

Al Stewart

Alastair Ian Stewart (born 5 September 1945) is a Scottish-born singer-songwriter and folk-rock musician who rose to prominence as part of the British folk revival in the 1960s and 1970s. He developed a unique style of combining folk-rock songs with delicately woven tales of characters and events from history.

Stewart is best known for his 1976 hit single "Year of the Cat", from the platinum album of the same name. Though *Year of the Cat* and its 1978 platinum follow-up *Time Passages* brought Stewart his biggest worldwide commercial successes, earlier albums such as *Past, Present and Future* from 1973 are often seen as better examples of his intimate brand of historical folk-rock, a style to which he returned in later albums.

Stewart appears throughout the musical history of the folk revivalist era. He played at the first-ever Glastonbury Festival in 1970, knew Yoko Ono before she met John Lennon, shared a London flat with a young Paul Simon (who was collaborating with Bruce Woodley of The Seekers), and hosted at the Les Cousins folk club in London in the 1960s.

Stewart has released 16 studio and three live albums since his debut album *Bed-Sitter Images* in 1967, and continues to tour extensively in the US, Canada, Europe, and the UK. His most recent release, *Uncorked*, was released on Stewart's independent label, Wallaby Trails Recordings, in 2009.

Stewart has worked with Peter White, Alan Parsons, Jimmy Page, Richard Thompson, Rick Wakeman, Francis Monkman, Tori Amos, and Tim Renwick, and more recently has played with Dave Nachmanoff and former Wings lead-guitarist Laurence Juber.

Early life

Although born in Greenock, Al Stewart grew up in the town of Wimborne, Dorset, England, after moving from Scotland with his mother, Joan Underwood. His father, Alastair MacKichan Stewart, who served as a flight lieutenant in the Royal Air Force volunteer reserve, died in a plane crash during a 1945 training exercise before his son Al was born. Stewart attended Wycliffe College, Gloucestershire as a boarder. After that, according to the song "Post World War II Blues" (from *Past, Present and Future*): "*I came up to London when I was 19 with a corduroy jacket and a head full of dreams.*"

Having bought his fourth guitar from future Police guitarist Andy Summers, Stewart traded in his electric guitar for an acoustic guitar when he was offered a weekly slot at Bunjies Coffee House in London's Soho in 1965. From there, he went on to serve as master of ceremonies at the Les Cousins folk club on Greek Street, where he played alongside Cat Stevens, Bert Jansch, Van Morrison, Roy Harper, Ralph McTell and Paul Simon, with whom he shared a flat in Dellow Street, Stepney, London.

Career

Stewart's first recording was on Jackson C. Frank's debut album, 1965's *Jackson C. Frank*, playing guitar on "Yellow Walls". His first record was the single "The Elf" (backed with a version of The Yardbirds' "Turn into Earth"), which was released in 1966 on Decca Records and included guitar work from Jimmy Page (later of the Yardbirds and Led Zeppelin). Stewart then signed to Columbia Records (CBS in the UK), for whom he released six albums. Though the first four of these attracted relatively little commercial interest, Stewart's popularity and cult following grew steadily through albums that contain some of Stewart's most incisive and introspective songwriting.

Early albums (1967–1973)

Stewart's debut album, *Bedsitter Images*, was released in 1967. A revised version appeared in 1970 as *The First Album (Bedsitter Images)* with a few tracks changed, and the album was reissued on CD in 2007 with all tracks from both versions.

Love Chronicles (1969) was notable for the 18-minute title track, an anguished autobiographical tale of sexual encounters that was the first mainstream record release ever to include the word "fucking". It was voted "Folk Album of the Year" by the UK music magazine *Melody Maker* and features Jimmy Page and Richard Thompson on guitar.

His third album, *Zero She Flies*, followed in 1970 and included a number of shorter songs which ranged from acoustic ballads and instrumentals to songs that featured electric lead guitar. These first three albums (including *The Elf*) were later released as the two-CD set *To Whom it May Concern: 1966–70*.

In 1970, Stewart and fellow musician Ian A. Anderson headed to the small town of Pilton, Somerset. There, at Michael Eavis's Worthy Farm, Stewart performed at the first-ever Glastonbury Festival to a field of 1,000 hippies, who had paid just £1 each to be there.

On the back of his growing success, Stewart released *Orange* in 1972. It was written after a tumultuous breakup with his girlfriend and muse, Mandi, and was very much a transitional album, combining songs in Stewart's confessional style with more intimations of the historical themes that he would increasingly adopt (e.g., "The News from Spain" with its progressive rock overtones, including dramatic piano by Rick Wakeman).

The fifth release, *Past, Present and Future* (1973), was Stewart's first album to receive a proper release in the United States, via Janus Records. It echoed a traditional historical storytelling style and contained the song "Nostradamus," a long (9:43) track in which Stewart tied into the rediscovery of the claimed seer's writings by referring to selected possible predictions about 20th century people and events. While too long for mainstream radio airplay at that time, the song became a hit on many US college/university radio stations, which were flexible about running times.

Such airplay helped the album to reach No. 133 on the *Billboard* album chart in the US. Other songs on *Past, Present and Future* characterized by Stewart's "history genre" mentioned American President Warren G. Harding, World War II, Ernst Röhm, Christine Keeler, Louis Mountbatten, and Joseph Stalin's purges.

