

# discoveries

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## Cat Stevens

Where's he been  
all these years?

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# Where Has He Been?

## Cat Stevens Talks to Discoveries

by Chris Nickson

What's in a name? A great deal. Names define us, and present us to the world. They say a lot about who we are, where we come from, and how we're perceived. Take, for example, Steven Demetri Georgiou. Greek, yes. How about Yusuf Islam? Arabic, in some way.

As a matter of fact, they're the same person at different stages of his life. He was born with the first, and took on the second when he was 30 years old. In between the two he'd enjoyed yet another identity, the one by which he's best known around the world - Cat Stevens.

Now, with a pretty new *Best Of* and his Island label albums all appearing in handsomely remastered editions, it's time to take a look back at the Cat. He walked away from all of that, to devote his life to Islam and his family, and for many years he's refused to talk about the past, as if it was another country he'd left behind and didn't want to revisit. But time changes a lot of things, and he's willing to open up about the days that have become a memory to him since.

Steven Dimitri Georgiou was born in London on July 21, 1947. His mother was Swedish, his father London Greek, a restaurateur who ran an establishment in Soho, which even then had a reputation as London's more bohemian quarter.

Given his age, it was perhaps inevitable that Steven would be drawn toward pop music. But it was only one of his loves, the other being art, and he attended Hammersmith College with the intention of becoming a designer. It was the time of "Swinging London," of Mary Quant, Carnaby Street and the King's Road. Everything was happening around him, and Steven wanted to be a part of it. He was writing songs, and began performing at his college under the name Steve Adams, trying to establish himself on the scene. One of the people he encountered was Mike Hurst, a former member of the Springfields (the group which gave the late Dusty Springfield her start), who'd become a producer. In fact, when they met, Hurst was planning to move to the U.S.

"I was punting my songs around to various publishers and production houses," Stevens recalls. "I met Mike through Jimmy Iconomedes, who was a Greek-American producer, trying to establish himself in the U.K. He had Marc Bolan on his books, and Mike Hurst as an in-house producer. I played Mike some of my songs which impressed him. It got him to change from emigrating to America to record-

ing me."

The pair went into the studio and emerged with some tunes. That was fine, but they still needed a label, and a name that was a bit snappier than Steve Adams. And so Cat Stevens emerged.

"Cat was a good name because my original name would have been very difficult. Cat came from the time, because there were so many cats all over the place - 'Cat Ballou,' 'What's New, Pussycat?,' 'Walking My Cat Named Dog,' all of those. And I had a friend who described my features as somewhat feline. And I kept the name Steven."

Hurst took two completed songs he'd done with Stevens, including the self-written "I Love My Dog," to Tony Hall at Decca, who liked what he heard, and made an offer. They'd put out the record - not on Decca itself, but on their new label, Deram, which was aimed at a more "progressive" market.

"They liked it and decided to use it to launch their new label Deram, which also had the Moody Blues and David Bowie," Stevens remembers.

Released in November 1966, it was an instant smash, going all the way to #28 on the charts. Suddenly Cat Stevens was a star.

"My first major gig was 'Top of the Pops,' which for someone new to the scene was awesome. I was suddenly faced with six million viewers, and I was petrified! But that's the way things

happened in those days. Overnight, stars were made."

His stardom was confirmed when "Matthew And Son" climbed all the way to #2 in February 1967. Not only was he suddenly on the road, taking part in a package tour with the Walker Brothers, Engelbert Humperdinck, and the Jimi Hendrix Experience, but his writing talents were in demand. Another of his songs, "Here Comes My Baby," gave the Tremeloes their first hit after the departure of singer Brian Poole.

"Brian Poole had just left, and he was convinced he was going to be a huge success. Then the Tremeloes covered 'Here Comes My Baby,' and they were the ones who became successful. There were a couple of other covers, too, which weren't so well known - Peter and Gordon did one."

Throughout 1967 the hits truly did keep on coming. There was "I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun," in April, the *Matthew and Son* album a month later, which peaked at #7, and "A Bad Night" (#20). Between touring, writing, recording, and being on the scene, it was a grueling pace, even for a young man. But you took the chances fame offered. Stevens' song "The First Cut Is The Deepest" became a classic single for P. P. Arnold (and would be covered by many others in the future). He filmed a documentary, called "A Spoonful Of Sugar," talking to patients at Stanmore Hospital, during the summer.

