

Cat Stevens

(a.k.a. Yusuf Islam)

comes full circle

by Ken Sharp

One of the '70s beloved and enduring songwriters, Cat Stevens, pulled a disappearing trick worthy of Harry Houdini.

By the mid-'70s, a festering dissatisfaction with the spiritually hollow nature of fame led Stevens on a quest for redemption. Gone was the momentary thrill of a gold record or sold-out concert performance. In its place, a disconcerting sense of ennui tore away at his soul. One thing was clear: Stevens was tired of being a pop star.

In 1975, after a near-death experience in Malibu, Calif., where Stevens almost drowned, struggling in the treacherous currents of a raging Pacific Ocean, he had an epiphany. A major life change was around the corner. But it would take an additional two years before Stevens broke free of the chains of his pop stardom. Retreating from the barren moral and ethical emptiness of his chosen profession, Stevens became a Muslim, embracing the Islamic faith and quitting the music business altogether after releasing one final album, *Back To Earth*.

For the last two decades, Yusuf Islam, as he is now known, has dedicated himself to increasing awareness of Islam and raising a family. A respected worldwide emissary of the Islamic faith, Yusuf has steadfastly devoted his energies to educational, humanitarian and charitable endeavors.

But let's rewind more than half a century to the year 1947. Born Steven Demetre Georgiou, the budding musical star drew profound inspiration from the sights, smells and sounds of his thriving environment. Living in the heart of London's bustling theater district, 24/7 exposure to the arts fired his boundless creative imagination.

By his mid-teens, after receiving his first guitar, Stevens began to compose songs. A natural storyteller boasting a velvety, full-bodied voice, Stevens caught the attention of record producer Mike Hurst, who quickly landed him a deal with Deram Records, a new division of Decca. A flurry of wonderfully crafted and wickedly inventive pop songs followed — "Mathew And Son," "Portobello Road," "I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun" and "I Love My Dog" — rocketing the artist, now christened Cat Stevens, to the upper echelon of the British music charts. Stevens also found major success as a songwriter with "Here Comes My Baby," a smash #4 hit for The Tremeloes, and Rod Stewart's tender interpretation of "The First Cut Is The Deepest," a U.K. #1.

Yet in 1968, Stevens hit a wall. His unfortunate bout with tuberculosis caused the rising musical sensation to reevaluate his current path as a dandy pop star. Abandoning the light, cheery nature of his tuneful, pop-oriented material, Stevens drew from within, crafting a heartfelt tapestry of deeply introspective folk songs that garnered him international acclaim.

His seminal '70s work, *Tea For The Tillerman*, *Teaser And The Firecat* and *Catch Bull At Four*, introduced the world to his remarkable gift as a master storyteller. A massive international star, Stevens' spiritually uplifting and enlightening body of work, comprising stellar tracks such as "Where Do The Children Play," "And I Might Die Tonight," "Wild World," "Sitting" and "Moonshadow," spoke eloquently of a stunning talent eminently wiser than his years.

Commemorating the 30th anniversary of the release of his classic '70s work, A&M/Universal Music Enterprises has launched a major CD reissue program of his popular releases, *Mona Bone Jakon*, *Tea For The Tillerman*, *Teaser And The Firecat*, *Catch Bull At Four*, *Foreigner*, *Buddha And The Chocolate Box*, *Numbers*, *Izitso* and *Back To Earth*. In 2001, longtime fans can also look forward to the release of a comprehensive box set comprising a cache of unreleased material charting the course of his illustrious career.

Meanwhile, just released on the artist's own imprint, Mountain Of Light, is *A Is For Allah*, an Islamic book/CD for children featuring two songs performed by Yusuf.

Today, newly reconciled with his storied musical past, Yusuf has finally come to terms with his life as Cat Stevens, happily reconnecting with the joy, sublime beauty and glowing positivity of his work.

Amid an avalanche of considerable public and critical interest in his music, *Goldmine* flew to London, England, to spend a delightful afternoon with the artist formerly known as Cat Stevens. A charming English gentleman with a cheeky sense of humor, Stevens is a marvelous raconteur, speaking

freely about his rich and glorious musical career.

Goldmine: Tell us about how spirituality has always infused your work.

Yusuf Islam: It wouldn't be difficult to decipher my spiritual ambitions through listening to my lyrics. So therefore I think people would have already had a premonition that I was on my way somewhere, but it wasn't quite clear where we were going.

"On The Road To Find Out"...

