

See The Morning: A look back at the life of Mick Stevens

*Shortly after running our review of Mick Stevens' recently reissued records, [See The Morning / No Savage Word](#), we received an email from a gentleman named **John Theedom** who had been friends and a musical collaborator with Stevens. He had randomly come across the review and was shocked to see that Stevens' work had been unearthed and reissued. He asked if we would be interested in running his own personal account of his list with Stevens, and of course we accepted this extremely compelling offer.*

I cannot tell you the effect seeing a review of Mick Stevens *See The Morning / No Savage Word* in *Dusted* had on me. I was at one and the same time, incredulous, elated and sad. How did these albums get to be on CD after all this time. Who had access to the tapes/records as there were so few copies produced originally? How marvelous, that this very special music was 'getting-out there' at last. But how sad that Mick Stevens, having succumbed to cancer 17 years ago, could not be here to enjoy the moment.

The review talks of "this obscure and talented songwriter... (who) has since fallen into oblivion." It seems as though Mick Stevens hour has finally come. An incredibly gifted musician, intellectual, linguist, and all round complex character. It is time the world came to know something of the man and his music.

It would be the summer of 1971. I bumped into Steve West who was a friend of a guy that I had played in a band with at some small local gigs. He told me that one of his school friends was going off to university shortly, creating a vacancy for a singer/guitarist in an (mainly) acoustic band, with a sort of west coast USA-type sound, and particularly strong on vocal harmonies.

I went to an audition a couple of nights later in a small room above the Endeavour public house in Chelmsford. Mick Stevens was there and had been somewhat in the background for the most part whilst he and the other members of the band - *Sunday Morning Gothic* - listened to my contribution to the evening's music. With the 'business' side of things out of the way, the band started to play through some of their numbers the way they would normally perform them. Suddenly, the sound was different. The amazing guitar 'fills' and 'licks' emanating from Mick's guitar were not only very fine musical statements in their own right, but completely complimentary to the sound overall. I had never been in such close proximity to anyone who could play like this before. This was no ordinary musician. I was privy to something special happening in this room. And I was going to replace this guy?! (It actually took two of us to replace Mick, another guitarist/songwriter friend of mine joining a few weeks later).

The next few weeks were spent working with Mick and the band so that I could learn their current repertoire before Mick headed north to Nottingham University where he was reading Russian. As I was to learn, Mick was an incredibly gifted guy in a number of ways. Languages, and the use of language – English or indeed many others – featured large in Mick's life. He was comfortable with the whole of the English language it seemed; just sample some of his songs – despite its often essentially romantic nature, you won't find any *moon in June*-type lyrics in Mick's songs.

Although Mick was in Nottingham, he returned to Chelmsford during study breaks and holidays and we all 'hung out' together. A favourite pastime was to play our new songs to each other, busking guitar parts and harmony vocals as we went along and sometimes developing full musical arrangements. *Sunday Morning Gothic* became *Celeste* and started to secure a number of prestigious gigs (but earning virtually no money) whilst Mick was developing both his song writing skills and some technical skills making home recordings of some substance.

The album *See The Morning* was recorded in Mick's bedroom at University and/or his bedroom at home by means of 'bouncing' mono tracks on a 7 1/2 ips reel-to-reel Tandberg tape machine, whilst adding yet another vocal and guitar part 'live' into the mix. Recording this way requires endless patience and no small amount of skill. You have to perform a take in one go with no mistakes, and this 'live' take is superimposed simultaneously onto the backing track you previously recorded providing a new, updated, but 'final' mix. If you get anything wrong – a guitar part, you sing the wrong words, or the mix of this new 'layer' of sound is not balanced with the existing recorded soundtrack – you have to do it all over again, and again, until it is right.

Mick did not have access to multi-track, limiters, compressors, mixing desk, direct input to recording desk, computer and digital technologies etc. A lot of this technology, taken for granted today, just was not available (and where it was it was out of the reach of unheard of, struggling, musicians without a record company deal). Mick was a 'one-man band' performing the roles of artist, songwriter, tape operator, studio technician, and producer, – all at the same time. When you take all this into account *See The Morning* is a most remarkable, and accomplished piece of work.

To realize a piece of work in such demanding circumstances often entails an approach nearing obsession. At the same time, Mick had an incredibly able mind – a tool which enabled him to stick with difficult problems, seeking and finding solutions long after most of us had passed-up the matter in pursuit of something offering quicker gratification. The combination of his dedication and super-analytical mind was not without its downside, however. He could be intense,

inward-looking and insecure in his quest for perfection. This obsessive behaviour sometimes seemed to be taking him closer to the edge – leaving him in a sometimes depressive state of mind. He saw things in life, or heard things in his music, that he felt were unacceptable and that would somehow cause the world to punish him. In reality, these things were imperceptible to the world at large, and would have been of no consequence even if they were.

After graduating, Mick undertook a residency in a bar in Malta for a short while. This was a little strange as Mick seldom played anyone else's material and certainly never played commercial pop music, unless there was an opportunity to parody it. I don't know what happened during his stay there, but I do know that I saw real fear in Mick's eyes on his return to England. Whatever had gone on had fed that incredibly active mind of his and was in danger of disturbing the delicate equilibrium that was Mick.

