



RICHARD THOMPSON

When it comes to legends, you struggle to find somebody more worthy of the status than Richard Thompson. 50 years since he co-founded the groundbreaking Fairport Convention the certified master has a new acoustic album just out – what better time for a chat?

WORDS: DAN HOBSON PHOTOS: DAVID KAPTEIN

Richard Thompson is undoubtedly one of the greatest guitarists of all time. After essentially inventing British Folk Rock with the legendary Fairport Convention, Thompson is regarded as one of the world's most critically acclaimed and prolific songwriters in history. Thompson's jaw-dropping body of work includes over 40 albums, many Grammy nominations and numerous soundtracks. Myriad artists have recorded his songs over the years: Elvis Costello, REM, Del McCoury, Bonnie Raitt, Patty Lovelace, Los Lobos, Tom Jones, David Byrne, Don Henley, and Robert Earl Keen, to name a few.

Thompson, often dubbed the English Bob Dylan, has received Lifetime Achievement Awards for songwriting on both sides of the Atlantic; from the Americana Music Association in Nashville, the BBC Awards, as well as the prestigious Ivor Novello. He even received an OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 2011 – personally bestowed upon him by Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace.

Having co-founded Fairport Convention in 1967, aged 18, Thompson was the driving force in getting the band to write their own songs. After learning the craft, Thompson was soon Fairport's main writer; quickly earning a reputation as a master of the trade. The influence of those Fairport Convention songs continues to this day, and the band are adored as much now as they ever were.

In 1971, Thompson left Fairport and initially played guitar on British folk-rock albums. He teamed-up with Fairport and folkie veterans,

including drummer Dave Mattacks, singer Sandy Denny, and bassist Ashley Hutchings under the name The Bunch to record *Rock On*. A friend of Denny's, Linda Peters, sang on that album. She married Thompson soon afterward.

After the marriage, Thompson began a decade-long musical partnership with his then-wife Linda. In 1974 the pair converted to Sufism and, following a UK tour, retreated to the English countryside to start a Sufi

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community. They returned in 1978 with *First Light*. After the marriage broke down, Thompson began a glittering solo career, which continues to this day. He has performed for over 30 years as a highly successful artist, who tours both solo acoustic and with his electric trio.

The past two years saw Richard Thompson headlining dates around the world as well as co-headlining shows with Emmylou Harris and Rodney Crowell as well as the Americanarama Tour, with Bob Dylan, Wilco, and My Morning

Jacket. This culminated with Dylan himself covering Thompson's classic song '1952 Vincent Black Lightning'.

Thompson's genre defying mastery of both acoustic and electric guitar continue to earn him massive new fans and a place as one of the most distinctive virtuosos in folk rock history.

With 2017 being the 50th anniversary since Fairport Convention was formed, and with *Acoustic Classics II* just out, we thought it was high-time we caught up with this genuine, bona fide legend.

Where are you now and what are you up to?

Err... where am I? I'm in New Jersey [laughs] just getting ready for an acoustic guitar and songwriting camp up near Woodstock, New York, called Frets and Refrains.

So, *Acoustic Classics II* is just out. What can we expect from the album?

On *Acoustic Classics I*, I re-recorded songs that were very popular from the catalogue, some of which had been recorded on electric, some of them were quite old, and it felt like a good time to revive them. That album was very popular, so this one is more of the same thing.

Where was the album recorded?

I did it at home, in my garage. I have a small studio at home. It's just a little setup, but I've got nice mics and it sounds quite good.

We reviewed it in the last issue of *Acoustic* and thought it was brilliant.

Oh, fantastic. Just occasionally there's things like dogs barking and planes going over on it, but apart from that, I do think it is a great recording [laughs].



Fairport Convention, backstage at Top of the Pops in 1969



Are you planning to release any more records in the near future?

There is an album that's coming out called *Acoustic Rarities*, which will be an album of previously unrecorded songs. In some cases, my first performance of a song that may have been written by somebody else. Stuff like that, odds and ends. It'll be an interesting record.

Will that be out later this year, then?

Yeah, I think so.

You're regarded by many as one of the best guitar players of all time, both on electric and acoustic. Which of them do you prefer playing, though?

