

Show and Tell

The English folk duo Show of Hands are highly popular stalwarts of the folk circuit, regularly performing sell-out shows across the UK. They chat to **Nathaniel Handy** about the people behind their songs

Bruce Springsteen has few peers. It's not a matter of his music so much as his commitment. His single-minded faith in where he is taking his audience; his legendary stamina in delivering the ultimate night, every night, in venues big or small; and his pursuit of a near spiritual connection with his audience. All this makes Springsteen stand out from the crowd. But why the hell would you want to know about that? This isn't a rock'n'roll mag.

The reason is that Steve Knightley – one half of the Devon folk duo Show of Hands – never has the example of The Boss far from his mind when he steps out onto a stage at night. “It's your contract,” he says of the Springsteen ideal. “You've done a deal with the people out there. You don't know who's rolling up, but they've made that journey to be here tonight. You're looking out at guys who may have pulled someone from a car crash, may have just had the worst day of their life, but they've come out. You can't forget that.”

Like the big man himself, Knightley holds the stage with an easy swagger and a ready wit. Yet behind all the banter is an awareness that music is a serious business. It can enrich lives and as a performer you have a responsibility. He has no time for the grumpy artist with the slouching, vacant indifference that passes for cool. “It's not fair and it's not right,” he says with the conviction of an old West Country farmer.

Knightley is standing under the blue glow of the stage lights in the vast, whispering space of the Hackney Empire in London. Beside him is a man who has shared his musical path since they were teenagers in the folk clubs of Exeter: the multi-talented Phil Beer. They are in the early stages of another nationwide tour in support of their latest studio album, *The Long Way Home*. It's their first ever show at the Empire and East London is perhaps not their natural stamping ground, but they are an act that can rely on a dedicated following. It's about more than the music – it's that contract again.

As Knightley explains, the duo's love of Americana runs deep – right back to their earliest musical experiences growing up in Exeter. “A lot of the guys we used to listen to were into the ragtime and the blues as much as the folk,” he explains. “Wizz Jones, Bert Jansch, Cliff Aungier and

Gerry Lockran – a lot of them used to get a feature on local television on their way down to Cornwall. That's why there's always been a smattering of blues and slide.” That smattering is there again on their latest album in the track ‘Sweet Bella’ – “genuine, West Country frontier gibberish,” as Beer calls it.

Their 2012 studio outing – *Wake the Union* – was a study in Americana. “We had been touring with Richard Shindell, Phillip Henry & Hannah Martin, Rodney Branigan and Leonard Podolak & Matt Gordon – hanging out with six Americana artists,” says Knightley. “What do you do at soundchecks? You tend to play that stuff. There's a common language between Americana and British music.”

Finding the common language has always been a central endeavour for Show of Hands, from their early work with exiled Chilean musicians to the many songs that connect Britain with the migrant communities that settled around the world from Australia to Canada. The new album features a bare, stripped-back transportation tale discovered by Beer in a rare book of folk ballads. Called ‘Virginia’, it reveals links between the US and Britain that most would find extraordinary today. “I found it in *A Ballad History of England: from 1588 to the Present Day* by Roy Palmer,” says Beer. “It's about white slavery and the only other reference to that I know of in recent years is [Giles Milton's] *White Gold* about a Cornish lad who worked for the caliphate for 20 years after being sold by Barbary pirates and who finally managed to escape.”

The idea that plantation slavery in Virginia was anything other than black African slavery would be a shock to many. “I think it was too brief a period for it to become established in memory, because with the discovery of Australia they started shipping them there,” says Knightley. “We're only talking a 30- or 40-year period of sentencing to plantations in Virginia.”

