

**QUESTIONS FOR PHIL RILEY ON UK RELEASE OF THE BLESSING TREE
(STRATHAN RECORDS-slightly updated and amended)**

When and where were you born?

April 13th 1954 in Gateshead , Co. Durham.

What are your musical influences, both generally and in the Celtic sphere?

Too many! Sting, Bonny Raitt, Elbow, Paul Simon , The Beatles ,Genesis ,Classical composers, Crowded House, Enya , Clannad, The Chieftains, Ralf McTell , Martin Carthy, Mike Oldfield, Jon Mark.

Are you a trained or self-taught musician?

A bit of both; some formal piano training, but not 'til I was 18 and too infatuated with the instrument to restrict myself to the weeks classical piece-must have driven my old teacher crazy. I was always more fascinated by what I could find myself, which my teacher saw as a curse, but has since proved a blessing. Also had 2 years formal drum/percussion training when I was a student. I would have to say though that the vast majority of my skills in playing and arranging/producing are self-taught and continue to develop.

What instruments do you play?

Drums/percussion, Piano/synth keyboards, guitar, concertina and some woodwind e.g. tin whistle, , harmonica & mouth organ.

How do you approach writing music/lyrics? Is it an easy process?

I'm lucky, in that I'm able to 'write to order' in all sorts of styles. I compose on the keyboard, usually. Inspiration can be from a lyric or percussion loop; sometimes a particular sound suggests a melody or chord structure. Writing for White Cloud gave me a lot more freedom than I'd had as a pop/rock songwriter. I was able to choose a palette of sounds that really appealed to me and forget the tight 3-minute radio song format – if it sounded orchestral, or developed over 8 minutes and explored different genres, that's ok. As long as it takes the listener on some sort of journey emotionally and/or lyrically and has strong melodic content I know I'm on the right track. I find lyric writing difficult and time consuming, but intensely satisfying.

Describe your personality in a few sentences.

An unusual blend of the romantic and the hopelessly sensible (probably the combination that allows me to start albums from a kernel of inspiration and go on to finish them 6 to 9 months later in a mass of practical, tightly arranged detail!). Strong sense of humour. Good listener. Can be moody ,but never for more than 5 minutes at a time. I like most people. Working my way slowly out of a Yorkshire upbringing based around 'see all , hear all, say nowt' !

Do you have any hobbies?

I love binge reading for hours when I get the chance e.g. David Gemmel, Stephen King, Michael Connolly, Bernard Cornwell and Lee Child, satisfy my need for swash buckling , straightforward light reading.

Do you have a family?

Wife , Jane (NB: N O T Jayne Elleson) is in Banking – we met at university in Manchester .Daughter Lindsey is a Registrar. Also a Border Terrier called Bella

Can you give us a very quick potted history of your life/career since leaving school e.g. jobs done, the development of your music career?

Early years on Tyneside, then mostly in York .

Have always been involved in music from early age. Started in bands at age 15 on Yorkshire Working Men's Club Circuit, first as guitarist in pop band, then Drummer backing other acts,comedians etc.Played concertina in folk bands.

BSc Biology/Biochemistry (Manchester)

QC chemist in malting Company in Burton –on -Trent

*Came to NZ in 1977. Was Brewer and Plant Chemist for a Wellington company for 3 years, then did teacher training for graduates and started teaching at secondary level(Bio,Science,Music) while playing in bands at night and on weekends. Moved into recording industry more when I got into Synths and the technology of recording. Eventually resigned from teaching to set up my own commercial recording studio. Met Jon Mark when he was involved in producing the band I was writing and playing for. Jon asked me to do an album for **White Cloud** in 1993/94 which led to the series of Celtic and World music albums. I had been working with Jayne Elleson as a studio session vocalist and we had a series of pop and rock song collaborations .When Jon Mark suggested 'Celtic' it gave us the opportunity to indulge our love of harmony and add the spiritual emotional quality to our music.*

I have continued writing and producing for NZ ,Australian and UK artists, composing for TV, recording and editing for projects as diverse as the New Zealand Symphony Orchestra and children's music for schools. Every day is different ,musically, so it's a wonderful life ,as the film title goes !

When did you move to New Zealand and why?

1977.Jane's family were here. The UK was not a good place for new graduates at the time.

What is better or worse about New Zealand when compared to the UK e.g. weather, people's attitudes etc? Is there anything you miss about Britain?

Could write a book on what is good and bad about NZ , but the 'Good' chapters would be much longer than the 'Bad'. I do miss York and the historical aspects of Britain. In NZ 100 years old is ancient history. I miss friends and family , obviously ,and the countryside I grew up in.

Are you involved in other aspects of the music industry besides composition for your own projects e.g. producing albums for other artists; composing for specific outside projects such as

film scores?

