it now: Molly Jones, my youngest daughter, she's in Liverpool and she's coming on. Oh yeah, it's great, obviously I'm very proud of them both. I think Martha was wary of keeping our musical identities separate when she first started. She was very conscious of the fact of being my daughter but now she's got her

own sound, her own voice, her own audience. It's really great.'

Almost reluctant to change the subject, I ask about Tilston's guitars. Was he still playing the Coles? Yes, but he'd taken to playing a Moondog Grand Auditorium when he went abroad. 'They're designed by a friend of mine, Tim Nicholai, from Cardiff. Lovely guitars, but my first love are my Coles, of course. I'm just loath to put a hand-built guitar on an aeroplane. The one that Martin Cole made me – that's the one I designed with the 14/12 – it's still my first love. It's really a wonderful guitar and it just gets better and better.'

I remind him of the last time he spoke to *Acoustic* in 2005, when he said the only thing he couldn't do was play any Django Reinhardt. 'Well,' he replies, 'I did get a book of Reinhardt's solos and there were a couple of pieces I could just about manage, but very, very slow. There's a part of me that would still love to play like that. I still like playing a bit of classical now and again, and I've written a few instrumental pieces. Funnily enough, I wrote one recently called 'Davey G'. I started it last October and he died, sadly, only two months later. I called it 'Salute To Davey G' because it seemed that every lick I played sounded like a Davey Graham lick. But I regard myself as a songwriter first and foremost. It's



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just that I like having a pretty full accompaniment and being able to do the whole thing.'

And it isn't just with music that Tilston likes to do the whole thing. He's a skilled archer and has made his own bow out of Welsh yew. 'That's my big passion,' he says. 'I've just got two Grand Master Bowman scores with the longbow, but they don't count because you have to get them in competitions, but at least I can manage it on the field!'

So who did he identify with more? Robin Hood or Alan-a-Dale? Tilston laughs, as if it was a matter he'd never thought about before, but something that might warrant consideration. 'Well, I'm obviously a combination of the two. I've got a pretty Zen-like approach to life, and the archery comes in to that. It's traditional archery, that's the only one I'm interested in, and hitting a target at a hundred yards gives me an amazing buzz. It's diametrically opposed to music in some ways, and it's hard to correlate exactly how it filters into my music, but it's an important part of it. We all have passions, and men particularly have obsessions, and this is my trainspotting. If something really engages me, I always like to do it to the best of my ability; it's been the same with music. When I saw

ZIGGURAT

WHY THE BABYLONIAN TITLE?

As a kid I was always influenced by that area and I wrote a song about the Iraq war. A lot of the antiquities were getting trashed, and ancient sites were getting bulldozed over and used as helicopter landing pads. I had to ask, why exactly are we there? We were supposed to be a civilising influence and bring democracy, but there's been scant regard for what was there thousands of years ago. I know the phrase gets bandied about a lot – the cradle of civilisation – but the city states were created there, so the area is of fundamental importance to us all. Some people thought that the whole CD would be themed on the title, but it's quite a small part of the album. There's quite a bit of anger in some of the songs, though. They were written over quite a short time frame after a period of writer's block, so there's a kind of musical correlation.

Davey Graham and Bert Jansch, I thought, well, that's the kind of music I want to be playing. I want to play to that standard. I always knew I had it in me.
Noel Harvey