

Biography By Martyn Wroe...(2000)

'A depth, resonance and emotional punch, which belies comparisons.' Q Magazine At first glance Martyn Joseph is (just) another gifted singer songwriter. First impressions are there to mislead of course: Joseph's ambition is broader than entertainment, deeper than commerce. Some musician's want to move your feet, some just want to move you: Martyn Joseph wants to move heaven and earth. Somewhere back in the middle distance Martyn Joseph emerged from the pack and we began to notice. For a moment there he might have been a pop-star, certainly a protest-singer, a balladeer now and then, a Celtic rock star before they were in vogue, a folk troubadour and then, just, Martyn Joseph. Darkness on the edge of Cardiff. If he has a reputation onstage as a raconteur, extemporising lyrics to fit every occasion, his songs have always been infected with a discreet but defiant god bothering, music more interested in the forgotten than the remembered, the way things might be than the way they have become. It is less the ghost of Tom Jones than a holy ghost music, an aching and a longing for another way, another place, where you can treasure the questions that have no answers. Depending on where he was at the time, some of these songs have had a fortune spent on colouring them in while others are the second-take line drawings from the home studio or Polaroid's snapped live in the back of beyond. The consistency is the voice the place where he stands, from where he chooses to look at life. This is music that articulates a yearning for another world that is yet to be born, songs of sorrow acquainted with grief but, nevertheless, melodies carried in sunlight, thunder and rainbows from the same sky. And as his new 'Best Of' collection illustrates, Joseph's work matures with age. If these songs are already word-perfect to fans, in the future they will be by others and taken to new audiences.

You can't keep a good song to yourself. The songs won't stand for it. The Welsh troubadour, who first walked blinking and faintly reluctantly into the spotlight of popular acclaim with his 1992 chart-hit Dolphins Make Me Cry, is a peculiarity: an artist who thinks rock'n roll can be more than the soundtrack of our times, that maybe, just maybe, it can change not just the way we move but the way we think and live and breathe. After building a major nationwide audience in fifteen years of touring, Joseph now has the freedom to call the shots: following two albums with Sony and two with Grapevine, now its Martyn Joseph direct. As he watched with growing intrigue the 24/7 buzz of fan-chat and interaction on his web site, it dawned on him that maybe this was full-circle and it was time again to begin releasing his work on his own Pipe Records. 'The major advantage is complete control and creative freedom: if I write ten songs next week and like them, I'm not dependent on Robbie William's diary or Madonna's film schedule for when it gets released. I can just put them out myself, there is this audience of people who want them.

' That audience was first ignited with a string of chart singles from the hit Sony album 'Being There' - 'Dolphins Make Me Cry,' 'Working Mother' and 'Please Sir.' But after two hit albums and five top fifty songs came a move from Sony, which, inadvertently perhaps, came as a liberation to Joseph's song writing now that chart-success wasn't paramount. Subsequent recordings like 'Full Colour Black and White' and 'Tangled Souls' won acclaim with critics and 'Far From Silent' is set to win more plaudits. Q Magazine praises Joseph's 'thoughtful lyrics ... lungpower aplenty ... and a heart full of breathless emotions.' The Boston Globe lauds this 'fine talent' whose live set is 'a

profound experience.' Occasional song writing partner Tom Robinson hails Joseph as 'one of the most charismatic and electrifying performers in Britain today'. It was Joseph's blend of song writing maturity and passionate performance - plus a cult following worthy of a minor deity - which won him his original major deal. He had long been playing 200 gigs a year, selling out large venues and shifting shop-loads of independently-released recordings. One live, self-financed album 'An Aching and a Longing' sold a massive 30,000 copies - this one never dented the album charts because fans bought it after shows.

The loyalty of this growing audience is a key factor in the decision to go direct. 'I would usually sell to about 10% of the audience,' he remembers. 'With an audience of 800, I might sell 70 to 80 albums. Not a bad living'. In fact music nearly wasn't his living at all. He started playing golf at the age of 10, and by 15, was playing off a handicap of one. When he realised that pro status looked beyond his grasp, the music took over. "I didn't say 'right it's going to be music', I just subconsciously began to put more energy into it. I'd written a few draft songs when I was 12, or 13, played in a school eisteddfod, but never really considered that my vocation would be music. It was a musical childhood, listening to records and learning to play guitar but it wasn't like 'I'm going to be a rock'n'roll singer and try to change the world!'. That came later.

