

Interview - Blues In Britain magazine, 2015

When Robbie McIntosh started out playing guitar, as a schoolboy, he was used to addressing male teachers as 'Sir'. Right now, Robbie is back in 'Sir' territory as guitarist in Sir Tom Jones touring band. He has previously played in the band of another knight of the realm in Sir Paul McCartney, so he is certainly familiar with some especially celebrated musicians, and more than these two Sirs.

Robbie has his own band, The Robbie McIntosh Band, of whom more will be said, but just how did Robbie come to work with two knighted household names and a series of other top notch musical performers? We asked Robbie to tell us about his life and climbing the musical ladder.

First, though, let's start at the top, with those knights.

1. What is it like touring with Sir Tom Jones and what was it like in Sir Paul McCartney's band? How different are the two experiences?

We jammed a lot more at rehearsals with Sir Paul. I was also much more familiar with Sir Paul's material having grown up a big Beatles fan. I do however enjoy playing Sir Tom's material now. All the material from 'Spirit In The Room' is very rootsy. Both Paul and Tom's material, across their whole careers, is very eclectic which suits me!

2. Later this year you'll be playing live in your own right solo or as a duo? What does that experience give you away from the limelight of the household names?

Remembering lyrics mainly!! Doing all the singing, putting my own set list together also. I suppose being the front man brings with it many other responsibilities.

3. Obviously when you are in the band of a star, you aren't playing your own music. What is your own music? How has your own sound developed down the years?

I think my own music, like many of the people I have worked with, is quite varied. I wouldn't class myself as a 'Blues' artist necessarily. A lot of my influence is blues and country based but there's a bit of pop and rock rolled in there too. Over the years I've maybe concentrated more on writing songs than writing material that is just a vehicle for my guitar playing. I like to think my guitar playing 'serves the song' rather than the other way round.

4. How and when do you write songs?

I usually have a few ideas which have backed up over time and then finish them off late at night. Most of the lyrics come at the same time as the music. I never write a tune and then fit lyrics to it or vice versa. I might tinker with the lyrics in the final stage, but usually I write both at the same time.

5. You have your own band, The Robbie McIntosh Band. What kind of music does that play?

A heady cocktail of blues, country and rock!

6. As the leader of The Robbie McIntosh Band, how do you do things? Are you very assertive over the direction and content of the music, or is it a blend of the ideas and skills of the band?

I play bass and occasionally drums on my records so I can be fussy when we get to play live. In the studio I collaborate mainly with Stephen Darrell Smith and Paul Beavis on the albums. I don't really have to tell them what to play that much, just the general direction that I want, so I rely on their skills, certainly when we record together.

7. You have played with several more well-known names, for instance, Norah Jones and The Pretenders. What did you take from those experiences?

Being sympathetic to the song and the lyric. The songwriter ultimately should have the last word. That's something I've learnt whether playing in the studio or live.

8. What contributions to other people's recordings are you proudest of and why?

Very proud of the Talk Talk records that I played on because they are so unique. Mark Hollis is a genius. Really enjoyed the stuff I did with Thea Gilmore as it's got that edgy country feel that I like and the songs are great too. I suppose any good singer-songwriter is going to be rewarding because you know the finished article is going to be quality.

I loved the 'Unplugged' album with Paul McCartney as we did it completely unplugged. No pickups on the acoustic guitars; all on mic. It was hard, but it sounds great and we played some of my favourite old Beatles/Paul songs. 'I've Just Seen A Face', 'Junk', 'We Can Work It Out', etc.

9. You play alongside keyboard player Paddy Milner in Sir Tom Jones' band. How long have you known him?

I've known Paddy since he was a teenager and he used to play with my blues band the 'Steamer Ducks'. We played in and around Weymouth. Great player. Was a really mature player even when very young. His future as a top player was never in doubt!!

10. What music of your own are you proudest of and why?

I don't want to appear conceited, but, all of it, for different reasons. I wouldn't have put it out otherwise! My 'Unsung' and 'Hush Hour' albums show that I'm not just a rock guitarist so I'm proud of them for that reason. I also think all my albums are quite varied and don't get boring stylistically. The industry these days tends to force people to specialize to one style to make it marketable. I'm afraid I don't concur. I appreciate the purity of musical style and tradition, but at the same time I feel no shame in mixing it all up a bit.

