

Robin Mills met Kirsty McGee at Wayford, near Crewkerne



© Kirsty McGee Photograph by Robin Mills

I grew up in the Peak District in a tiny village called Mill Brow. We lived in what had once been a textile workers' cottage. It had a big garden and was surrounded by open countryside which was great for a wild and free childhood. As a bit of a solitary child, with no siblings, I got seriously into reading. From an early age I realised there were two escape routes from everyday life: one was books, and the other was nature.

My mum was a primary school teacher, and my dad was a travelling salesman in the textile industry. Mum is very creative, an amazing gardener, and she's been a very big influence on my life. My childhood was constantly filled with creative activities.

My love of books led me to take a degree in English Literature at Sheffield, and then a master's degree in modern and contemporary fiction. I was interested in radical fiction at the time, anything which was pushing the boundaries of the mainstream, particularly American writers like Angela Carter, Steinbeck, and the beat writers like Kerouac.

After University I became an obsessive hitchhiker. Everywhere I went, even for quite short journeys, I would hitch. It was because I was so in love with stories; every driver had a new story for me. For 10 or 12 years hitching became my identity. I think I wanted to be Sissy Hankshaw, the female hitchhiker with enormous thumbs in Tom Robbins' novel "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues". Eventually the master's degree finished off my relationship with literature, perhaps because I'd absorbed a surfeit

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of words and needed to make room for something else.

After university I went into journalism, working for a publication called the Ethical Consumer magazine based in Manchester. I had become a vegetarian at the age of 9, and as I got older had become interested in politics which related to respecting the rights of everything living. The magazine work involved researching companies and where they stood in respect of human and animal rights, and their relationships with oppressive regimes. The business was run as a co-op, so we did everything from deciding what went into the magazine to mailing out the envelopes. It's nice that the magazine's still going. As their Arts Editor I went to the Newbury bypass site and stayed as a guest on the Go-Tan camp. I also went to the Schumacher College at Dartington, studying under Norwegian philosopher of ecology Arne Naess, who had founded the Deep Ecology movement.

This was the time of the road protests such as the one at Newbury; working in Manchester I became involved in the Manchester Airport campaign, for a while living in a tree, hitching to work wearing a climbing harness, and living as part of a commune of like-minded people. It all seemed perfectly normal.

My parents had always encouraged me to play music. I played flute from a very young age, reaching Grade 5 at the age of 9 or 10. I was always exploring music and listening to lots of American songwriters. My dad would buy records and play great songs to me, artists like Joni Mitchell. I had begun to write songs and occasionally played at open mic events, playing alongside bands like Elbow. By 2000 I found I'd had enough of journalism and needed a change, so I went to St Ives in Cornwall where I lived for a while in a friend's beach hut.

The hut was amazing, half built out of driftwood above the fantastic beach at Hayle. I was lucky to get a job in a health food shop run by two musicians, which came with a flat above it. Whilst living in Cornwall I played a festival in Carlisle where I met someone who became my manager and agent. He worked hard to establish me in folk clubs but, with my roots in American music and many of the

clubs favouring traditional music, I never really felt like I fitted in. There are amazing interpreters out there, but I have always preferred to make new songs.

After a year in Cornwall, I returned to Manchester where I stayed for 20 years. I lived in a flat in the centre of the city, enjoying what was quite a radical community, and began to tour. In 2007 I was seeing someone who became my musical partner. We began publishing and releasing our own music, not wanting to work with record labels any more.

We began working in Europe, which became the mainstay of my work for the next 8 or 9 years, touring in Germany, Belgium and Holland. Audiences in Europe seemed more accepting that our musical genre, which we called Hobopop—the band is the Hobopop Collective—couldn't really be pigeonholed. In the UK there's a tendency to label music with identities, like folk, indie, punk, etc, and that may be a reason why we didn't catch on here. The music we created had no fixed genre—hence the tongue in cheek reference to hobos—but drew inspiration from the freedom to travel.

I've been very lucky to have worked with many wonderful people whose instrumental skills would sometimes make me feel like I had a Ferrari but was driving it at 5mph, amazing musicians like Nick Drake's producer John Wood, a bassist and drummer who went on to play with jazz band Go Go Penguin and a reeds player and drummer who now works with Beth Gibbons.

Since my teens I've loved Tom Waits' music, particularly his ballads; his is a one-man genre. Marc Ribot, a New York guitar legend who plays with Waits, worked with me on my album *Those Old Demons* in 2014 which had to be one of the high points of my career. That, alongside getting my song Sandman in Danny Boyle's film *Trance* (2013) which led to a trip to Hollywood.

Sadly, the Covid lockdown, then Brexit, really killed off the European touring scene. Not being able to keep it all on the boil affects everything as a performer, your voice, your playing ability, and confidence. I also suffer from Prosopagnosia which is an inability to recognise faces, and it's

certainly impacted my confidence as it's often hard to tell whether I have met people before.

Although I've never found playing live easy, once on stage I love singing and performing. A singer-songwriter is perhaps a contradiction in terms, as an old friend once pointed out to me. To be a songwriter you need to be vulnerable and sensitive, but to be a singer you probably need the opposite. It's a hard balance to get right.

Living in the centre of Manchester near Moss Side was sometimes a bit edgy, although once you got to know people you felt they'd look out for you. But I began to feel hemmed in by the growing skyscrapers surrounding my flat, and the journey to see my mum who lives in the South West seemed to get longer. During lockdown I lost my dad which was a huge blow for me, and it felt like the right time to make a change. It took a long time to find a house, but after much searching I found this cottage. It couldn't be more different to city-centre Manchester, but it's lovely to have a garden full of life, swarming bees, brilliant neighbours, night time silence with only hooting owls and starlit skies, and my mum only half an hour away. Of course there are things I miss; as a foodie and having been vegan for 30 years, I miss the great Indian food that was always easy to find. But there are compensations. I can swim in the sea, and I have peace and quiet, something I realise I needed after long-term touring, and losing my dad.

I did a few gigs in Holland earlier this year, but found out how much more difficult it is after Brexit. I can do a little work in Europe but now there's a lot more paperwork and cost involved in jumping from one country to the next. I've played at the Square and Compass at Worth Matravers for more than a decade, and it was there I met Rick Foot. We toured together this spring, which we both loved, his double bass playing complementing my jazz-inflected songs. These days my work is much influenced by the American Songbook. We have a few upcoming gigs, at The Square in November, then at Chetnole Village Hall in February 2025. Maybe I've come full circle, returning to country life. I think I'll really enjoy playing in village halls and pubs. 