"On the Road To Find Out." [recites some of the lyrics] "In the end I'll know but on the way I'll wonder..." So I was still in this phase of wondering. In "Peace Train" I never explicitly said where I thought it would end up. Interestingly the word "Islam" itself is a derivative of the word "peace" in Arabic, which is "salam." So there were hints in my songs, and I was a man of change. I loved trying out new ideas, thinking and pondering this world from different angles, and I suppose that all began for me back when I had my first crisis in life with getting tuberculosis. After an initial year of success and flashbulbs and adoring fans, my seat was vacant and I was in bed thinking about this world whizzing by me and where I was going. It was my first brush with death. That made me think more seriously. At that point I started reading books about the self like *The Secret Path* by Dr. Paul Brunton. It's a very interesting book for anyone who's of Western mind looking for a place of peace within his life. For me it was a revelation.

Did your spiritual beliefs help you deal with the initial onset of your phenomenal success?

For sure. My first period of success was an inoculation [laughs] towards preparing me for the next phase of exposure to fame and fortune. I was on a secret mission. Perhaps not everybody could see it, but through my words they can find my story and my longings and yearnings for peace and enlightenment. My albums illustrated that also. For instance "Catch Bull At Four" was taken from a kind of 10-stage enlightenment process from Zen Buddhism. And my music evolved to the point I suppose. I tried many different styles as well. I mean *Forriquer* was one stage. It was me saying, "Look, you can't nail me down. [laughs] I don't want to be nailed down in this particular style or format or package or box. I want to be free and say it from another part of my soul."

Today you are finally embracing your musical career, not shying away from speaking about it.

When I finally discovered through receiving a gift of the Koran, when I finally discovered Islam, it opened up a whole new world of knowledge for me, which linked hitherto, I had only guessed. It sort of turned them into realities. My belief in God became absolutely confirmed when I read this book. And in a way it was a confirmation of all the things that I instinctively felt and also those things of which I had been brought up with through the Bible, through my Christian education and upbringing. Even things from my Buddhist journeying, this Koran was weaving it all together in a wonderful picture

Sheet music courtesy of Clefnotes, Toronto



British sheet music.

of unity and oneness. So I finally embraced Islam and I never read anywhere in the Koran anything to do with music. I mean I couldn't see one word which said music in quotation marks. So I never thought it was a problem. What there were problems was connected with lifestyle, frivolous and temporary relationships, and obviously those kinds of things are not quite sanctioned by the Koran, not at all. So drinking, partying, all those things that really quite honestly gave me a headache anyway and were problems, things I wrote about. Like in "Hard Headed Woman" I sing, [recites lyrics] "I knew a lot of fancy dancers. People who can glide you across the floor. They move so smooth but have no answers when you ask them what do you come here for." But you know what they come here for. It's not the real thing, it's the fleeting life. So in other words, I realized there was a problem with remaining in the business and trying to purify my life and get myself on the right track. Then I heard some severe warnings about the music business itself explicitly coming from scholars. People who were teaching me, so I decided to just quit. And that I did in a kind of dramatic fashion. And I suppose again that reflects my urge for 100 percent maximum commitment. Whether I'm a musician, an artist or a Muslim, I'm gonna be committed. And at that point I couldn't see any place for music at that time in my life. It was not necessary. I had done that — been there, done that sort of thing. So that's when I sold my instruments for charity and walked off. It was a sad moment in a way for many of my fans, and perhaps [laughing] it was one of those things I now regret, perhaps doing it in that way. But I needed to envelop myself in my new life and I had to learn basics like a child going to primary school again. I was just beginning at the very lowest level. And I wanted to be at that level. I felt it was my chance to escape the limelight and to get human again. Then after that, a period passed of great experiences and turbulence. Sometimes I'd be involuntarily asked to comment on major crises in the Muslim world and in the world generally, and it was only because I was a Muslim celebrity, someone that people knew that caused me to be in that position. But I was not really prepared many times to answer those kind of complex questions. Then more and more I saw the picture of Islam as it was projected in the media becoming horrifying. People were turned off because of strange and unpredictable events in the Muslim world, which

had nothing to do with the faith itself which I had been exposed to through the Koran. Nothing like the experience I was living and the majority of Muslims actually live every day without much controversy. I was dragged into controversy.

