

Al Stewart interview

Singer-songwriter Al Stewart, 80, has been performing for over 60 years, and released his debut album, *Bedsitter Images*, in 1967. Best known for his hits *Year of the Cat* and *Time Passages*, this autumn he's going back on the road, performing songs from his 16 albums and telling stories from his years in the music game, including sharing a flat with Paul Simon and guesting at the very first Glastonbury Festival in 1970.

You turned 80 in September, and you're calling this your Farewell Tour. Is this really the last chance we'll have to see you live?

Not at all! When I say the phrase Farewell Tour, the accent is on tour. It's just that the older you get, playing is easy, everybody would do that for free, but the touring bit? You get up, you have to drive 200 miles, you have to get on an airplane, you're sitting in a car, you're sitting in a dressing room, you're packing, you're unpacking and trying to find time for food. Then after the show, you gotta pack everything up, get back to the hotel, sleep if you're lucky, and then you're back in the car again. This gets very tough. It's the daily grind, like do I have enough clean shirts? I mean, touring is all about laundry!

You were born in Scotland and raised in England, but you've lived in Arizona for the past 46 years. Do you still feel British after all this time in the States?

I had a Scottish father and an English mother, so I guess I'm half and half. Really, I don't know what I identify with. As I travel so much and play in so many countries, that after a while, you don't really identify as anything. You just identify as this mobile unit.

You're playing Glasgow's Royal Concert Hall on 17 October. While you're in Scotland, are you tempted to go back to explore the area you were born in?

I left when I was three, so I've got a very sketchy memory of it. I know where it is, and I even know the address, it was 73 Union Street in Greenock. Whether that still exists, I don't know. If anyone reading this is in Greenock, you can check it out for me and see if it's still there!

What can fans expect from this tour?

Well, we've got a great band for a start. The Empty Pockets are from Chicago, and they're really good. I've done a lot of tours in the UK where it's just me and an acoustic guitar, but this is the full monty. I'm planning to do different songs all the time. I think we've got 14 shows in Europe, and my plan is to do at least two or three different ones every single night. I also spend a lot of time talking, telling stories, and of course, I don't know what I'm going to say until I say it. I like spontaneity.

Your songs include a lot of references to history and literature. Do you find that some fans like to talk to you about those things?

They give me history books! It's fine, I'm perfectly happy to sit and talk about Russian history for three hours. I can do that, but I can't do that to an audience. I mean, it'd crucify them. But if you go on YouTube, it's full of people saying, "I started reading history because of Al Stewart." I mean, they go out and check the references. Somebody did teach a university course on my songs here in America, and also I was invited to talk at Oxford University, but I couldn't bring myself to do that. I'm not a historian, I'm someone who reads history and manages to translate it into song.

Your biggest hit in the States and the UK was in 1976 with Year of the Cat. What's your relationship like with that song? Some performers tend to resent the track they're most famous for.

It's a calling card, I think everybody needs one, unless you're a superstar like Elton John or Mick Jagger, in which case you've got 50 or 100 of these things. But it's just a calling card to tell people who you are, because a lot of people don't know. It's like, "Who is this guy?" Well it's the guy who sang the song about the cat.

Do you still write songs?

No, not at all, but what I am doing is writing something completely different. I'm trying to write a book at the moment – nothing to do with music whatsoever. I mean, I've read probably 100 different rock biographies, and they're all the same, because they're all the same person. But I've always been a big fan of nonsense poetry, like Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear and Mervyn Peake so I thought, why don't I have a crack at that? It's a 21st century version of Alice in Wonderland and it's about inanimate objects coming to life. Whether I will ever finish it or not, I don't know, but I'm having a lot of fun trying!