As I said above , most of my time is filled up with these projects . Albums of my own like ‘the Blessing Tree ‘ are my luxury secret indulgence. Haven’t scored a major film yet ,but would love the opportunity !

How did Jayne and yourself meet and end up collaborating together on musical projects?

Obviously The Blessing Tree is an album with a very strong Celtic flavour throughout - where did this spring from, was it in response to what the record label wanted, a joint decision with them or totally from Jayne and yourself?

My own roots are Celtic (family originally from County Cavan).Grew up playing Planxty, Chieftains, Horselips and English folk harmony stuff like Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span. Jayne and I were both admirers of Clannad and Enya school of Celtic harmony .When the record company asked for ‘something’ , we sort of turned in on ourselves to see what would come out when there was no ‘agenda’ . I think we were as surprised as the record company at what was painted on the inside .It feels very natural to both of us that it falls under the Celtic banner.

Please tell us a bit about the musicians on the album

Jon Mark (acoustic guitar)

Legendary guitarist/writer/producer . Started with Marianne Faithful (wrote many of her hits and was her guitarist).Went on to Jon Mayall band ,then formed Mark /Almond Band.Long successful career in US before moving to NZ and forming White Cloud Label.

Gary Taylor (electric guitar)

Talented guitar and keyboard player.Some of the amazing creamy pads on the album are not Synth.They’re Gary using his telecaster guitar through a Korg A2 FX machine .

Bob Bickerton (Irish pipes)

Probably NZs top Celtic piper , from Uilleann pipes to wooden flute. Recording artist in his own right.

Keiran Newell (Irish whistle)

Gigging musician based in Wellington with fastest fingers this side of the Pacific !Also superb Mandolin player.

Gavin Duncan (fiddle)

Just managed to record Gavin on album before he left for Canada ,where he now works in radio.

Mick McKenna (Bodhran)

Irish through and through. Ball of energy who was too loud to be recorded in normal booth-Had

to rig a mic in the control room to let him 'do his thing' .Has collection of nearly 50 bodhrans.

Robert Kirk (backing vocals)

Kiwi songwriter , now based in Australia who kindly agreed to add his amazing baritone voice to the low harmonies in Spin The Circle Down. Also outstanding guitarist.

Peter Fellin (violin solos)

Virtuoso violinist from Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Parts were recorded in Australia then sent back to NZ on ADAT for editing in to place.

Michael Atkinson (violin arrangements)

One of Australia's top film and TV composers. Also a White Cloud artist. I was over the moon when Michael agreed to write the 2 violin arrangements , based only on my rough guide on ADAT and a quick phone conversation . Two of my own personal highlights from the album.

How long did it take to record The Blessing Tree?

Album was actually recorded in two halves, over about 8 months.

Where did you record the album?

All tracking done at Life of Riley (my own studio) except the violin parts. Mixed at UCA studio in Wellington by David Antony Clark ,ace engineer , friend and fellow White Cloud artist.

Please tell us a bit about the ideas, significance etc behind each song on the album

Spin the Circle Down

Sort of a John Barley-Corn idea. Started from lyrical idea about reincarnation and regeneration of seasons. ie If I've lost him then let me die so we can meet more quickly the next time the circle comes around.

(2) Breton Drum

Was originally an instrumental idea that evolved from a picture in my head of a girl dressed in borrowed boots and ragged uniform, with her hair shaved off ,trying to find her lover by following him to war disguised as a drummer boy. The front was probably the hardest section for Jayne to sing, as it is so exposed, and she was ill at the time we were recording the track. She nailed it !! We thought the 'ancient Breton' words set the mood and the period for the story, making it a bit more mysterious and magical.

(3) Come Silver Moon

A blend of a piano idea and a lyrical idea brought to life by some stunning harmony vocals and 'that violin'

(4) When I Dream

Lyrics were worked backwards from the phrase 'This I Dream'. Music was based at first around the Piz. Strings sound that flows through the song.

(5) Between The Shadows

I wanted to combine the beautiful sound of Jayne's multi-layered vocals with harmony Irish whistle and the heart beat sound you can hear under-pinning the song.

(6) Benediction

A peaceful spiritual piece that always suggested to me the blessing or benediction of a young girl under a giant oak somewhere pagan ,yet Christian. The words evolved from that picture.

(7) The Chalice

Piano and uilleann pipes,with Jayne and I in support.

(8) Sanctus

Starts with me in classical mood and tries to capture the emotions , if not the words of a spiritual awakening, though not in a churchy sort of way.The lyrical language pulls the listener to a less ordinary place, I hope.

(9) Slow Runs My Heart

The whole song came from a few lines of poetry I wrote after reading a story about the Grail. Tried to write the longing and sorrow of parted lovers into the music arrangement.