[Laughs] Personally, I refute those claims. I really enjoy the fact that I play acoustic and switch to electric. It's two completely different things and in some ways hard to compare. With acoustic guitars I'm usually playing solo, so I have to cover more bases. Acoustic is a more full-on way of playing, rather than electric with the band, where I'm just playing single lines and solo.

You've been hailed as one of the greatest songwriters of all time; I think the *LA Times* said you were the best since Dylan...

[Laughs] I might argue with that one as well!

Tell us about the songwriting process for you.

It's very hard to analyse the process. In terms of what you write about, sometimes songs are based on something quite specific in your life and you try and get that across faithfully. Other times, songs can really just be stories; things that you conjure up out of your imagination. But then sometimes you realise that the fictional ones are usually about you in the end anyway.

Interesting! Do you set time aside to write or do you just try and capture flashes of inspiration when they come?

I really try to work at it. If you wait around for lightning to strike, you can wait for a long time. So I do work at it and I do try to set time aside when I'm on the road to have writing bursts, you know, and I try to keep a notebook with me all the time so as I'm travelling I can jot ideas down.

It's 50 years since Fairport Convention was formed. Has the time flown by?

It's scary - 50 years is ridiculous! I've thought a few times that it was all over and we'd all want to retire. But here we are, still going. I'm proud of the band, I think it was groundbreaking and some of the records that we made have stood the test of time. It will be a good celebration

at Cropredy in August and it'll be nice to see everybody and to celebrate this monumental anniversary together.

Since leaving Fairport at 21 years old, you've had a very long and prolific career. If you had to choose just one highlight, could you do it? And if so, what would it be?

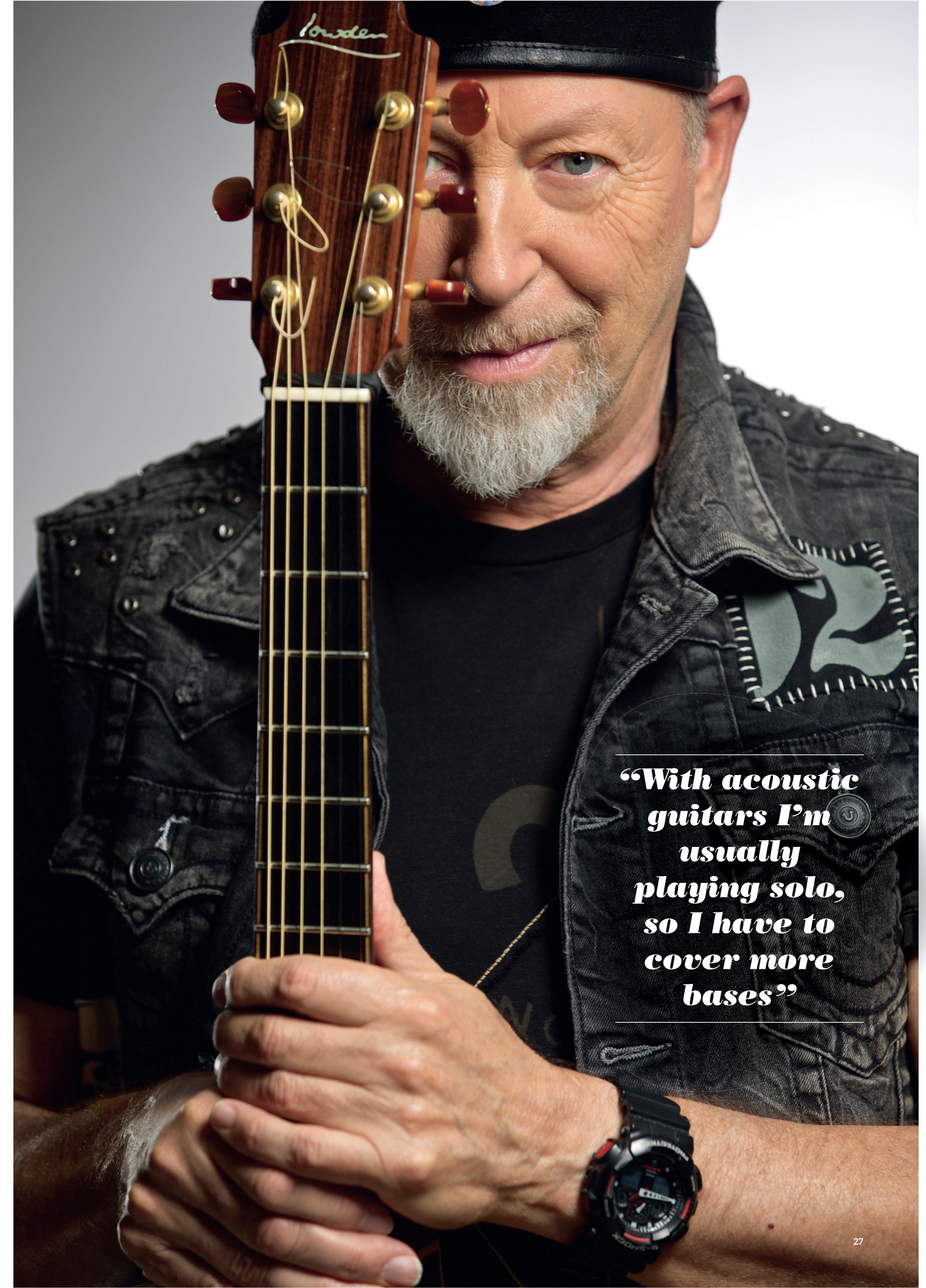
Oooh, tricky. Hmm... Well I did a festival a couple of years ago with Bob Dylan and he played one of my songs and I thought that was pretty much a highlight.