Back in the 'safety' of family and friends in Chelmsford, Mick was slowly able to begin the process of ridding himself of those 'demons'. Inevitably, part of the healing process involved Mick 'getting things out of his system' writing some new songs. Most of this batch of new songs are to be found on *No Savage Word*. The album contains striking contrasts between outpourings of recent pain and bitterness – just listen to the bile-laden lyrics of "Some Kind Of Unholiness" – and set it against the inner peace Mick sought in "Holiday". The hurt experienced in the former (note the use of femalevolent – not a real word, but that one non-word captures the mood of the piece), and the idyllic ambience of "Holiday" – these are emotions that we can all relate to; it's just that with Mick, the 'highs' and 'lows' could be so intense.

Mick introduced additional musicians (myself included) to the process when recording *No Savage Word*, firstly to enable more instruments and voices to be recorded at each take – thus reducing the number of 'layers' to be recorded and achieving a better sound quality, and secondly to create less of a 'loner' vibe than on *See The Morning*. The recording techniques were still primitive, though a second Tandberg was added to the equipment list. The drums were recorded in a village hall as I remember, over a 'guide' tape, then the tape brought back to Mick's bedroom at his parents house and fed from one tape machine into a second as additional voices and guitars were recorded. The musicians include Des Brewer who was in British pop/punk band Giggles, before moving to the USA and spending time in The Long Ryders; Warne Livesey, a record producer of some renown working with many artists worldwide, and now a major force in his chosen country of residence, Canada; Mick Ransome, drums, has played in a number of British heavy metal bands – Preying Mantis, Tattooed Love Boys and more besides.

Around this time, I remember playing a couple of 'one-off' gigs in a 'scratch' band made up of Mick, myself and a couple of other guys. I only have vague recollections of these gigs, probably because most of what we played was just 'jamming', a few songs - and lots and lots of alcohol! But I remember the sheer fun we had, and a relaxed and carefree Mick – and, of course, I remember Mick's solo's on 'Black Magic Woman' which were just sensational.

Outside of the music there was a living to be made. If making music was not a breadwinner, then Mick's flair for languages was. He took a number of jobs where he taught English as a foreign language, or taught foreign languages to English students - I think Mick spoke four or five languages.

But the music had to go on. Mick made two more limited release albums at Spaceward Studios in Cambridge, *The River* (1977) and *The Englishman* (1979). These are professionally recorded affairs with some excellent musicians – including ex-members of Soft Machine - in tow. Here, Mick is able to concentrate on the music with the technical side being handled by the studio producer and engineers. These are must have albums for Mick Stevens fans, the guitar work being particularly assured.

Life was moving on, as inevitably it must. For a number of the Chelmsford 'crowd', career opportunities, girlfriends, marriage etc meant a broadening of horizons and moving away to pastures new. The very 'tight knit' friendships of our youth starting to unravel as more of the opportunities the world has to offer come into play. As I moved away from the area, earlier concerns that I, and others, may have had about Mick's well-being had largely disappeared. For a start, Mick was happily making music – even if it was reaching the ears of a very limited number of people. He had learnt to enjoy the 'normal' aspects of everyday life - employment, holidays, socialising etc. And he had met 'Hilly' (Hilary), a girl who brought about a noticeable difference to Mick's general demeanour.

The moving away was gradual. I remember that we still met up and we would discuss how things were going with *The River* and later *The Englishman*. I remember Mick complimenting me on one of my songs and saying that he wished he had written it – I remember it because Mick did not usually 'give himself away' like that. Mick and 'Hilly' moved to Berkshire. I still have a Christmas card from that time with the new address written inside, and signed from Mick, Hilary, James and Fay. Mick now married, and a family man and, as far as I could tell from reports I received, contented and at peace with himself.

I can't tell you the date. I was back in Chelmsford with my wife and our young children. We had taken them to a park to play. An old friend from schooldays had seen us and walked over. "Isn't it terrible about Mick", he said. I will never

forget those words. For whilst I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about, I was to learn of Mick's untimely death following the discovery of cancer to his tongue and throat.

From memory, Mick had just 30 copies of *See The Morning* pressed, although due to Deroy's processes at the studio a further three copies were delivered with completely white labels and covers. I have one of these copies with Mick's handwritten song titles in pencil on the rear cover. The production-run for *No Savage Word* may have been as many as 50! I don't know about the two Spaceward albums, but I think it unlikely that more than 100 of each were made. If you have one of the original albums, you have a collector's item – *Record Collector Rare Records Price Guide* in the UK quotes values of £250 (\$400) each for good quality copies of *See the Morning* and *No Savage Word*. Whether you have the originals or you just bought the re-issue on CD or vinyl, you have a classic of early '70's psychedelic sound for your enjoyment.

If you don't have these albums, go out and buy the CD and treat yourself to the like of something that may not pass your way again – and celebrate! Celebrate the fact that without the advantage of major record industry sponsors or contacts, without overtly commercial music or production techniques, without the accessible / affordable technology available today, without even being alive, thirty years on (and with thanks to the 'good ears' of Thomas Hartlage at Psychedelic Music in Germany), that an unknown but unique and genuinely talented musician got the chance to be heard.

I remember commenting all those years ago on the likelihood of commercial success for these albums, stating "that the world was not yet ready for Mick Stevens". Well it seems, thirty years on, that it just might be.

John Theedom
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