He was firing on all cylinders, and it was literally tearing him apart. He rushed to write and record a second album, *New Masters*, in time for Christmas, then was diagnosed with tuberculosis. The cure was literally months of rest in a sanatorium.

"The times were a little bit heavy on me. After about a year of the pop lifestyle I was out of it, and I whisked away into hospital with tuberculosis. It was in Liddhurst, the King Edward VII Hospital. Someone who was there at the same time was Boris Karloff, and I believe he passed away that year, 1968. It was an archaic disease, really, not something you got in the middle of London, so it was quite a shock. But you can get it when you're weak and overstressed."

During his lengthy hospital stay, two singles were issued ("Here Comes My Wife" and "Where Are You") which fulfilled the requirements of his Deram contract. Neither of them were hits, and it seemed as if the rise and fall of Cat Stevens might have happened very quickly. Instead, it proved to be merely the end of phase one.

"One of the important parts of that period of convalescence was that I started to look within myself, getting deeper, and asking big questions about life and the meaning of my existence. That coincided with a growing interest in transcendental meditation, vegetarianism, incense, and psychedelic colors. I was deeply interested, and my earnest search began there. I was given a book on Buddhism, and that's the time I grew my beard.

When I came back, having more or less regained my health, I'd been writing these new, reflective songs, very much in a simple format, with me and my guitar. I wanted a change. I didn't want the session man machinery. I wanted to dictate the sound and keep it as close to me as possible."

Armed with new, more personal songs that seemed to reflect the time more than the brash pop he'd worked on in the past, Stevens was, almost literally, a new man. And he still wanted to make his living from music.

"I had an idea for a musical. I sang a couple of songs from that to Chris Blackwell, who was the head of Island Records. He was really wowed, and offered me a deal. That's how I started my second career; it began with the album *Monz Bone Jakon*."

The album appeared in July 1970, produced by former Yardbird Paul Samwell-Smith. The public didn't immediately take to Stevens' new singer-songwriter style (the album only made #63 in the U.K., and didn't chart at all in America), but a single pulled from it, "Lady D'Arbanville," written for ex-girlfriend Patti D'Arbanville, did



go to #8.

"It was quite Latin-inspired, with some Spanish overtones, emotional and extremely troubadour-ish. Other songs on the album were very fresh, with minimal back, often first takes. It felt very natural."

While the public might not have initially reacted very positively to his songs, other artists did. Reggae star Jimmy Cliff had his first major English hit with a cover of "Wild World" that summer. And, more importantly,



Stevens believed in what he was doing. He put together an acoustic band that included guitarist Alun Davies and returned to the studio to record a follow-up album, *Tea for the Tillerman*, which appeared in December 1970.

"Alun was my right-hand man. We played off each other, especially in the studio. He'd be like a rock sitting there doing his thing of sparkly guitar. Of course, my songs lent themselves to a new sound and a new genre, if you like."

It was a luminous record, very accessible to both an audience coming from pop and those reaching out from folk music, with songs like "Father and Son," "Sad Lisa," and his own version of "Wild World." In retrospect, many of his songs from the time, Stevens says, point toward his future.

"Boys become men, and men's paths don't always walk in the same line. 'Peace Train' took a long time to record, and we never got it as exciting as we did live. The words were a reflection of what I've found today. The root of Islam comes from the word 'salaam,' which means peace. All these coincidences are hidden in my songs."

*Tea for the Tillerman* proved to be his breakthrough. It hit #20 in Britain, and #8 in America, where it stayed on the charts for a massive 79 weeks, with "Wild World" becoming his first American single hit (#11).

"It was a time of change, and a lot of people were writing about that. It was a new generation that wanted a new world, and we weren't content with inheriting the traditions of our parents. In effect, they'd taught us to be liberal and look beyond, and we had. We were looking in many different directions, but the overall message was change."

Having been successful once, Stevens found himself thrust back even more firmly into the spotlight.

"It wasn't quite expected. The size and scale of my second round of success was staggering. I was no longer a star, I was a superstar. Along with that came the money, the increased fame

and adulation. Because I'd had an initial inoculation of success, I was more prepared, and more cautious about contracts. I was able to exert more control over what I recorded, what I wrote, how, when, and where I appeared. For many artists who sign a contract with their first manager, it's difficult to do that. I'd experienced that myself, but I'd become more of my own master, so that was different. One of the last suggestions of my agent back in the old days, before my illness, was to play Buttons in [the pantomime] "Cinderella."

