

Interview with Dave Stewart & Barbara Gaskin



L to R : Dave Stewart, Beren Matthews, Barbara Gaskin

Dave Stewart is one of the most important and refined keyboard players in the world. He played with many great bands such as Egg, Hatfield and the North, National Health, and Bruford, and also composed or arranged many of their songs. Barbara Gaskin is a musician who has the most beautiful voice in the world. She also performed with many of Dave's bands as noted above. Since 1981, they have been duo and released many wonderful albums. In 2018, they released their new album "Star Clocks". They are going to come to Japan in 2019, with their new guitarist Beren Matthews. So I interviewed them and they told me about their music, their new album, and message to Japanese fans. I hope you will enjoy this!!

◆ About Japan tour

I'm really looking forward to your concerts. Would you tell me how you will make of the set list on next concerts in Japan?

Barbara (BG) : We're really looking forward to coming to Tokyo in November, Japan is special for us and we're so happy to be invited again. We have been carefully planning our set list for a few months: there will be some new songs that Dave is writing now - not yet recorded - and some older songs that we haven't played live before, or at least not for a long time. And some songs from our newest CD Star Clocks which are still new and fresh for us to play. We ask each other (and this includes our guitarist Beren now) which songs we would like to play, and then we discuss the practicalities of arranging them for live performance. The set lists won't be absolutely fixed until nearer the time.

You have come to Japan several times till now. Do you have any impressive memory in Japan?

BG : I lived in Japan for about a year - after I'd finished university in Canterbury and my first band had split up. I spent a few weeks in Tokyo and Nagano (in the summer) and travelled around a bit,

but mainly I settled in Kyoto where I was able to get some part time jobs. I was fascinated by Japanese language, life and culture - its similarities and its differences from my own - and I wanted to stay as long as my visa allowed. I taught English for a term at Kyoto Women's University and I gave some private English conversation lessons. Quite often I would meet people who were interested in learning how to speak with an English accent.

For a little while I worked with a Canadian friend baking bread in the kitchen of a music club called Jittoku. I believe that club is still going although I think it may have moved to a different building and changed a lot. I also had a job singing in a Kyoto night club - in the Gion district. I remember the Gion Matsuri and how the rainy season started almost immediately afterwards. I remember the hot humid nights when it was difficult to sleep and I used to go for walks in the middle of the night. And I remember the snow. I was renting a six mat room in the Nishijin district with a sento just across the road where I would go to get warm (after I got clean) and then home to sit under the kotatsu. Kyoto made many strong impressions on me and it's a pleasure to remember them. I feel very lucky that I was able to spend that time there visiting shrines and temples and going on journeys into the countryside.

The Japanese people I met were immensely kind to me. Sitting here in my kitchen now I have a strong memory of the atmosphere of the mountains around Kyoto... but I also remember the generosity of the people and the strangeness of the big cities. One impressive memory is when a small earthquake happened while I was in Tokyo: the windows of our building shook and everybody went out onto the street. That is something that never happens in England. I didn't have enough time to visit the coastal areas of Japan, which I slightly regret. Since then Dave and I have visited Japan together to promote our music - I think November will be our seventh visit.

◆ About music of Stewart & Gaskin

Since 1981, you have been releasing many albums on your own label. What is the good point to manage your own music by yourself? Or, what is the difficult point to do?

Dave (DS) : With certain exceptions, the music business operates on the principle of paying musicians as little as possible. In 1981 we were lucky enough to work with Stiff Records, who gave us a fair deal for our singles. At that time, although I had very little money, I was in a position to pay the studio costs for 'It's My Party', which meant we could retain the rights and license the track to companies (such as Stiff and MIDI Inc. in Japan) on a time-limited basis. From that point on, we've always owned our recordings.

In 2009 we began selling our albums through Burning Shed, a distribution company and label run by musicians for musicians. They are ethical, extremely fair-minded and a pleasure to work with. I always advise musicians to control their own music if possible, but it does involve a lot of extra work - you have to organise artwork, manufacturing, publicity, etc. Some musicians don't want to do that, but we've found it works for us.

I think your melodies are always very beautiful and sophisticated. I feel that you are really strict with your music and truly honest to music. So I would like to ask about your motto when you write the songs.

DS : Thank you. My approach is purely instinctive: I have never tried to write music to fit a commercial requirement, it always comes from the heart.