11. Tell us the story of The Robbie McIntosh Band.

I formed the band in the late 90s. I wanted to play my songs with some of my favorite musicians, so I got Paul Beavis, Pino Palladino, Melvin Duffy (pedal Steel) and Mark Feltham (harmonica) and formed a band. I thought having blues harmonica and pedal steel in the band would give the band an interesting twist, enabling us to straddle blues and country while still retaining an edge. Pino's playing just speaks for itself. So musical!! Really special! I knew Pino loved playing with Paul so it all seemed right. We recorded 'Emotional Bends', did some gigs and took it from there. Whenever Mark couldn't make a gig, Peter Hope-Evans would do it and actually they both ended up playing on 'Wide Screen', my next album. Pino was busy with D'Angelo and many others, so he didn't play

bass on Wide Screen (I did) and my dear friend Matt Irving took over the bass duties live. Matt played on one track on Wide Screen.

It wasn't long after this that I joined Norah Jones's band, so everything went onto the back burner. The next band album was 'Turn Up For The Books', after a long hiatus!!

Stephen Darrell Smith has co-produced all of my records and played keys too, so he is now part of the band. Paul Beavis still plays on most of my stuff. He's my favorite drummer!! Steve Wilson plays bass with me now. He's one of my best mates. We get on like a house on fire and he plays great too. Funny guy, so a good foil for me when we play live. Peter Hope-Evans is one of the most instinctive players, on harmonica and Jews harp and vibs, I've ever worked with. Blues royalty!! I just let him do his thing!! He's kind and funny and it's a real joy and an honour to have him in my band.

12. If you weren't a full-time, professional musician, what would you do?

Teach biology maybe? I didn't go to university but if I had, that's what I would have done. Still have an interest in science.

I drove a tipper lorry for six months when I was nineteen delivering sand and cement. Loved that!! I was as fit as a butcher's dog!! Apart from that I've never taken time away from music!!

13. Has the kind of original music you play changed down the years?

I think it's mellowed a bit. The last song I put out is called 'Seeking Beauty' It's downloadable from Bandcamp. It's very mellow!!

14. Who are your great inspirations?

So many!! Lowell George, Bob Dylan, John Martyn, BB King, Freddie King, Albert King, NRBQ, James Taylor, Joni Mitchell, Aretha Franklin, Ry Cooder, The Beatles, Los Lobos, The Rolling Stones, John Scofield, Mississippi John Hurt, Blind Boy Fuller, Chet Atkins, Count Basie, Neil Young, Randy Newman. I listen to a lot of classical music too. Delius, Stravinsky, Mozart, Bach. Sounds pretentious I know but I really do.

I listen to everything!!

15. Whose band that you haven't played in would you most like to do so if the chance arose?

Bob Dylan.

16. What new music of your own can we look forward to?

I will try and get another album finished this year for release in early 2016.

17. What are the nicest things people have said to you as a musician?

After my very short audition with Norah Jones she said, 'Robbie, will you be in our band?' That felt good. John Mayer saw me play with Paul McCartney when he was 13.

He told me he enjoyed the gig so that was nice. Apart from that, 'Thank you, it sounds great, here's some money' will usually suffice!!

18. You are a multi-instrumentalist. What is your favourite instrument and why?

I am trying to learn to play the tuba although I'm making very slow progress! If we could have afforded a drum kit when I was young I probably would have been a drummer.

I love playing drums and have a great kit. Still love playing guitar though really. As my dear friend Ken Watkins says, 'Guitars is best!!!'

19. Where in the world have you found the most appreciative or knowledgeable audiences?

German audiences are great, very knowledgeable.

20. What are your favourite tour items that you would hate not to have packed?

Well now, my iPad as I've got so many books on it! I could read non-stop for years if I needed to!! Entire works of Charles Dickens, Richard Brautigan stories, several Adrian Mole diaries, P G Wodehouse, tons of stuff! My Staedtler 0.7 mm propelling pencil, (very useful), swimming trunks, some tea bags (Clipper organic, PG Tips or Barry's).

21. Do you have any guitars with a particular story to them?

My Fender Telecaster was bought for me new in 1977 by my grandfather. My previous guitar was stolen outside Dingwalls, so he lent me the money to buy a new Tele. I paid him back £10 a week. That guitar is very special to me obviously, so I will never sell it. I did most of my stuff with The Pretenders on that guitar. I recently got Wilko Johnson to sign the back. I used to go and see the Feelgoods in the 70's with him and thought it would be cool. Lovely man!

22. If someone wanted to hear the most essential Robbie McIntosh songs or album, what would they be and why?

'Unsung' or 'Turn Up For The Books', my first and most recent albums.