Now he remained master of his own destiny, although he was still on the conveyor belt that was the music business. By October 1971 there was a new album, *Teaser and the Firecat*, which took him to even greater heights.

"Moon Shadow" was a hit on both sides of the Atlantic, and the LP itself reached #3 in Britain, #2 in America. "Peace Train," released as a single only in the U.S. confirmed Stevens' new status by going all the way to #7.

But the one that put him over the top, also taken from *Teaser and the Firecat*, came early in 1972. The irony was that "Morning Has Broken" wasn't even really a Cat Stevens song. The words came from a children's hymn by Eleanor Farjeon, and Yes-man Rick Wakeman played the piano part on the record. Regardless of that, it's become a song forever associated with Stevens, a top ten hit in Britain and America, one that crossed generations in its appeal.

How could he follow that? By broadening the colors of his music, which was exactly what Stevens did on *Catch Bull at Four*, bringing synthesizer into the mix. It worked; the album topped the charts at America, and rose to #2 in Britain. It seemed as if he could do absolutely no wrong, but he wasn't a happy person. All the fame and fortune was fine, but it wasn't giving him what he desired inside. Some of that would be reflected on his next record,

*Foreigner*, one side of which was taken up with the complex "Foreigner Suite."

"I think it was me saying to people that they didn't yet know me," Stevens explains. "I used the name Foreigner because I felt I was being branded with an identity, particularly by my publicist and the big American record business machinery. I wanted to stop, and artistically make a statement. Of course it was so much of a success (going all the way to #3), which worried me slightly. At the same time I'd asked for it, because I didn't want to continue and become a caricature of myself. Musically, it was again an expression of change, looking at some of the things that were exciting me musically; I'd always had a very deep appreciation of blues and soul, of black music generally. One of my heroes in the early days was Leadbelly, an incredible figure in the history of blues and folk. My collection included John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and Rufus Thomas."

He largely stopped playing live, and also left England for a year in tax exile (he would donate the money he would have given the tax man to UNESCO). But there was more than just money behind his journey.

"I became a bit of a recluse, moving to Rio, in Brazil. I was a wanderer, living a nomadic life out of a suitcase, occasionally coming home to see my family. I was seeking my place and seeking my future, and hoping I'd find my true identity."

He was, in his own words, "on the road to find out." But he hadn't reached a destination yet, although he was very consciously seeking, as his next album in 1974 would make crystal clear.

"The album after *Foreigner* was *Buddah and the Chocolate Box*. That was a record where I tried to prove that I hadn't gone away. There were some familiar tones and sounds in the songs, but that album epitomized the paradox of my life at the time. I was standing between the life of an ascetic and the

## CAT STEVENS



life of a lover of the world, because I had a Buddah and a chocolate box. Those two things summed up my life. I realized I had to keep searching. Not long after that I was given a copy of the Koran. I'd studied different religions, even Sufism, but I'd never looked at Islam, because I had preconceptions connected to my Greek ancestry. Whatever was Turkish was anathema to me, including the religion. But here was a gift of the Koran. I realized a book couldn't hurt me, and I began to read it with a very open mind. I looked at this religion, and as I began to understand it, I realized it wasn't as foreign as I thought. I never knew Muslims believed in God! I didn't know any Muslims, so there was no one to interpret it for me. I found a lot of familiarities, seeing the names of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and it wasn't what I expected."

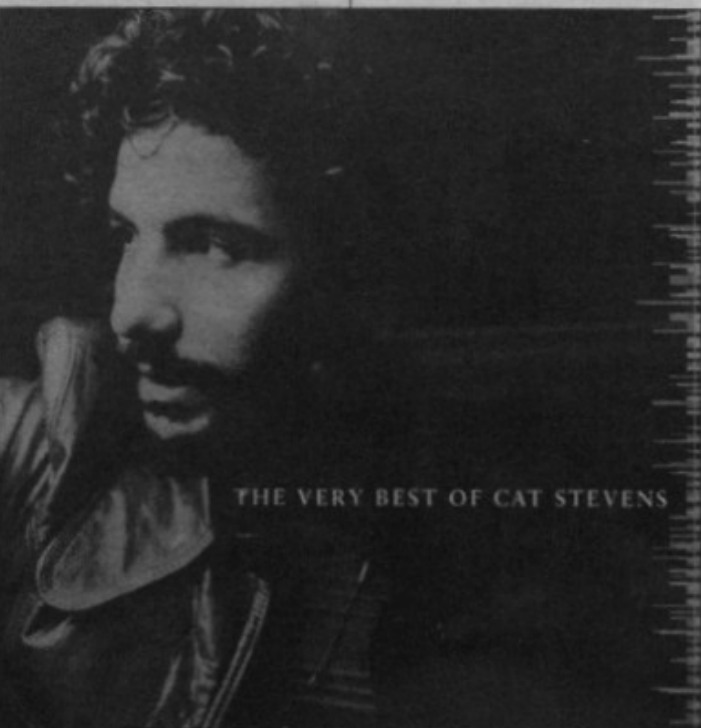
While Stevens was searching, the world was going on around him. The album climbed almost to the top of the charts in both America and Britain, while a cover of Sam Cooke's "Another Saturday Night" became a top twenty single in both countries.