I try to write music which gives me a certain feeling. When I play something I like a lot, I feel a shiver up my back, and that's when I know the musical idea is good. (Whether the music is slow and dreamy or fast and exciting, I get the same shiver !) When this

happens I try to develop the idea into a song by adding more musical sections and looking for a lyrical theme and title. That's a more intellectual process, but it's still guided by feeling. The music comes quickly, but the words take a lot longer. I try not to repeat musical ideas from song to song - I always want to progress creatively, particularly in the realm of harmony.

I hear that you always write the songs from the sound that you like. How do you find those sounds? In other words, what is the inspiration of your songwriting?

DS : Very often, a new sound inspires me to write music. It can be a keyboard patch, a sampled instrument or a rhythm loop; hearing a great sound makes me want to play, and I'll instinctively play in a way that brings out the best tonal and expressive qualities of the sound. Sampled sounds and beats can be exciting, and occasionally funny - I have a collection of samples which make me laugh, and sometimes they find their way into one of our songs.

What are the instruments that you are mainly using now? I think appropriate instruments are required to make good sounds. Which aspect do you place importance on when choosing your instruments?

DS : For writing our new songs I'm mainly using older keyboards such as the Roland Fantom G6, Korg Trinity and Korg 01/W. For live performances I'm planning to play a Korg Kronos and the new Roland Fantom 6 along with some of these older keyboards. These instruments (which are all digital) contain sounds that I enjoy playing and which inspire me to compose. For recording I also use software instruments such as Omnisphere 2, Keyscape and Modartt Pianoteq, and occasionally samples from companies such as Spitfire Audio, Vienna Symphonic Library, Soniccouture, Orchestral Tools, Strezov etc.

Barbara, Do you join songwriting or arrangement with Dave?

BG : All our songs are written by Dave. I join in when the vocal melody is starting to take shape. At this stage Dave has recorded a backing track, sometimes just a sketch or an idea for a chorus or it might be something more finished. He doesn't sing himself so he plays me a melody on a keyboard, gives me some lyrics and I record a guide vocal in my music room. Then he can take it to Beren's studio where they work on a guitar part together. It's the start of a long process where we check keys, alter melodies if necessary and decide on various alternative lyrics.

Eventually, when we've decided what the finished vocal should be, I move my microphone to another room in our house and Dave records me. This is good because I can concentrate on singing and I don't have to think about pressing buttons (and cursing the computer). But we quite often keep some of the vocals I've recorded in my room. Most of the song 'Heavy Heart' from our album "Star Clocks" was recorded by myself very late at night.

Because I record the vocals at a fairly early stage I try hard to make the song work while it's in a relatively simple form. The songs on "Star Clocks" were a fantastic revelation to me when Dave had finished working on them - after I had done the vocals - and they suddenly made complete and beautiful sense. I am really fascinated to know how much of the final versions of the songs he has already imagined from the very beginning... I'm amazed by the finished tracks. Because we spend a lot of time together talking about a great many things and Dave's songs often seem to express some feeling or idea that I've had myself, I like to think I have been an influence on the songs that he writes. An influence perhaps, but apart from the occasional note and word, Dave writes everything.

I think the humour sense is the great charm of Dave's songs. I also love the liner notes that you wrote. What is that humour sense derived from?

DS : Like most human beings, Barbara and I enjoy a good laugh. We grew up with classic English comedy such as The Goons and Monty Python, both of which have a strong streak of surrealism. That continues nowadays with comedians like Vic Reeves and Bob Mortimer. Joking comes naturally to me: I tend to include a few jokes in my liner notes and music articles, and our covers of 'Walking the Dog' and 'Shaking All Over' feature some funny sounds.

Barbara, your voice is always very beautiful. What is the key of keeping such a beautiful voice?

BG : That's very kind of you to say. A lot of the time I feel quite dissatisfied with my voice and I'm always trying to improve it. That's what keeps me practising and trying to sound as good as I can. When I'm recording I get very critical about details so I can make the best decisions on how to sing, and sometimes I get quite upset that I can't make it sound the way I want. But then after a few days I might listen to a recording again and think - oh, that was OK after all. Some singers are really clever at copying other people but I can't do that. So I just admire other singers - often the ones who are the most different

from me - but I accept that my voice is my own. Everyone can sing - and should sing I think, because singing lifts your spirits. If you're embarrassed to sing solo you can sing in a choir. I try not to wear my voice out and strain it by singing too long. I have never had formal singing lessons but I know that you have to be careful about damaging your voice. Nowadays there are hundreds of YouTube videos offering advice about how to sing and keep your voice healthy. Some of them are very, very boring - the ones where people just talk about themselves for hours. But I have found a few that have been really useful for me. You have to search a bit until you find the right ones for you.

