

STEPHEN 'FOZ' FOSTER

'SUFFOLK WOULD BE A MUCH POORER PLACE WITHOUT ITS LOCAL MUSIC SCENE'

Danielle Lett sits down with the broadcasting legend as he reminisces over a fantastic career in music and radio

As a pretty big music fan myself, I was very excited recently to sit down and chat with local radio legend Stephen (Foz) Foster.

Formerly one of BBC Radio Suffolk's longest-serving hosts, he's your man when it comes to all things music.

Not only did he have a long-running regular slot on the station after joining in 1990, he also helped get Ipswich Music Day off the ground - and to this day continues to help support and promote the music scene in the county.

A Suffolk boy through and through, Stephen was born at Heath Road Hospital on Halloween 1959. He attended Sidegate Primary School and then Copleston High School before leaving school at 16 to work for Willis Faber and Dumas.

But when he wasn't studying or working, his hobby was music - and has been from a young age.

"I first got into music in about 1972/73, and I've been passionate about it ever since," he says.

"The first time I remember hearing any sort of pop music that I really got into was the Sunday

Right; Stephen Foster

Below; Music aside, Stephen is a big sports fan and has been the Ipswich Town matchday presenter for three years now
Pictures: STEPHEN FOSTER

chart show, which would've been on BBC Radio One or 2 at the time. From then on, I was hooked, and began listening to Radio Caroline as well."

The first record Stephen bought was Mouldy Old Dough by Lieutenant Pigeon, from the Boots store on Tavern Street in Ipswich.

"It was 49p, and after that the first LP I bought was These Foolish Things by Bryan Ferry in 1973 from the former Woolworths on Carr Street in Ipswich. I've still got my copy of that, and it's a treasured possession."

It was around this time that Stephen began immersing himself in the local music scene, going to gigs after school and on the weekends.

"My friends and I used to go to The Kingfisher on the Chantry estate as they'd have gigs on a Sunday night. And obviously having the Regent Theatre almost on my doorstep was great."

Stephen recalls his first concert there was Roy Wood's Wizzard - and he's been an avid gig-goer ever since.

Having been to countless shows over the years - Stephen estimates his gig count could well be into the quadruple digits by now.

"I've kept all of my ticket stubs from 1975 onwards, and I've got a list of all of the gigs I've been to, which comes in handy for all of my writing work. It's a good bit of research material for when I need it."

For a man so into his music, it comes as no surprise that he eventually made the natural progression over to working in radio.

"I first got my start working for Hospital Radio Ipswich during the summer of 1977. That's where I got my first taste of radio, and in some ways I've come full circle as I'm now vice chairman there and I also do a Tuesday show.

"I was desperate to get into radio full-time, and I thought the best place to start was - which I still think is the case today - to volunteer for your local hospital radio station. You can do some good for your hospital while learning the tricks of the trade."

During his time there, Stephen did programmes, ran the record library, and did a bit of ward visiting.

But after five years, he made the move over to Radio Orwell at Electric House where he worked as a trainee journalist in the newsroom.

"I remember the job interview - it was in the back bar of The Great White Horse Hotel with the station editor and news editor. They took me out for a liquid lunch and by the end of it, they offered me a job in the newsroom. I was delighted to be offered a job but I had my heart set on a music show. But I'm glad I took the plunge and left my safe job in insurance - it was a big leap for me."

While his first full-time radio job wasn't music-orientated, it still set him up in good stead and helped show him the ropes. "I was as green as the grass on Portman Road, but I learned so much in a short space of time," he says.

"And when BBC Radio Suffolk opened in Ipswich in 1990, I managed to get a job there which was a dream come true. I was lucky enough to spend the next 30 years working there doing all sorts of things. I've had a very productive three decades there and I'm proud to have done so much for so long locally."

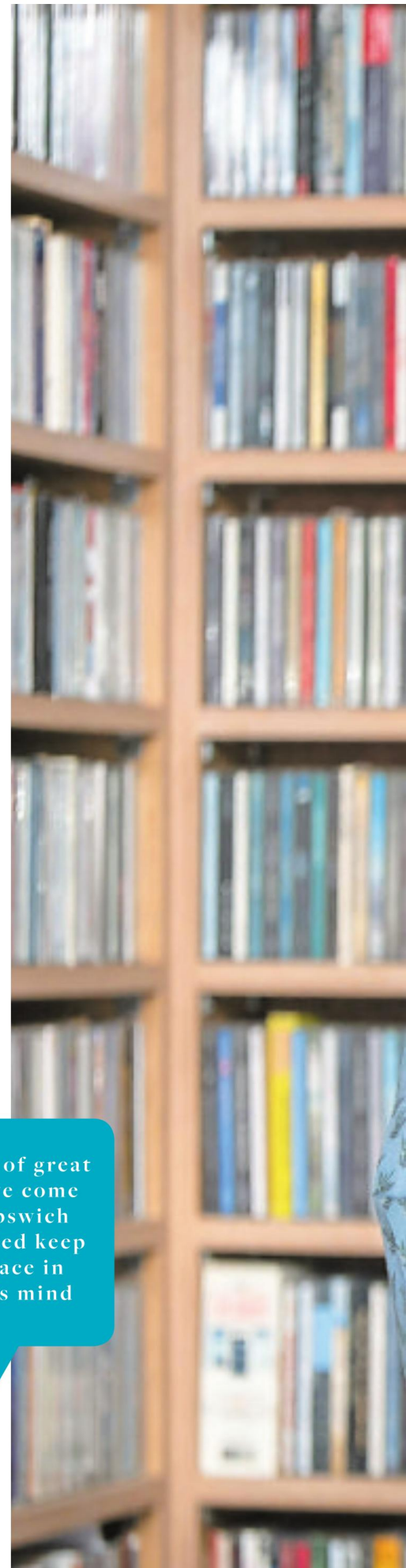
Some of Stephen's career highlights include going on a press trip to the Falkland Islands the year after the war ended, covering Sudbury Town FC when they played in the 1989 FA Vase Final at Wembley, and seeing Sir Bobby Robson being granted the Freedom Of Ipswich.

