







# F R A N K T U R N E R

*Ahead of a record breaking tenth appearance at Reading and Leeds, we talk to the folk-punk star about the pros and cons of keeping schtum – while still making yourself heard*

**WORDS: GEORGE HENRY KING IMAGES: RICHARD ECCLESTONE**

When over 12,000 strangers roared, 'It doesn't matter where you come from, it matters where you go' during Frank Turner's sold-out Wembley Arena show in 2012, the cynics who had dogged his career became irrelevant.

First of all, it was his constantly mentioned public school education that certain punk die-hards decided to take issue with. The discovery that he had once been tutored alongside royalty had led many to question his punk-rock authenticity and his anti-establishment stance.

Then his fiercely liberal view of the world saw Turner experience an even bigger backlash in 2011. After a music journalist collected and published all of his previous interview quotes regarding his political

opinions in an article for *The Guardian*, he was subject to a barrage of hate mail and death threats.

At this point, Turner had not long released his most critically acclaimed album, *England Keep My Bones*, but his art and creative output, as well as his endless good deeds for charity, had been brushed aside within the mainstream media in favour of column-inches regarding his private life and his not-so-private opinions.

When we sit down with Frank prior to what will be his 1889th show in 10 years, it seems as if his performance may yet again have to take a back seat. This time though, Turner's more than okay with it.

"I feel good doing shows like this. So much of my job is relentless self-promotion and talking about myself and why everyone should think I'm amazing, so it's really nice to just put that

on ice for a minute and talk about something that is considerably more important than my ego and my career."

The more important matters that he is referring to are the two charities that tonight's gig is in aid of.

Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM) is a charity dedicated to preventing male suicide and raising awareness about mental health in young men, while The Music Venue Trust prides itself in protecting the UK's live music network.

"The Music Venue Trust has done an amazing job of highlighting issues in music venues over the last couple of years, and I fronted up a campaign to get the planning law changed, which we successfully did in London. We got the Agent of Change principles adopted by Boris Johnson's administration just before







it finished, which is a fantastic thing. Without venues and without space, art doesn't exist. And particularly if you are talking about an art form that involves communication with the crowd and quite often-loud volumes and a raucous time, it needs to happen somewhere. I think there was a moment in time where people just took it for granted and I think we are now changing that cultural attitude and I think that's great.

"One of the things about CALM that makes it easy to do good stuff with them is that the essential problem is that people don't talk about it [mental health] and simply by talking about it in any shape or form you do make a small difference. There was a cultural and social stigma against us talking about mental health, particularly among young men and the macho culture, and I think collectively as a society we have made huge strides on that in the last couple of decades."

Despite having the added responsibility this evening of being a figurehead for the charities, Turner is quick to assure us that tonight's show is just going to be him and his friends having a great time doing what they love, while trying to raise the profiles of two great causes.

"Tonight's not part of a big tour or a big production thing and I am playing *England Keep My Bones* in full, which is something that I thought would be fun to do, to make a bit of an occasion out of it for the charities. I wanted to make sure that we sold the tickets – which we did in four minutes apparently – and raised some money for the charities."

To many, life as a popular musician seems like an enviable one of free gear, world travel and unfettered access to top recording studios and musicians, but Turner is keen to use whatever fame he has to promote the work of causes close to his heart.

"I don't want to try and make out that this makes me a special flower for doing this, but to the extent that I have a platform and I can draw attention to certain issues that I think are important. I did a lot of work for Shelter and I've been working with War Child lately. I think this is the bare minimum of what I should be doing with the platform that I have. I personally try to keep it apolitical, I mean there are bands that try to be political and pursue political causes and I think that's legitimate, but that's not something I'm particularly interested in. I'm a political person in my private life, but I've taken a conscious decision to try and separate my public persona from any of my political feelings in the last few years."

In keeping with Frank's passion for supporting small venues, tonight's show is fittingly taking place at the Electric Brixton – a venue that boasts

a mere 1,500 capacity. But despite having played to 20,000 at the O2 Arena, Frank is reluctant to underestimate the masses of people who will be looking back at him when he walks onstage in a couple of hours.

"It's funny that you and a few others have referred to this as a small show for me, and on some levels it is, but it's still 1,500 fucking people – that's not a small gig, that's a massive gig. For 90 per cent of the time that I have been making live music, the idea of playing to 1,500 people would have been laughable. So the fact that we can do it at short notice and sell it out is exciting to me."

Like many musicians, the UK's vast array of prestigious small venues has acted as an essential stepping-stone for Turner's ever-blossoming career, and he's quick to praise the importance of small venues and the effect that they have had on some of today's most established bands.