Alan Parsons years (1975–1978)

Stewart followed *Past, Present and Future* with *Modern Times* (1975), in which the songs were lighter on historical references and more of a return to the theme of short stories set to music. Significantly, though, it was the first of his albums to be produced by Alan Parsons.

In a highly positive retrospective review of *Modern Times*, AllMusic senior editor Stephen Thomas Erlewine described the album as "exquisite". Erlewine wrote that the album "establishes Stewart's classic sound of folksy narratives and Lennoxesque melodies, all wrapped up in a lush, layered production from Alan Parsons. The production gives epics like the title track a real sense of grandeur that makes their sentiments resonate strongly."

Modern Times produced Stewart's first hit single, "Carol". The album reached No. 30 in the US and received substantial airplay on album-oriented stations some 30 years before Bob Dylan would release an album of the same name.

Stewart's contract with CBS Records expired at this point, and he signed to RCA Records for the world outside North America. His first two albums for RCA, *Year of the Cat* (released on Janus Records in the US, then reissued by Arista Records after Janus folded) and *Time Passages* (released in the U.S. on Arista), set the style for his later work and have been his biggest-selling recordings.^[11]

Stewart told Kaya Burgess of *The Times*: "When I finished *Year of the Cat*, I thought: 'If this isn't a hit, then I can't make a hit.' We finally got the formula exactly right."

Stewart had all of the music and orchestration written and completely recorded before he had a title for any of the songs. He mentioned in a Canadian radio interview that he has done this for six of his albums, and he often writes four different sets of lyrics for each song.

Both albums reached the top ten in the US, with *Year of the Cat* peaking at No. 5 and *Time Passages* at No. 10, and both albums produced hit singles in the US ("Year of the Cat" No. 8, and "On the Border", #42; "Time Passages" No. 7 and "Song on the Radio", #29). Meanwhile, "Year of the Cat" became Stewart's first chart single in Britain, where it peaked at No. 31. It was a huge success at London's Capital Radio, reaching number 2 on their Capital Countdown chart. The overwhelming success of these songs on the two albums, both of which still receive substantial radio airplay on classic-rock/pop format radio stations, has perhaps later overshadowed the depth and range of Stewart's body of songwriting.

1980s

Stewart then released *24 Carrots* (#37 US 1980) and his first live album *Live/Indian Summer* (#110 US 1981), with both featuring backing by Peter White's band Shot in the Dark (who released their own album in 1981). While "24 Carrots" did produce a No. 24 single with "Midnight Rocks", the album sold less well than its two immediate predecessors.

After those releases, Stewart was dropped by Arista and his popularity declined. Despite his lower profile and waning commercial success, he continued to tour the world, record albums, and maintain a loyal fanbase. There was a four-year gap between his next two albums, the highly political *Russians and Americans* (1984) and

the upbeat pop-oriented *Last Days of the Century* (1988), which appeared on smaller labels and had lower sales than his previous works.

1990s

Stewart followed up with his second live album, the acoustic *Rhymes in Rooms* (1992), which featured only Stewart and Peter White, and *Famous Last Words* (1993), which was dedicated to the memory of the late Peter Wood (co-writer of "Year of the Cat"), who died the year of its release.

After parting ways with his longtime collaborator of almost 20 years, Peter White (who was credited on every studio and live album between *Year of the Cat* and *Famous Last Words* and also served as his regular songwriting partner), Stewart joined with former Wings guitarist Laurence Juber to record a concept album, *Between the Wars* (1995), covering major historical and cultural events from 1918 to 1939, such as the Treaty of Versailles, Prohibition, the Spanish Civil War, and the Great Depression. Juber produced the album, and went on to produce Stewart's subsequent studio albums.

In 1995, Stewart was invited to play at the 25th anniversary Glastonbury Festival.

21st century

In 2000, Stewart released *Down in the Cellar*, a concept album themed on wine. Stewart had begun a love affair with wine in the 1970s when, he admitted, he had more money than he knew how to spend, and so turned to fine wines.

In 2005, he released *A Beach Full of Shells*, which was set in places varying from First World War England to the 1950s rock 'n' roll scene that influenced him.

In 2008, he released *Sparks of Ancient Light*, produced, like his most recent albums, by Laurence Juber. On this album he weaves tales of William McKinley, Lord Salisbury, and Hanno the Navigator. A video for the song "Elvis at the Wheel" was released in December 2013.^[15]

Stewart and guitarist Dave Nachmanoff released a live album, *Uncorked*, on Stewart's label, Wallaby Trails Recordings, in 2009. They played the Glastonbury Festival 40th anniversary in June 2010 on the acoustic stage.

Stewart sang a duet with Albert Hammond of Hammond's "It Never Rains in Southern California" on Hammond's 2010 album *Legend*.

In 2011, Stewart sang a duet with his guitarist and opening act Dave Nachmanoff on Nachmanoff's album *Step Up*. The song, "Sheila Won't Be Coming Home", was co-written by Stewart and Nachmanoff.

In May 2015, Stewart performed the albums *Past, Present and Future* and *Year of the Cat* in their entirety at the Royal Albert Hall with a band that included Tim Renwick, Peter White and Stuart Elliott, who had appeared on the original recordings.

In April 2017, Stewart was given a Lifetime Achievement award at the BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards, presented by Tony Blackburn, with whom he had once played in a band in Dorset.

In October 2022 he toured in the UK supported by The Empty Pockets (who opened with their own set before backing Stewart).