



## Show of Hands

As Steve Knightley and Phil Beer prepare for an extensive UK tour this autumn, **Nathaniel Handy** looks back at the humble beginnings of the Devonshire folk duo who are now at the forefront of the British folk scene

**H**istory likes to paint the 80s as all synths, drum machines and plastic fantastic outfits. It is remembered as the era of fake – brash modernism for a disposable age. But for some of us, it had a very different energy – earthier, rootsier and angrier.

A crop of musicians came of age who had tuned into the big late-60s, early-70s folk revival as kids – everything from The Chieftains to Fairport Convention and Planxty to Steeleye Span – and then been through the

masher of late 70s punk rock. It produced bands like The Pogues and The Waterboys and, a little later, The Levellers, but it also brought together two West Country musicians.

“There’s always been this undercurrent,” remembers Phil Beer, one half of Devon folk duo Show of Hands, when he spoke with *Songlines* in 2015 backstage at the Hackney Empire. “We were listening to this stuff when we were 15 or 16. Local and quite traditional folk singers – we were still on the cusp of the

folk revival.” He namechecks the late Tony Rose, an Exeter folk singer the pair both used to watch on the folk circuit. “They were ten years older than us, so they were cool,” singer-songwriter Steve Knightley adds. “They were smoking, drinking, picking up women, had long hair – and they were real role models.” Whatever else may have changed, the long hair hasn’t. Phil Beer and Steve Knightley remain stubborn small-town rebels who took folk-rock to the nation and ended up winning.

Knightley and Beer grew up on opposite banks of the mouth of the River Exe, on a spectacularly beautiful stretch of the south Devon coast referred to grandly as the English Riviera. These are windswept, salty seaside towns that spend much of their year with a rather forgotten and mildewed feel, only to spring to life for a short, sharp summer. This beachside melancholy permeates the sound of Show of Hands.

But this folk duo's story is one of a train almost missed. Though they were together in the Exeter pubs and clubs as teenagers, they went their separate ways. Knightley went to university in Coventry and then to London, while Beer became a touring musician with Arizona Smoke Review and The Albion Band. It was their returns to Exeter in the mid-80s that led to their reunion, and that return to their roots has become a hallmark of their success ever since.

Herein lies the dichotomy that has served Show of Hands so well for what is now some four decades. They are in fact a highly polished, fastidiously practised, meticulously researched, beautifully considered and serious musical act. Beer is one of the greatest multi-instrumental folk musicians of his generation while Knightley is a singularly engaging frontman and songwriter. They are a class act, and yet, whenever you see them perform, the patter plays it all down.

Knightley will languidly thank the audience for coming to a "folk gig," with a wry smile playing on his face. However big the auditorium – and this is a duo who have played London's Royal Albert Hall four times – there is always the sense of pint glasses clinking, some murmured chat at the back between farmers and a West Country howler rattling the windows. Knightley will recall their first forlorn gigs at rural pubs where the audience was more interested in the fruit machines. They are willing you to discount it all, only to hit you with the sucker punch.

They let the music do the talking, and it has done. They combine the rich storytelling tradition of English folk with the more contemporary crafted social commentary of the likes of Bruce Springsteen or Dick Gaughan. The mix of atmosphere and anger is echoed in their versatile musicianship. Beer's fiddle playing would be worth paying to watch all on its own. Here it is the summit of a sound that includes banjo, guitar, ukulele, double bass and the Chilean *cuatro*.

The *cuatro* was an addition discovered during a collaboration the duo had with the exiled Chilean band Alianza in the early 90s. The experience widened their musical and

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political horizons, producing songs such as the pointed 'Columbus (Didn't Find America)' and the achingly beautiful 'Santiago'. It was a cue to where Knightley's songwriting would be taking them next.

The 21st century has brought with it increasingly anguished identity crises around the developed world. Show of Hands use their rootedness, their strong sense of connection to their native West Country, to explore the tensions at the heart of rural life in England. They released the album *Country Life* and a few years later, *Witness*. These included the anthemic tracks 'Country Life' and 'Roots', both tackling these questions head-on.

The taut – sometimes uncomfortable – energy that songs like these have brought to their shows have made Show of Hands into one of those acts who have a die-hard following. It is no longer simply about music, but something bigger – they represent ideas of identity, belonging, a shared sense of place. As their canvas has grown, so has their duo. With the addition of double bass and beautiful vocals from Miranda Sykes since 2004, they have in effect become a trio.

In recent years, this sense of community has broadened. Knightley and Beer now regularly champion young musicians, especially from the West Country, bringing them exposure and recognition. Seth Lakeman, Phillip Henry & Hannah Martin and Jenna Witts, to name only a few, have all benefitted from this informal mentoring. Yet all the while, there is still the sense that nothing can better an Exmouth pub on a winter evening, and Steve Knightley's bare voice singing 'Widcombe Fair' to Phil Beer's lonely fiddle airs. ♦

- + **DATE** *Show of Hands start an extensive tour of the UK in October, see Gig Guide for details*
- + **ONLINE** [www.showofhands.co.uk](http://www.showofhands.co.uk)
- + **WIN** *We have three copies of Show of Hands' latest album The Long Way Home to give away. To enter, answer: What is the name of the double bassist that has turned the band into a trio? See p25 for competition rules*

### BEST ALBUMS



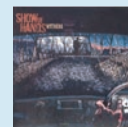
#### **Country Life** (Hands On Music, 2003)

The album that announced their true arrival as folk-rock social commentators. The title-track has gone on to become a staple live anthem at their gigs and a rallying cry for a neglected rural underclass in Britain.



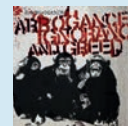
#### **As You Were** (Hands On Music, 2004)

A mammoth 22-track double live album that really gives a sense of the power of their live performance. Show of Hands are first and foremost a live act, and this is the best collection of their finest live tracks.



#### **Witness** (Hands On Music, 2006)

Though this album was defined by the track 'Roots' – a 'Born in the USA'-style repost to a politician's dismissal of country folk singing – it's equally memorable for the moody 'The Dive' and the fabulous fiddle track 'The Falmouth Packet'. Reviewed in #37.



#### **Arrogance, Ignorance & Greed** (Hands On Music, 2009)

In some senses the culminating album of a series of increasingly angry political releases, this one raved at the banking crisis, but also included quieter and more meditative songs on other, more complex modern crises. Reviewed in #65.



#### **The Long Way Home** (Hands On Music, 2016)

Their latest album is a barnstormer in the true Show of Hands tradition – and it is now a tradition. There's rousing historical storytelling, traditional tunes and delicate contemporary tales of love and loss. A Top of the World in #115.

### IF YOU LIKE SHOW OF HANDS, THEN TRY:

#### **Seth Lakeman**



#### **Ballads of the Broken Few** (Cooking Vinyl, 2016)

Fellow Devonian Seth Lakeman came out from beneath the wing of Show of Hands to become something of a poster boy for English folk. He has since returned to some very rich and earthy roots, particularly on this album. Reviewed in #122.