"I'm so grateful to have done all of these things and more while working at Radio Orwell and BBC Radio Suffolk," he says.

And of course, he's interviewed some of the biggest and best names in the 'biz - including a certain chart-topping singer-songwriter before he made it big.

"I haven't spoken to him for many years now but I remember interviewing Ed Sheeran when he was on the way up. He had just played the Maverick Festival at Easton Park Farm in 2008. It was

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Stephen at Radio Caroline



Stephen interviewing Ed Sheeran - just before he made it big

just him and his little guitar, and no word of a lie, there was no more than a man and his dog watching him, but he was still up for performing.

"He gave me a lovely interview after he finished and played a couple of tracks live on air before heading off to play a gig in Norwich. He was a busy lad playing all over the place, probably for peanuts, but it helped get him a foot in the industry."

After that, Stephen met Ed a few years later just before he took to the stage at Jimmy's Farm - as he was on the cusp of breaking through.

"He did a bit live on air with us, and you got the feeling he was about to have a hit single. At the end of the interview, I said 'I feel you're really going places - I wish you the very best', before he went on to play the main stage. No one could've predicted the success he's had. He's such a grounded chap who's done so much for Suffolk."

"Throughout the years, I've been lucky enough to interview so many top names, and the vast majority of them have more than lived up to expectation. I remember interviewing Neil Diamond before his Ipswich show. That was a huge thrill for me, and we did that in the same studio in London that Terry Wogan

would've used just a few minutes earlier."

Stephen's expertise and passion for music has not only allowed him to get up close and personal with some of the biggest names in the industry, but has enabled him to help shape one of the county's core events on the music calendar - Ipswich Music Day.

"I went along to the first Ipswich Music Day as a punter in 1991. I thought I'd pop along - but I was a little underwhelmed by the set up. I thought to myself that BBC Radio Suffolk could do a lot more for the event if we were involved. "It didn't really do the local music scene justice, which was thriving at the time. There were dozens, if not hundreds, of really good bands and singer-songwriters at the time, and there was this low-key event in Christchurch Park that I thought I'd love to make bigger."

In the subsequent years following the inaugural event, Stephen has helped grow Ipswich Music Day into the fantastic event it is today, and he's over-the-moon to see how much it's flourished.

"Luckily we were more involved in the second year as a radio station, and by the following year I was part of the organising committee which helped make it bigger and better. It's fantastic to think that 40,000 people come to the park every year, and I'm proud

to have been part of that for 30 years."

Because if anyone understands the importance of supporting local emerging talent, it's Foz.

"All sorts of great acts have come from Ipswich and helped keep this place in people's mind. And Suffolk would be a much poorer place without its local music scene. A lot of people can't afford tickets for big shows in London and beyond, so we've got to keep our feet on the ground and help the emerging musicians learn their trade while at the same time provide great entertainment for people who love to see all of this close up."

Stephen cites The Apex in Bury St Edmunds and Snape Maltings as just some of his favourite local venues due to their 'near perfect acoustics' - but thinks the county town could do with something similar.

"It's a shame Ipswich hasn't got something similar to The Apex. We've got the Corn Exchange and I know work is going on to improve the sound in there, but what's missing for me in this modern age is a purpose-built venue. It would look lovely on the waterfront, and would attract a whole raft of different people."

"My all-time favourite venue will always be the Regent though, and I'm pleased the council continue to run it successfully. Long may it continue."

Music aside, Stephen is quite the sports fanatic too - and for the last three years has been the match day announcer at Portman Road. "That's become a big part of my life and ticks all the right boxes for me as I've been a Town fan since my first game in 1969," he says.

"It really has been a wonderful career, and I'm still enjoying all of the radio and presenting I get to do. I can't see me stopping anytime soon - and I wouldn't want to."

To keep up to date with Stephen, follow him on Twitter @stephenfoz. He can also be found on Radio Caroline and Hospital Radio Ipswich.



Stephen Foster