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"If you want bands to play the big venues who aren't just manufactured, Simon Cowell fodder, you've got to have somewhere for those bands to inculcate and to find their identity and their sound and their audience. I mean you can talk about Radiohead, Biffy Clyro and Stereophonics – any bands like that who have come up slowly and have had time to develop who they are. Muse are a brilliant example – they did all the small venues in their time and if people like that didn't have a place to play then nothing would happen. Without those venues I would be doing something else with my life and the records I make and the records these other people make wouldn't exist, and there wouldn't be Biffy Clyro headlining Reading and Leeds, which I think is a wonderful thing. I might be biased because they are old friends, but they deserve every ounce of success. But there is an awful lot of art that will only ever exist in small venues and will only ever be played to

200 people or less. Those people aren't aiming for the big time, and if they don't get there it's not that they have failed, it's that they are playing obscure art and obscure art is equally as deserving of our time and attention."

When pressed to reveal his favourite small venues, Turner doesn't hesitate in naming The Barfly in Camden and The Joiners in Southampton – a venue that he recently helped save from closure.

Sadly though, some venues haven't been lucky enough to have an established musician fighting their corner, but Turner insists some bands do still occasionally swap the spacious arenas for the sweaty bars that helped to make them the stadium juggernauts they are today.

"I mean I'm wary of telling anyone else what to do, because if other people tell me what to do I get shirty, but I think that most of the bigger bands that I am kind of tight with do respect that [helping the small venues]. I know the Biffy guys do, for example, and even Radiohead are doing the Roundhouse, which is a small venue for them. I love what I do now and I love the level I play at, but my heart very much remains in the Barfly."

Along with Biffy, Turner himself will also be heading to Reading and Leeds Festival this year for what will be a record 10th time.

"Reading Festival was the first music festival I went to and I remember feeling like I had found my tribe. I grew up in a small town where no one was really into metal, punk or hardcore and I walked in and every single person was wearing a band T-shirt as far as the eye could see, and it was like, 'shit, these are my people – I've found them'. I'm not trying to cuss everybody else, but there are some festivals that people go to because they are 'hip' or because there is a 'cool' vibe, but Reading isn't cool, and I'm not cool, I've never been cool and I never will be cool, and people in Shoreditch are never going to fucking buy my T-shirts and think it makes them cool. Reading isn't for people like that. Reading is for people who are like, 'at 3.20pm I'm going to see four songs of this band and then at 3.45pm we are gonna be on this stage' and it's about music. It's a direct and a geeky and pure music event, and that's who I am and that's the culture I fit into."

One musician that Turner reveals didn't quite fit in with the Reading and Leeds culture, however, was 50 Cent, who was bottled off stage during his set in 2004.

"This isn't a comment on his music whatsoever, but with 50 Cent it was an interesting culture clash between the way he wanted backstage and how everyone else did, because in my world it's about camaraderie, and behind the Lock-Up Stage every year it's just mates and everybody knows everybody.





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But 50 Cent wanted a clear backstage for his walk to the main stage and he wanted catering emptied before he could eat his soup and quite a lot of people were just, 'no, fuck off!' and it was just an interesting culture clash."

Although Frank Turner's last album, *Positive Songs for Negative People*, received a more lukewarm response from critics in comparison to its predecessors, it was recently re-released as a limited edition acoustic album for Record Store Day – a decision inspired by Billy Bragg.

"I'll be honest; part of the idea came from that record by Billy Bragg, *Mr Love and Justice*, where he sort of released a rock version and an acoustic version of it, and I thought that was really cool. I mean, first of all it keeps everyone happy because there are always going to be people who say they just want to hear the band stuff and then there's the more old school people who just want to hear the solo stuff. A lot of the songs are written in that format before I take them to the band and then we arrange them collectively, so it's an interesting view on that level. And even the ones that I would have written with the band, it's kind of fun to try and find a way to playing them as a soloist. There is a song called, 'Glorious You' on the record and the acoustic version is pretty different and I kind of love it and there is a little part of me that thinks that version should have been on the record, but I don't believe in 'what ifs' because it's a waste of time."

When you write and gig as much as Frank Turner does, reliable equipment is paramount to sustaining a high degree of quality throughout both your albums and your live shows. So, which of Frank's many guitars has managed to stand the test of time and feature regularly on his vast back catalogue?

"There's a guitar that I have, which I call 'Old Faithful', that was built for me by Patrick Eggle just before my second record and it's actually the guitar on the cover of the record. It's an incredible piece of wood and I've used it, here and there, on every record I've made and I've done over 1,000 shows with it, so it's fallen apart a little, but it's been fixed. I'm not overly precious about guitars, as in, I'll use whatever the producer thinks is right for the job."

The last time *Acoustic* spoke to Frank Turner, he mentioned that he was learning bluegrass finger picking. When I question him on how his lessons are going, he simply grabs his acoustic and answers my question with a seamless demonstration – all with a confident, wry grin sprawled across his face. He then declares, "I'm writing a bluegrass finger picking album" Let's just hope the punk die-hards don't take issue with that. ■