Pop Talk: Thompson is just hitting his stride

by George_Varga

Richard Thompson has performed on more than 250 albums since making his recording debut in early 1968 with the pioneering English-folk band Fairport Convention. But this veteran musical maverick, whose past and present fans range from Jimi Hendrix and Bonnie Raitt to the members of Dinosaur Jr. and X, is convinced he's just beginning to hit his stride.

"I'm probably more productive now," said Thompson.

RICHARD THOMPSON - It was only after Sept. 11 that Richard Thompson began to write more about the world stage and American politics. Before that, he says, he focused on English politics. CNS Photo. "Perhaps I figured out how to get to the starting point quicker or my methods are more efficient. When I began writing songs I probably started writing at midnight. At about 4 a.m. I'd hit some inspiration, and by 4:30 a.m. I'd be exhausted and go to sleep. Now, I get up at 6 in the morning and work until 2 in the afternoon, so I have 8 hours, instead of 4 1/2."

Thompson laughed when asked if he used to start writing songs at midnight because he only had time to work on his music after performing shows with Fairport Convention.

"No," he said. "I was 18 and it was fun to stay up all night!"

A quintessential cult artist, Thompson has been hailed as one of the most original singer-songwriters in contemporary music. He has also been cited by Rolling Stone as one of the "Top 20 guitarists of all time," an accolade that only does partial justice to his instrumental command and dazzling fusion of rock, country, jazz, classical, Celtic and Middle Eastern styles.

His songs have been recorded by everyone from Elvis Costello and the Pointer Sisters to the Blind Boys of Alabama and the Del McCoury Band, which earned the International Bluegrass Music Association's 2002 Song of the Year award for its version of Thompson's "1952 Vincent Black Lightning."

"Richard is a fantastic musician with a lot of soul," R.E.M. bassist Mike Mills said recently. "All of us in R.E.M. are fans of his."

Thompson had no long-term goals when he started playing professionally as a teenager in London. Music then was something fun to do for a year or two, before he went to college.

"A year after that, I thought: 'I'll do it for another year,'" Thompson, now 57, said. "Twenty years later, it still didn't seem like something you could do for much longer. I suppose I still feel insecure, which is ridiculous, but it's a hard habit to break."

Fairport Convention started out playing blues and rock, and emulating The Byrds and Jefferson Airplane. After realizing this was an artistic dead end, the band embraced its traditional English-music roots.

The resulting folk-rock hybrid made Fairport Convention one of the most distinctive groups of its time, and - at least in Europe - one of the most influential of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Some folk purists were incensed with the band, in much the same way that Bob Dylan was attacked for "going electric" at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival. But others welcomed hearing a contemporary spin on centuries-old music.

"We could play the blues, in a sort of imitation of Muddy Waters, and we could imitate The Byrds and Jefferson Airplane, but it was always second best," Thompson said. "We couldn't sing country as good as Hank Williams because we didn't have the roots. And we looked at our contemporaries in the U.K., who were

in slavish blues and soul bands.

"So we thought: 'We're intelligent suburban boys, let's think about this. Because, surely, there must be a way to play indigenous music that means something. ...' We weren't paying much attention to what people thought, because we weren't caught up in any popularity contests. We were very sincerely pursuing a fairly obscure goal."

Thompson's music since then has remained obscure, at least by mainstream standards. But he has created an expansive body of work that, with few exceptions, is of a uniformly high standard.

His next album, due in May, features "Dad's Gonna Kill Me," a vivid song about the war in Iraq. Where Thompson's post-9/11 song "Outside of the Inside" cast a withering look at religious fundamentalists who want to blot out Western culture, "Dad's" is written from the perspective of a U.S. soldier whose existence is precarious at best. (The song can be heard in its entirety on Thompson's Web site: www.richardthompson.music.com.)

"On the whole, the reaction has been positive," he said. "As a song, I don't think it's that judgmental. If you didn't have a sense of irony, you could take it as a kind of positive song. That's why we love irony!

"A lot of times, political songs can be more subtle. But sometimes you just have to name names. There's a time and place for political music, a time to stand up and name the despots, and say: 'People take to the streets, it's time for the revolution.' There's a time for Neil Young to say 'Impeach the President.' And, god, this is the time."

Copley News Service Pours down like silver

Richard Thompson is not the only solo artist to make dozens of albums. But this acclaimed singer-songwriter is one of the few whose work has rarely dipped below an unusually high standard. His consistency makes it difficult to suggest just a few of his releases, which is why "Watching the Dark: A History of Richard Thompson," a 47-song compilation set released in 1993, is a good starting point. But here are some individual albums that would enhance most any collection:

"Shoot Out the Lights" with Linda Thompson (Hannibal, 1982): Recorded shortly before he and Linda, his luminous-voiced wife, divorced, this landmark album blends wrenching ballads and dreamlike musical portraits of doomed lovers with crackling rockers and Richard's fierce electric guitar workouts. Highlights: "Walking on a Wire," "Wall of Death," "Just the Motion."

"Across a Crowded Room" (1985, Polydor): His third solo release, post-Linda, is a gem that blends Thompson's mordant wit with provocative songs about failed love, crushed hearts and tattered lives. Highlights: "She Twists the Knife Again," "Fire in the Engine Room," "When the Spell Is Broken."

"The Old Kit Bag" (2005, Spin Art): Grace and understatement are not common qualities in this era of audio and visual overkill, but Thompson is a master of both. Spare and intimate, this 12-song album showcases his potent guitar work and wry lyrical touch (sample verse: Alms for the poor / Alms for the poor / Chairman Mao's got a whole lot of thoughts / And R.D. Laing's got me tied up in knots). Highlights: "A Love You Can't Survive," "First Breath," "Gethsemane."

Five things you may not know about Richard Thompson

1) He has performed as a guest artist on more than 120 albums by other artists. His recording partners have included Robert Plant, Nick Drake, The Incredible String Band, Bonnie Raitt, Crowded House, Maria McKee, Everything But the Girl, Beausoleil, John Cale, Henry Kaiser and J.J. Cale.

2) In the 1980s, Thompson performed solo acoustic shows whenever he could at the intimate Old Time Cafe in north San Diego County, where he liked to try out new material. His 1985 performances at the now-defunct venue were so covert that Capitol Records (the label he then recorded for) didn't even know about them

3) He has been a devout Muslim since 1974, when he joined a mystic Sufi sect in his native London.

4) In early 1971, he and fellow Fairport Convention singer-guitarist Ian Matthews were "probed" in Don Henley's Los Angeles garage about joining the band that soon became The Eagles.

5) In 1967, as the teenage lead guitarist in pioneering English folk-rock band Fairport Convention, he jammed a number of times with avid Fairport fan Jimi Hendrix. "He could play anything, left-handed, right-handed, it didn't make much difference," Thompson recalls of Hendrix. "And he was a very sweet guy."

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