You've had quite a few awards for your music over the years too, including an OBE in 2011. Which award are you most proud of, and why?

Gosh, I don't know. All awards are like a pat on the back. As an artist you need a small amount of praise. Just enough to say 'well done, carry on'. Being critiqued isn't necessarily the truth, but being praised isn't either. I really don't live my life by awards. I try to have my own idea of the value of what I'm doing.

How did you first get into playing the guitar?

I always wanted a guitar, from about the age of five. Probably from about Elvis' time, I thought that was just fantastic. The guitar was just the cool thing to have, you know, the cool thing to play - the cool thing to pose with



“With acoustic guitars I’m usually playing solo, so I have to cover more bases”

as well. I finally got one when I was about 10 and I got hold of Bert Weedon's *Play in a Day*, the famous guitar instruction manual that everybody started on. I had an older sister, five years older: when she started dating, her boyfriends would come round and I'd get free guitar lessons from them.

How did you come to get your first guitar?

My dad was a bit of a lapsed guitarist. He got this old Spanish guitar and did it up a bit for the house. He was going to play a bit as was my sister. But I kinda commandeered it and things just went from there.

When you first got into playing the guitar, who were your musical influences?

My dad had lots of records; jazz, Django Reinhardt, things like that, which I was listening to at a young age. When rock 'n' roll came along, my sister had Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly records, which I loved. Then The Shadows came along, as well as some amazing slide guitar players, which were a great inspiration for me.

You're doing a lot of acoustic solo shows over the next few months. What's your live setup?

I use a Lowden signature model, with a Sunrise guitar pickup. Inside the guitar is a condenser mic, I can't remember the brand, I'm sorry; it



was made by a guy in Nashville who doesn't make them anymore. That goes through a two-channel preamp called a gas cooker, made by a company called Rig Farm Studios. Because that's a tube preamp that warms up the sound a lot.

Any favourites from your personal collection?

I don't have many acoustics, actually. I've got an old beaten-up Martin R-18, which I've had since the 1960s. It's not road-worthy right now as it's got so many cracks in it. Mostly I play Lowdens and have five of his guitars. One I keep for the studio, which sounds great, and a couple of those for stage. I've got a Gibson J-200 which is nice sometimes for recording. I've got a few other handmade guitars too.

Finally, given your distinguished career, what advice would you give to readers?

The most important thing is individuality. There are a lot of good guitar players out there. The more you can sound like yourself - the more you're going to stand out. There are so many copy cats and imitators of existing styles, you have to bring something individual to the table. So, think about the direction of your music and how you can be different. ■

Acoustic Classics II is out now

Info: www.richardthompson-music.com

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