Such informative spotlights on hidden areas of our collective past are a Show of Hands speciality. They draw on the work of Dick Gaughan and Aly Bain for another track – ‘John Harrison's Hands’ – that tells the life story of the man who invented a way of measuring longitude at sea. It is one of those epics that seem intent on laying down a manifesto for an entire way of life. “The only song I know that is as ambitious ▶



Steve Knightley (left) and Phil Beer have been performing together since the 80s



Paul Tomlins

Show of Hands
with double
bass player
Miranda Sykes
at Larmer Tree
Festival 2015

is 'Northwest Passage' by [late Canadian folk singer] Stan Rogers," says Knightley. "It takes as a theme someone's whole life as a journey. I think that's remarkable." He also loves the irony of the fact that it took two Scotsmen to write a song revealing the greatness of a low-born Englishman rejected by the elite.

Sometimes, in their dredging of the past, the duo can achieve a quite devastating contemporary resonance. Take the singing of 'The Bonny Light Horseman' to conclude a song about a contemporary British military death, or 'The Keys of Canterbury' in the midst of their banking crisis album, *Arrogance, Ignorance and Greed*. Closing their new release is a song that could appear innocuous enough. It sounds traditional and its lyrics hark back to the folk tradition of female drummer boy songs – relating the 17th- and 18th-century practice of girls dressing as boys and enlisting in the army or navy. It's a long tradition. This track, 'Mesopotamia', evokes an ancient Middle East, and yet listening to it sends a chill down the spine. Hearing it in Hackney, a stone's throw from where young girls have departed 'to the wars' of the Islamic State, makes you acutely aware that nowhere else have you yet heard an artistic response to these events.

"The lyrics I rejected were brutal," reveals Knightley of the first take of the song. "They were very bloodthirsty and sharp-edged. I was persuaded and I'm glad I was." This decision to use more oblique lyrics is maybe more powerful, and yet he made the decision for fear of causing offence to the wrong people. The duo are keenly aware of the dangers of misinterpretation. It has dogged their hit song 'Roots' – a rallying cry for the English to connect with their lost identity that was quickly appropriated by the far right for its own ends. To even have such dilemmas to deal with illustrates how brave their music is and how important, too. Such issues need intelligent artistic responses. The resonance of such songs reveals that need.

Beer and Knightley are now taking on the aura of elder statesmen of English folk. Both clearing three score years, they

have been at their game for decades now and have a battle-hardened strength that comes of gigging round the pubs, clubs and small venues of England. The whole air of *The Long Way Home* is of reflection, a gathering in of the past, a reckoning with life. It's a record that only musicians of a certain age could make. Younger artists wouldn't have the experience for it.

Running through this record, and through all their music like a talisman, is the mighty shadow of West Country folk singer, Tony Rose. He died in 2002, and his passing has clearly left a considerable hole felt deeply by the duo. He was central to their first love of folk. The reverence with which they perform his signature song, 'Twas on One April's Morning', is arresting. They conclude it with a wonderful tune penned by Knightley and executed on fiddle by Beer: 'Isca Rose', named in Tony's honour.

For those who heard their last album, *Centenary* – a commemoration of World War I in song and poetry – 'Isca Rose' will be familiar. It's the tune set to stanzas of 'The Lads in Their Hundreds' from AE Housman's immortal *A Shropshire Lad*. The reappearance of this fiddle air, sliding in again on this new album like the returning tide, encapsulates the rhythmic nature of Show of Hands. They have picked up the mantle left by Rose and his contemporaries and are already passing it down to artists like Seth Lakeman, Jackie Oates and even Knightley's own son, Jack. It speaks of a never-ending process.

As they stand solemnly together with their long-time collaborator Miranda Sykes at a single mic under a single spotlight at Hackney Empire, this sense of continuity is brought home. They sing a new sea shanty – 'Keep Hauling' – *a capella*. The human voice stripped bare. The auditorium is as still as the mouth of the river Exe on a summer's day. ♦

+ **ALBUM** *The Long Way Home* is a *Top of the World* this issue, see p55

+ **DATES** Steve Knightley and Phil Beer are currently touring the UK individually, see *Gig Guide*, followed by a *Show of Hands* tour in April and May and a return to London's Royal Albert Hall in 2017