

# BIG INTERVIEW

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with JASON O'TOOLE



# There's no masking the genius that is Steve Wickham

## Waterboys' well-schooled rock fiddle star still has many strings to his bow

Steve Wickham may be still able to walk down the street without too many eyeballs on him.

But he is definitely one of the most successful Irish musicians on the world scene today, having played on an estimated – count 'em – 200 albums.

The Dubliner – hailed as “the world’s greatest rock fiddle player” by Mike Scott – was able to help cement such a strong reputation thanks to his trademark “fuzz fiddle” rock sound with The Waterboys, and on the likes of U2’s song Sunday Bloody Sunday and Elvis Costello’s famous Spike album.

But Steve – who’s back out on the road this week with The Waterboys for a UK tour, which starts tonight at the Regent Theatre in Ipswich – was far from instantly recognisable when we came face-to-face.

There was an elephant in the room – or rather on Zoom – with the Fiddler (on the Roof) conducting our interview “Wearing” a facemask!

When the epidemic “put paid” to his work as a gigging musician, Steve decided to sign up for the fine art programme at YAADA (Yeats Academy of Arts Design and Architecture) in Sligo where he has lived “for the best part of 30 years”.

As an experiment for a class assignment, he donned this cut-out image of the famous Turner prize winning artist Gillian Wearing.

And not only that, Steve asked if – “for the craic” – his Swedish-born classmate Maria May Fleming, who was in a mask herself as the great French conceptual artist Sophie Calle, could translate all the questions into her native tongue, before he would then answer.

The second year student explained: “As part of the Arts programme I’m exploring the issues surrounding ‘identity’ and, to some extent, masks.”

“The British artist Gillian Wearing has done some very interesting work with this topic.”

“She has a very interesting take on the idea of identity. My tutor has asked me to explore Gillian Wearing.”

“We’re – myself and Maria – involved in an experiment, exploring our sense of identity.”

I was game for a laugh. And we all somehow seemed able to keep a straight face for the most part.

But we’d burst out laughing whenever Steve’s cut-out fell off on a couple

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of occasions, which brought a whole new meaning to the mask slipping during an interview!

“I find this very interesting because you’re asking me all these questions about myself as a musician, or about playing with The Waterboys, U2 or In Tua Nua,” he said.

“I was given a violin at three years of age and my sense of identity is so wrapped up with being a violinist that when the violin isn’t beside me I feel like one of my limbs is missing.

“It’s actually as bad as that. Now,

that’s a pretty deep psychological problem.”

Yet Steve didn’t grow up with a hankering to be a rich and famous rock star.

“I had no love for the violin when I was a child. I didn’t want to play it. I wanted to play football. I wanted to be a scientist. I wanted to do everything else, except be a musician,” he admitted.

“If you had asked me even when I was a teenager, ‘What do you want to be?’ I would say, ‘A scientist, a brain surgeon... something else.’”

But he eventually became hooked.

“You know, lucky my parents sent me to the College of Music – for 12 to 14 years – and by the time I was 18 or 19 I was fully cooked, as being able to play the violin,” he said.

Steve had a “hard neck” when he started out on his long and winding road to fame.

Here’s the unabridged version of how he ended up playing with U2 on Sunday Bloody Sunday.

“I grew up in Sutton, North County Dublin. And Bono was a familiar sight to me as a 15-year-old travelling on the bus to his girlfriend in Raheny,” Steve recalled.

“And even then he had the swagger of a rock star.

“So they played in our school. I went to (St) Fintan’s (High) School in Sutton. They were called The Hype, and they were awful!”

“But a girl in my class played in the band. She played the flute with them. They had a flute player, believe it or not.

“And one of the covers they did was Nights in White Satin by The Moody Blues, which I really love. And they did a terrible version of it.

“But they did it. And I was very

impressed as a 15-year-old kid.

“I never heard about U2 – I’d seen their posters around the place.

“I had thought, ‘What a s\*\*\*e name! U2! How pretentious could you get with pictures of an American bombing plane!’ It wasn’t even punk.

“And there they were: and they were young guys – 16,17,18 – doing it, and they were knocking the ball out of the park.

“So when I heard the first record Boy about three years later I thought, ‘Wow! These guys are the real deal. This is pretty good’.

“And I met The Edge at a bus stop and I told him that I’d heard the record.”

To make a long story even longer, Steve asked The Edge if they needed a fiddle player.

“At that time I was 20/21 and I had a hard neck and I needed to get some work,” he added.

“He took my number. I still remember the book I was reading:

Herman Hesse’s Glass Bead Game.

“I tore the back page off and wrote my number on it and gave it to him.