What do you think is the most important thing when singing the songs?

BG : I think the most important thing is to try and focus completely on the music and on the people listening, whether they are in the same time and place as you at a concert, or listening to a recording somewhere else and in another time. It isn't always easy to focus on the sound completely in that way and not be distracted, but really the music is the only thing that matters. If you can do that, you can hope that there will be moments when boundaries between people dissolve. Defining music in words is difficult - is it emotion, thought, feeling, etc., etc. But it does have a transcendent power.

On another level, I could say that I think the most important thing when singing is breathing - breathing in the air and breathing out the sound! When I was much younger in my first band (Spirogyra) and we were touring a lot, it occurred to me one night on stage that my job was simply to breathe out the music. And I felt very contented about that !

◆ The other activities in U.K.

Apart from musical activities, what do you usually do?

DS : We live in the West Country, a beautiful and peaceful part of England. We spend most of our time working on our music, but when we have time we enjoy, amongst other things, walking by the sea and visiting the lovely beaches round the coast.

BG : I'm happiest when I have a musical project. But when I'm having a break I like to be out of doors as much as I possibly can. We are lucky that we live in a very beautiful place where you only have to step outside to see and feel how the landscape and the weather is constantly and mysteriously changing.

I also love reading and I'm in a book group that meets every couple of months to talk. And I have to do repairs from time to time (I do them badly) on our building which is very ancient and likely to crumble and leak. We chop wood, light fires and cook. And we talk, at the moment particularly about national politics, which is going through a troubling stage in the UK.

◆ About "Star Clocks"

Please let me know about your new album "Star Clocks". When did you start planning the structure of this album?

DS : After we released "Green and Blue" in 2009 I began reviewing unfinished material I had on my old DAT tapes. There were dozens of sketches and demos, many of which had the potential to be Stewart / Gaskin songs. I started developing these ideas, at the same time writing new material. It was quite a slow process, but gradually the songs began to take shape, and by 2013 I realised we had more than enough for an album. We made a shortlist of nine songs and I began finalising the arrangements and lyrics. After that we recorded Gavin Harrison's drum parts at his studio, Beren and I recorded guitar parts at his studio (called The Cave), Barbara recorded her vocals in our studio (called Dave & Barb's studio :)), I mixed the tracks and Beren mastered them. That's how "Star Clocks" was created. It took a long time, but we're very happy with the results !

How did you come to collaborate with Mr. Beren Matthews?

DS : We were looking for acts for a music event some friends were organising. I found a young band called Grip-Like Vice on the internet who I liked a lot - their song 'With the Band' is fantastic and the video was amusing, so we booked them for the event (they were excellent) and met their leader and songwriter Beren Matthews. I gave Beren a CD of our music and to my surprise he showed interest in one of the songs, so I offered to teach him the guitar part.

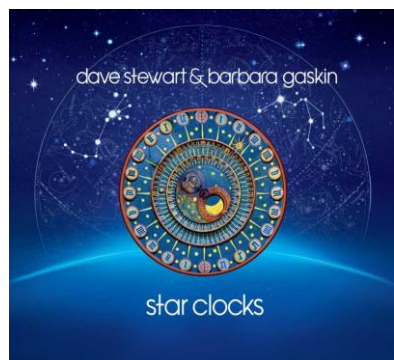
When I arrived at Beren's studio he had already learned the part and amazed me by playing 'The Emperor's New Guitar' all the way through, including all the keyboard lead lines as well as the guitar and bass riffs. He played it as if he was on stage in front of a thousand people, and at the end he was actually shaking with the effort. I thought, "This guy's got something." After that I showed him the chorus of 'Wings On Our Shoes', and he impressed me by

understanding the harmony and suggesting different guitar chord voicings. We began to work on what became the "Star Clocks" songs, and evolved a working method and friendship. After that, it was natural to invite Beren to play live with us. He's a pleasant, hardworking and disciplined guy, a vital part of our team along with our sound guy Ted Hayton. We really enjoy working with him.

The zodiac signs appear on cover design. We can also find astronomical body-related things in your past works. Is there any intention here?