Joseph's songs are often laments for a culture gone awry- but laments seamed with compassion more than judgement, sadness more than anger. Take 'Celebrity' from 'Far From Silent'. 'It's about our futile obsession with fame,' he explains. 'That this is the be all and end all of life, yet it's no secret that the lives of many of these shiny happy people we know so much about - merely because they can sing or perform - appear to be pretty shallow and meaningless..... But we wish for it all the same.' Actually, he admits with a grin, for a while there, a man with horns on his head and slimy fingers seemed to be offering Martyn Joseph all the kingdoms of the world. And he confesses he weighed the offer up for a moment! When 'Dolphins Make Me Cry' garnered rotation radio airplay and climbed the top thirty, Steve Wright predicted it was a Number One. 'What if it had reached the top like he said? It would be easy to fall for the illusion of fame and celebrity, even though in my head I know it's a blind alley.' Still, he adds, there are compensations: 'It's so much easier to get the shopping done.' The other problem, as Joseph freely admits, is that he is congenitally indisposed to composing the kind of happy tunes that dominate daytime radio - and he would have it no other way.

All In The Past, again from Far From Silent co-written with the Liverpoolian poet Stewart Henderson, explores the way our past informs our present, that none of us can build over the ruins of our history. Everything - from a child's upbringing to a country's heritage- affects its present identity. 'Good Man' is not exactly chart-show material either - a eulogy for a friend who took his own life while 'The Good In Me Is Dead' finds a refugee on the Kosovan border looking forlornly for his loved ones in a line of refugees. 'It's a strange business I'm in' he says, almost apologetically. 'I sit at home and try and write meaningful songs that might make a difference and wake up and find Mr Blobby at number one (in 95 song he wrote with Tom Robinson called 'Talk About It In The Morning' was at 41 in the chart whilst Noel Edmond's creation occupied the top slot). I want my songs to drag the listener back into the real world and not to escape it'. 'Song writing is like therapy for me, a way of dealing with the pain, the hurt, the sorrow, the joy, the questions ...' His voice runs out but he adds, '.....and any answers there may be.'

His music is scattered with the stardust motes of hope, illuminating its darker passages throughout. Not exactly answers but certainly the promise that a bleak outlook sometimes gives way to sunnier prospects. People Crazy As Me he calls his 'sermon on the mount', a song about 'how we might live, some principles not rules, just a few old-fashioned precepts that I think we'd all be surprised by.' It sits well with his inclusion of his own darker cover-version of the Joan Osborne modern classic If God Was One Of Us. 'I wish I'd written it, it's a spiritual song for our slightly paranoid millennium era. I love the paradox it poses - what if, what if... it's so unlikely you never think about it, but then what if?' There is light illuminating in All This Time, a song inspired by the silent grandeur and majesty of a trip to the Canadian wilds. 'It humbles you visiting a place like that, anyone with an ego problem needs to backpack through Canada for a while.' He continues: 'I'm finding it can take a lifetime to glimpse how many experiences, hurts, lies, lessons, love and loss make us what we are. Maybe if we can understand that we will never be good enough ..we might just be...'

Joseph may not fit comfortably into our disposal celebrity culture but he wants his work to last longer than three minutes. And anyway, he's a songwriter who thinks that maybe the time for songwriters is returning. 'Maybe 'the song' is coming back, and maybe I'm someone who can help hasten its arrival.' Martyn Wroe

Special guest on tours with Beverly Craven, Chris De Burgh, Clannad, Joan Armatrading, Celine Dion, Mike And The Mechanics, Mike Oldfield, Art Garfunkel, Runrig, Belinda Carlisle, Shirley Bassey, Jools Holland, Suzanne Vega, songwriting collaboration with Tom Robinson.

What they Said...

"Opener Martyn Joseph was a profound experience of his own. He combined edgy protest songs that reached a Phil Ochs intensity at times, but also had a droll sense of humor that kept the audience pleasantly off guard throughout. A fine talent." The Boston Globe

"One of the most charismatic and electrifying performers in Britain today...tough and passionate." Tom Robinson "

I loved working with him. I loved listening to him. I'd love to work with him again, anytime, anyplace.." Janis Ian:

"A depth, resonance and emotional punch, which belies comparison. One of acoustic music's most original voices" Q Magazine

"A burnished voice, intimate manner and unhurried guitar style" The Guardian.

"He creates an intimacy that transforms a cavernous hall into a cosy front room" The Western Mail.

"Martyn sings with such a passion that you feel every ounce of love and pain" The Tip Sheet.

“Somewhere between Chris Rea and Mark Knopfler, with touches of Springsteen grit and Big Country’s social compassion. Accomplished work like this deserves to be heard”. Q magazine.

“Joseph proves that the path to integrity is a celebration not a chore. An artist of enduring worth” Mo Jo