The following year, 1975, saw the release of *Greatest Hits*, a collection of his Island years smashes, coinciding with a big tour. Number two in Britain, #6 in the U.S., it effectively rounded off an era for Stevens, who was thinking more and more about following his heart and becoming a Muslim. His new concerns would appear, indirectly, on his next release, *Numbers*.

"*Numbers* was based on a strange prophetic figure who represented zero. He went to a planet where they made numbers from one to nine. He caused a stir. On that ethereal level, it was looking for answers."

His first album of the period not to chart in the UK, it was a complex, involved work that went well beyond the usual singer-songwriter fare, demanding a lot of the listener. It also came as punk was breaking in Britain, and the old guard was being slowly routed by the young Turks. Not that Stevens was paying much attention to that; his own thoughts were going in a more spiritual direction. Still, he wasn't yet ready to abandon music, and issued a new album in 1977.

"That was *Isitso*, and the landmark songs on that was "(I Never Wanted) To Be A Star" and "(Remember The Days Of The) Old Schoolyard." I was studying the Koran then, but it hadn't really impacted on my life." But he was looking at it very seriously, and that year began attending the mosque, formally adopting Islam on December 23, 1977, and changing his name to



THE VERY BEST OF CAT STEVENS

Yusuf Islam. "The most important change was that I started praying regularly. You have the five pillars of Islam - prayer, giving to charity, fasting in one month of the year, and making a pilgrimage. I was concerned with getting those right, and I was happy, and I wanted to get other people along with me, which wasn't as easy as I thought. Music wasn't an issue. I never saw anything in the Koran which degraded music."

In fact, he'd only make one more real album, 1979's *Back to Earth*, before turning away from music. "I found some expectations in the life of someone who wants to be good and stay away from harm, that working in the music business wasn't conducive to a spiritual life. I realized I had to exclude myself, at least for a while. So I withdrew. That was a shock for many people, and it was meant to be; I wanted to underline my commitment to what I'd in fact been writing about for many years and found in Islam. I tried to communicate it, but didn't succeed very well."

Success had been fine. In truth, with a new name he'd moved on to another stage of his life, and what was past was history.

"In the stage of my development, it was natural to marry and start a family. My first child was born in 1980. Then I thought about education for her. I wrote a poem called "A is for Allah." I wanted to teach her that before apples and balls comes the Creator of everything. I got involved with some other parents, and in 1981 we began this school called Islamia.

Now there are four schools, covering the full age spectrum. I withdrew from the music world and became very involved in education and relief organizations. They occupied my time for many years. But the growing distortion of the message of Islam began to distress me. People hadn't had the chance to learn that the basic message was peace. I decided to get up and do something, [and] went into the recording studio again. Not to make music - I think my career as Cat Stevens had had a finite beginning and end - but to educate."

The result, in 1995, was *The Life of the Last Prophet*, a primarily spoken-word album. "To me, Islam is encapsulated in the life of the Last Prophet (Mahomet). On that record I sang a famous traditional Islamic song, "The White Moon Is Risen Over Us," and that was a tremendous hit in Muslim countries!"

It was as if he was jinxed to have hits, in one way or another. But perhaps he'd also come to realize that in denying his recording abilities, he was cutting himself off from some God-given talent, and since then he has made occasional trips to the recording studio for various projects, including a benefit compilation for those who suffered in the Balkans war.