DS : We're both interested in the cosmos, the planets and stars. When I'm writing music I often have a sense of travelling out into the unknown, away from the everyday world of politics and economics. 'Wings On Our Shoes' from "Star Clocks" has an interstellar travel theme, and our new song 'Region of Dreams' continues the sense of reaching out beyond the stars, using only our imagination - cheaper than rocket fuel. The cover image of "Star Clocks" brings in the element of passing time, which is explored in the song 'Time's Arrow'.

BG : I think it's accurate to say that we're interested in astronomy rather than astrology. We're excited by the idea of exploration in music, and space travel is a kind of metaphor for that - into the unknown. Personally I'm attracted to circles and spheres as visual symbols. Dave and I generally agree on imagery for our album sleeves and we spend a lot of time talking to our designer Mike Inns when we plan our album artwork. We start with an image and an idea about how to make it particular to us and we give Mike a free hand to start off with. Then we send ideas and alterations backwards and forwards until we arrive at the finished sleeve.



There are very various songs in "Star Clocks". Taking account of the album title, I feel that the songs express the passage of people's life and nature. What kind of feelings did you have when you were writing these songs?

DS : When writing gentle ballads like 'Time's Arrow' and 'Everything Sings' I feel quite tender and sensitive. But when writing loud rock songs like 'Afraid of Clowns' I become more of a raging maniac. It's the two sides of my personality :) But as I said, I get the same musical shiver from both types of song.

'The Arms of Miklosko' is the song about football player Mr. Ludek Miklosko. I hear that Dave likes football. What is it that attracted you to him? In addition, Mr. Mont Campbell joined this song. How did you come to collaborate with him again?

DS : I was watching football highlights on TV. One of the teams playing was West Ham, and their goalkeeper at the time was Ludek Miklosko. At one point the commentator shouted, "...and the ball drops from high in the air, straight into the arms of Miklosko." I thought, "That's a good song title." (I'm actually a Chelsea fan, but Miklosko was a good goalie and West Ham play good football, so I'm happy to credit them both!)

Unusually, the song is sung from the point of view of the ball. To help give it an anthem-like quality I wanted bagpipes for the middle section, so asked our old friend Mont Campbell (who is a winds expert) if he'd play them. The song was in the wrong key for Scottish Highland pipes, so Mont used Uilleann pipes instead and overdubbed himself several times to create a pipe band sound. It's quite a tricky part to play.

In "Star Clocks", there is only one cover song. What sort of effect is it having on songwriting to arrange cover song?

DS : When we started making music together back in 1980, we had two songs: 'This Is Human Speech', an experimental song inspired by the sounds I was creating on my new Prophet-5 synth, and 'It's My Party', which we did for a laugh. Much to our surprise, 'It's My Party' was a huge, chart-topping, million-selling worldwide hit. We were suddenly in a position where we needed to record new songs in a hurry. I had none written, so we concentrated on recording cover versions such as 'I'm In A Different World' and 'Busy Doing Nothing', and released them in a series of 7" vinyl singles. For the single B-sides I wrote

original songs, the first being 'Waiting In The Wings'. As time went by, I was inspired to write more original material and we recorded fewer covers. Nowadays our albums are mostly my songs with perhaps one cover, such as 'Summer in the City' on "Star Clocks" and 'Good Morning Good Morning' on "Green and Blue". I've always enjoyed arranging. When I played with Egg I used to arrange Mont Campbell's compositions to make them more suitable for stage performance, and in Hatfield and the North I made a lot of arrangement suggestions for Phil, Richard and Pip's tunes, which they graciously agreed to! When Barb and I record a cover I very much enjoy dreaming up new arrangement ideas, it's a lot of fun and I don't have to spend time writing words :)

Would you tell me about future plans? Do you have any plan of next album?

DS : Yes - the new songs we play in Tokyo will form the basis of our next album, which we hope to release next year. We're also planning a London concert in 2020.

◆ Lastly

Could you please give any message to Japanese fans who will come to your live?

DS : We're very pleased to be invited again and looking forward to playing live to our great listeners. Thanks for your support over the years.

BG : Please come along - we will be so pleased to see you. And thank you so much for listening.

(Interview by Kanyo)
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Special Thanks to:

Barbara Gaskin
Dave Stewart

For more Dave Stewart & Barbara Gaskin's info, please visit this website.

- <https://davebarb.com/>