(10) Coventry Lullaby

We were both really keen to Celtic-ise my favourite early carol. A very powerful traditional song whose roots are lost , but seems to talk to everyone.This was played on NZ classical FM and promptly went to No. 3 in Classical charts over here !

(11) Pictish Girl

Another single verse poetry idea that became fleshed out into a song .Children were often given as a kind of hostage to other tribes, to be brought up among them and ensure the good behaviour of the family back home. I imagined a wild girl sent to live among a more sophisticated people.

(12) And Soon The Day Will Fade Away

Jon Mark suggested we wrap up the album by returning to a tiny part of 'Come Silver Moon' and perhaps a small reminder that the only constant is change, and all good things must end .

The only track on the album that you did not write/co-write was Coventry Lullaby/Carol. Why did you decide to include this particular song?

Where do you get the inspiration for your songs?

I don't usually know where the exact place is .I don't consciously base my work on any one source . It's out there (or in there) somewhere and I make a good try at pulling the idea out whole .Like most writers I guess I only ever capture a small part of the colours in my head. The rest disappear as you try to make them concrete.

Which are your favourite tracks on the album and why?

Please explain the theory and practice behind the language you have created for several of the tracks on the album i.e. Breton Drum, Sanctus and Benediction?

Sorry-please use email explanation.

Do Jayne and yourself ever perform live? Have you ever performed songs from The Blessing Tree?

We're both performers but never of the Blessing Tree Music.We would love to do the album material live to the right audience.

Please tell us a bit about your other recent albums i.e. the ones before and after The Blessing Tree recorded for White Cloud. Do you think there is a common structure running throughout these projects or are they totally different?

Celtic Visions and Voices was the egg from which The Blessing Tree and other works eventually hatched .Full of emotional vocals ,but not regimented into actual lyrics ,as we were asked to keep within the Ambient nature of the label at that time.

A Pattern of Lands is more eclectic and World music in content ,but still contains elements of the first album. There are even a few recognisable words creeping in, in English and Arabic, with NZ Maori, Australian, Flamenco etc. musical references.

The Blessing Tree returned to the feel of the first album, but this time we were given the freedom to add song structures and lyrics to the album

Since the BT I have recorded several albums for White Cloud; Secret Egypt, with Huda Sabour,a World Music album hybrid of Arabic and western feels ,a collaboration album (Mark, Clark and Riley) and The Challis and the Changeling with Jayne Elleson, which is a more instrumentally based album with some vocals in the style of the first album .

We understand that you are currently working on a new album which is more oriented towards the Celtic mainstream market. Is this album really the one Jayne and yourself have always wanted to make i.e. letting your hair down and with no restrictions in structure, or is it an attempt to break into the commercial mainstream Celtic/pop market?

I would say it's mostly a letting our hair down sort of album.

As it's more commercial than the White Cloud material it's a return to our roots but taking with us all the good things from the B.T. If people enjoy the Harmony , melody and emotional story telling of the BT , they'll find all those elements in the new work plus the natural evolutionary movement on from that point to where we are in now.

What do you want to achieve, music wise and personally, in the future?

I think we'd like to continue making albums that move people in some way.Live shows are definitely on the agenda. We'd like to take the music out to more people and see how far we can take it. I'd like to spend more time making our own albums rather than making music for someone else .I'm sure Jayne would too.

QUESTIONS FOR JAYNE ELLESON

Hi there Jayne - many thanks for taking the time and trouble to answer our questions. As with Phil if there are any you don't want to answer please just skip over them.

Brian Reid
Strathan Music
Scotland, UK (strathan@btclick.com)
14 February 2002

When and where were you born?

What are your musical influences, both generally and in the Celtic sphere?

Are you a trained or self-taught singer?

Do you play any musical instruments?

Describe your personality in a few sentences.

Do you have any hobbies?

Do you have a family?

Can you give us a very quick potted history of your life/career since leaving school e.g. jobs done, the development of your music career?

We understand that you were born in New Zealand but are currently living in Australia. Why did you relocate to Australia?

Are you involved in other aspects of the music industry besides your own projects with Philip Riley?

You have a very beautiful, ethereal type of voice which lends itself perfectly to the music in The Blessing Tree. Is this your trademark style or do you have the type of voice that can mould itself to different music styles e.g. pop and rock?

How would you rate The Blessing Tree compared to the other albums you have done with Philip?

Which are your favourite tracks on the album and why?

We understand that you are currently working on a new album which is more oriented towards the Celtic mainstream market. Is this album really the one Philip and yourself have always wanted to make i.e. letting your hair down and with no restrictions in structure, or is it an attempt to break into the commercial mainstream Celtic/pop market?

What do you want to achieve, music wise and personally, in the future?

Do you have anything else to declare e.g. about The Blessing Tree, current projects or anything

else?

Thanks very much for taking the time to answer our questions.