"It inspired me to do something. At the end of the war we produced a compilation of songs which had kept the spirit of the defenders of Bosnia alive. I wrote two songs for it - "Little Ones (of Sarajevo and Dunblane)" and "Mother, Father, Sister, Brother." So I've become involved in recording again, although not as a career. My latest double album is again spoken-word, *A For Allah*, based on the poem I wrote for my daughter. It was meant to be a

## "I never saw anything in the Koran which degraded music."

miniature encyclopedia based on the 28 letters of the alphabet in Arabic. It's a grounding for kids, with faith over everything else, to see the world with spiritual eyes. There are songs I've helped to write, and one I perform."

These days, Yusuf Islam is a man of many parts, and one who seems very content with himself, and who's come to terms with the past he turned away from.

"We have schools in London, in Willesden to be precise, and our offices for Mountain of Light in Islington. The area where we have our schools is where I recorded *Tea for the Tillerman* and *Teaser and the Firecat*. They were both done at Morgan. Music has the ability to etch time on your memories and heart. These days I do listen to and reflect on those songs. Of course, the memories are all there. But it's interesting, listening to the words, how they became predictions. I was unaware of that at the time. "On The Road To Find Out" is a perfect illustration of my life before it happened,

before I discovered my spiritual home."

Home is where the heart is, and Steven Dimitri Georgiou/Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam seems to have found his heart.

### Singles

1966  
I Love My Dog/ Portobello Road (Deram)  
Matthew And Son/ Granny (Deram)  
1967  
I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun/ School Is Out (Deram)  
A Bad Night/ The Laughing Apple (Deram)  
Kitty/ Blackness Of The Night (Deram)  
1968  
Lovely City/ Image Of Hell (Deram)  
Here Comes My Wife/ It's A Supa Dupa Life (Deram)  
1969  
Where Are You/ The View From The

Top (Deram)  
1970  
Lady D'Arbanville/ Time/ Fill My Eyes (Island)  
1971  
Wild World/ Miles From Nowhere (Island)  
Moon Shadow/ Father And Son (Island)  
Tuesday's Dead/ Miles From Nowhere (Island)  
Peace Train/Where Do The Children Play? (Island)  
Morning Has Broken/ I Want To Live In A Wigwam (Island)  
1972  
Can't Keep It In/ Crab Dance (Island)  
Sitting/ Crab Dance (Island)  
1973  
The Hurt/ Silent Sunlight (Island)  
1974  
Oh Very Young/ 100 Dreams (Island)  
Another Saturday Night/ Home In The Sky (Island)  
Ready/I Think I See The Light (Island)  
1975  
Two Fine People/ Bad Penny (Island)  
1976  
Banapple Gas/ Ghost Town (Island)  
Land O' Free Love And Goodbye/ (I Never Wanted) To Be A Star (Island)  
1977  
(Remember The Days Of The) Old Schoolyard/ Doves (Island)  
(Remember The Days Of The) Old Schoolyard/ Land O' Free Love And Goodbye (Island)  
Was Dog A Doughnut/ Sweet Jamaica (Island)  
1979  
Bad Brakes/ Nascimento (Island)  
Last Love Song/ Nascimento (Island)  
Randy/ Nascimento (Island)

### Albums

*Matthew and Son* (1967, Deram)  
*New Masters* (1967, Deram)  
*Mona Bone Jakon* (1970, Island)  
*Tea for the Tillerman* (1970, Island)  
*Teaser and the Firecat* (1971, Island)  
*Catch Bull at Four* (1972, Island)  
*Foreigner* (1973, Island)  
*Buddah and the Chocolate Box* (1974, Island)  
*Saturday Night* (1974, Island)  
*Numbers* (1975, Island)  
*Itiso* (1977, Island)  
*Back to Earth* (1979, Island)  
**Compilations:**  
*The World of Cat Stevens* (1970, Decca)  
*Matthew and Son/New Masters* (1971, Deram)  
*Very Young and Early Songs* (1972, Deram US)  
*Greatest Hits* (1975, Island)  
*First Cuts* (1980, Deram)  
*The Collection* (1986, Castle)  
*Cat Stevens* (1986, Spot)  
*Footsteps in the Dark - Greatest Hits, Vol. 2* (1985, Island)  
*The Very Best of Cat Stevens* (1990, Island)  
*Wild World* (1993, Pulsar)  
*The Very Best of Cat Stevens* (2000, UTV)

**As Yusuf Islam**  
*The Life of the Last Prophet* (Mountain of Light)  
*A Is For Allah* (Mountain of Light)