“And he called my old dad, who I lost recently. And he said, ‘Steven, this chap called The Edge wants you to give him a shout’.

“So that was it. What an experience for a young man – playing in a recording studio.”

But it didn’t work out quite so well when he tried chancing his arm on another occasion.

“I met Bob Geldof outside Blooms Hotel and I asked him the same question: ‘Do you need an electric violin player?’” he recalled,

laughing.

**TREAT NIGHT**  
Steve Wickham and Co play in Donegal on Halloween



**VIVA ESPANA** The Waterboys performing in Barcelona back in 2019



**LEARNING THE ROPES** Starting out with In Tua Nua



**LONDON BOYS** Steve and Mike Scott at the Roadhouse, England back on May 24, 2019



fiddle player.”

Steve’s big break came when, out-of-the-blue, he was asked if he’d like to jump ship and leave In Tua Nua to join The Waterboys line-up in the mid-80s.

“Mike (Scott) had heard my playing on a Sinead O’Connor demo which I had played on in Karl Wallinger’s studio in London. Karl was a member of The Waterboys,” he told me.

“And they liked my violin playing and they said, ‘We think we could do with that guy on the new record’.

“This was when they were making the big record, This Is the Sea.

“It wasn’t particularly new to me because I had played with U2 before that. I’d seen the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain earlier.

“So when I met Mike and Karl it wasn’t completely new territory, but it was certainly a great opportunity.”

Asked if he felt guilty about leaving In Tua Nua he confessed: “When I

was a younger man I was incredibly ambitious, like most young men.

“And I valued ambition more than friendship and loyalty.

“And so when the chance came along to tour America and to be with somebody that’s in the charts and jump on that ship – I jumped with both feet and left behind my comrades.

“In Tua Nua were a big band, so they were able to absorb the loss of a violin player.

“They got the beautiful Aingeala De Burca straight after that and then Andre Previn’s daughter Lovely Previn joined in my place.

“There’s a tacit understanding between musicians – tempus fugit and all that, and carpe diem and all the other aphorisms that have come down to us over the years.”

Modestly, he added: “You know, fiddle players are incredibly expendable.

“We’re a\*\*\*\*\*s, musicians, a lot of

listening to a whole load of music. BP had an amazing collection of music,” he recalled.

“I made friends with Elvis and he asked me would I play on Spike.

“And it was a beautiful experience because there were so many great musicians: Derek Bell of The Chieftains, Christy Moore – all the huge luminaries of Irish music.

“Elvis collected them all around him and had a great producer, T Bone Burnett.”

This is the same Grammy winning producer, of course, that rose to fame as a guitarist in Bob Dylan’s band and later did the soundtracks for O Brother, Where Art Thou and Walk The Line. He also famously brought Robert Plant and Alison Krauss together for their Rising Sand album.

“Also, for me, it was the pride of being on the same record as Paul McCartney. So, that was lovely,” he added.

“I think I’ve played on maybe 200 records! It might be more than that. I’ve been very lucky to be on all those records.”

Steve, who has also appeared on ex-Waterboys’ member Joe Chester’s recent superb solo album Jupiter’s Wife, said he has never had any major bust-ups when in the studio with Mike Scott.

“I’ve always seen myself as a violinist, not a songwriter. My role in The Waterboys has been to serve that song – and to try and inhabit the feeling or the thought in the lyric or the song,” he explained.

“In my opinion, Mike is one of the great songwriters. You get pointers along the way. Mike is a great artistic director and a great bandleader.

“So, have we had conflicts? Yeah, we’ve conflicts all the time but that’s the artistic process. Somebody says, ‘You should paint that red.’

“No, you shouldn’t. You should paint it blue!”

I’ve always been partial to Paint It Black myself.

Steve might’ve started out as a reluctant musician, but he has no major regrets about “this lifetime of slavery”, as he joked.

“I really have to thank my parents for sending me to lessons. My parents would always say, ‘Have you considered a life as a musician?’” he concluded.

“It gave me the most wonderful life. It was a wooden passport. It brought me around the world a couple of times.

“In fact, I’ve figured out that I’ve travelled something like a million miles.

“I worked out the number of hours I spent in the air over 40 years travelling: and it’s something like a million miles, which is to the moon and back – twice.”

Talk about seeing The Whole of the Moon! There’s plenty of air miles left in the old dog yet.

■ **The only Irish Waterboys’ gig this year is on Halloween night at the Fomhar Festival in Donegal. Steve is also playing a solo support slot for The Lost Brothers at Vicar St on Dec 2, and December 1 in Dundalk (as well as appearing with them).**