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Made in Dorset...

Steve Knightley, of acclaimed folk duo Show of Hands, talks to **Sophie Atherton** about the band's Dorset roots and his love of the county.

As I drive to meet Steve Knightley I try to avoid thinking about his talent for song writing, singing, musicianship and storytelling. I think it's the storytelling bit that worries me most, because telling stories is a journalist's bread and butter. Steve's ability in this department is nothing short of captivating. It is what hooks you about Show of Hands.

As much as the absorbing music made by he and his rhythm pal Phil Beer, it is the tales of poachers, farmers, ex-soldiers, kids growing up in seaside towns desperate to get away from places that are dead in the winter, love-stricken Portland clergymen and mysterious, ghostly characters roaming the racecourses and betting shops of England that make you want to hear more.



But when I arrive (late), he is an ordinary, friendly bloke who asks if I'd like a cup of tea and something to eat. Phew. He orders a pot of tea for two and a toasted teacake and we get down to business.

Although he was brought up in Devon, in the coastal town of Exmouth, Steve has had a strong connection with Dorset since childhood.

'My mother was evacuated there in wartime,' he tells me, 'we used to go back and stay at the farm near Bettiscombe where she'd stayed and I've been going back to West Dorset ever since.'

It is also a place of musical roots for Steve, in more ways than one; he played one of his first gigs at a folk club in Shave Cross in the Marshwood Vale when he was just 15, then after spending several years on the 'London rock and roll scene' he decided he wanted to move to the country and in 1986 ended up back in the area of his childhood visits.

'I sort of semi-retired from music for a bit and I was doing anything I could to make a living.' He explains. 'Between '86 and 1992 I had a B & B, I did some thatching, supply teaching and guitar teaching – Polly Harvey was one of my students, her family were our nearest neighbours at Corscombe.'

Perhaps teaching music fanned the flames of the need to make music, because it wasn't long before Steve was doing 'a handful of pub gigs and folk clubs' again. It was around then he became reacquainted with Phil Beer, who was at the time still with The Albion Band.

'I had all these songs that I'd written over the previous 15 years and in '92 Phil became available and suggested we went full time.' Says Steve. 'There weren't many duos on the scene at that time, but we knew how powerful they could be – when you think of people like the Dransfields and Carthy and Swarbrick.'

And so, Show of Hands was born, in Dorset. They were regulars at the Bridport folk club, their first album was a live recording of one of these gigs - released on a local label and their agent was Bridport-based, Peter Wilson.

'In a very real sense, Show of Hands began as a Dorset cottage industry.' Steve tells me, with pride in his voice – reflecting his love for the county he plans to move back to 'within the next five years'.

His association with the Dorset has provided rich pickings when it comes to songs. 'I work through plot, characters and how things play out – almost like a screenplay – then it becomes poetic instead of anecdotal.' Steve tells me, making it seem far too simple given the end result.

Take for example 'The Preacher', from the 1995 album 'Lie of the Land'. It is the story of a clergyman on Portland tormented by his love for another man's wife. Her husband works in the quarry, but tiring of the dangerous work, finds a new job on the mainland. The thought of his love leaving is too much for the preacher and he prays 'that something would tear them apart and force her to stay', but when his prayers are answered he is overwhelmed with guilt at what he's done. The story alone would be a page turner, but put to music the atmosphere of the tale surrounds you – so that you can see the characters and the plot playing out in your mind almost without consciously imagining it.

'If you come from a background of folk song it is ingrained that you can be lots of people in lots of songs.'

And so he is, from the Dorset poacher, with his 'Longdog' getting caught out on land owned by the local magistrate, to a Beaminster firefighter desperately trying to respond to 'The Shout' of the latest emergency and dozens of other characters in between.

Narrative songs are the mainstay of the Show of Hands repertoire, but they are only half the story.

'Acoustic music audiences are generally quite left-leaning and social thinking, so you have to be quite clever about how you reinforce those positive values.' Says Steve. But I have to tell you, he can do that too. The title track of the last studio album 'Country Life' is a polemic about the demise of rural life: the countryside emptied of its people by the increasing trend for second homes, failing farmers up against the demand for cheaper and cheaper food and the disastrous consequences of the seemingly unstoppable march of out-of-town supermarkets. Steve puts the message across through tales of the people affected, subtly weaving the issues around the stories. Although it wasn't subtle enough for the powers-that-be to endorse radio play for the song.

The new album, 'Witness', showcases Steve's song writing and storytelling at its best. He describes it as a journey through the Westcountry through the eyes of various characters and says he's pleased the album has a real sense of identity. It includes 49 English place names at the last count – something he examines further in a track called 'Roots', an exploration of ideas of Englishness, which came out of conversations Steve had with Billy Bragg.

'I used to feel awkward singing about English place names,' he says, 'especially when others were singing about New York and Route 66, but now I like the idea of reclaiming the English landscape as a canvas for song.'

Steve doesn't just pay lip service to the concept of roots, every year Show of Hands return to the county of their birth for their summer festival at the Sub Tropical Gardens in Abbotsbury.

'It's almost like a home gig,' says Steve – obviously looking forward to it. 'It's a celebration of what we do, with people who know us the best.'