It eventually became clear that I should look again at the idea of communicating through the medium. The medium I knew best was recording. So I went back into the studio and said, "I'm going to record something to at least help people to understand this faith that I've grown to love and that I feel can benefit so many people if they just understood it." I began my Mountain Of Light record label, and the first recording I did was *The Life Of The Last Prophet*. Peace be upon him.

And that is because so many people today, with all the amount of information flying all over the place through the Internet and satellite television and whatever, so many people have no idea about who this man was and what Islam means. So that I took as my first task. When that happened I started softening my approach and started looking back at my own music. And even though I was not going to make that kind of music again... I did decide to look back into it.

Did you relisten to your recorded work?

I had gone through a phase of actually separating my songs into two groups. The first group was what you might call the amoral or moral, social, spiritual, family, ecological, those kinds of songs which quite frankly nobody can argue with. Other songs, I call them love songs, songs of [laughs] unfettered love and symbolism of that sort, those kinds of songs I brought to another side. But I always recognized that the majority of my songs were thinker songs, songs that didn't make people dance. In fact that was one of the things that upset me when my records came on in a disco. [laughs] People would sit down and stop dancing and start contemplating. [laughs]

How can you do the jig to "Father & Son"?

[Laughing] Do The Twist! [laughs] So that was it. In a way I reevaluated that. Then when it came to striking a new deal, there's all these mergers going on everywhere. Suddenly Island Records wasn't owned by Chris Blackwell anymore. It was all a whole new control system. Then there were all these prospects of rewriting some of the contracts so we'd get a slightly fairer deal. And then being involved a little more in some of the compilations and having a bit more input. There I saw an opportunity to let people know what I'm doing today through my work of yesterday.

The remastered sound on the new reissues of your work is breathtaking. Tea For The Tillerman sounds amazing.

Yes I know. Unbelievable. It's incredible. For that I have to thank Bill Levenson and his amazing dedication. Again there are personalities in there that help remind me of some of the treasures that still reside in those tunes, in those words. With that kind of encouragement, I suppose also with a little help from my

Cat Stevens U.S. Discography

by Tim Neely

45s			
Label/#	A-side/B-side	Year	NMS
Deram 7501	I Love My Dog/Portobello Road	1966	\$10
Deram 7505	Matthew And Son/Granny	1967	10
Deram 85006	I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun/School Is Out	1967	10
Deram 85015	Laughing Apple/Bad Night	1967	10
Deram 7518	Kitty/The Blackness Of The Night	1968	8
A&M 1211	Lady D'Arbanville/Time — Fill My Eyes	1970	55
A&M 1231	Wild World/Miles From Nowhere	1970	5
A&M 1265	Moon Shadow/I Think I See The Light	1971	4
A&M 1265	Moon Shadow/I Think I See The Light (picture sleeve)	1971	6
A&M 1291	Peace Train/Where Do The Children Play	1971	4
A&M 1291	Peace Train/Where Do The Children Play (picture sleeve)	1971	6
A&M 1335	Morning Has Broken/I Want To Live In A Wigwam	1972	4
A&M 1335	Morning Has Broken/I Want To Live In A Wigwam (picture sleeve)	1972	6
A&M 1396	Sitting/Crab Dance	1972	4
A&M 1396	Sitting/Crab Dance (picture sleeve)	1972	6
Deram 85079	Kitty/Where Are You	1972	6
A&M 1418	The Hurt/Silent Sunlight	1973	4
A&M 1418	The Hurt/Silent Sunlight (picture sleeve)	1973	6
A&M 1503	Oh Very Young/100 I Dream	1974	4
A&M 1503	Oh Very Young/100 I Dream (picture sleeve)	1974	6
A&M 1549	Another Saturday Night/Home In The Sky (unissued)	1974	4
A&M 1602	Another Saturday Night/Home In The Sky	1974	4
A&M 1602	Another Saturday Night/Home In The Sky (picture sleeve)	1974	6
A&M 1645	Ready/I Think I See The Light	1974	4
A&M 1700	Two Fine People/Bad Penny	1975	4
A&M 1785	Banapple Gas/Ghost Town	1976	4
A&M 1785	Banapple Gas/Ghost Town (picture sleeve)	1976	6
A&M 1924	(I Never Wanted) To Be A Star/Land O' Freeloze And Goodbye	1977	4
A&M 1948	(Remember The Days Of The) Old School Yard/Land O' Freeloze And Goodbye	1977	4
A&M 1948	(Remember The Days Of The) Old School Yard/Land O' Freeloze And Goodbye (picture sleeve)	1977	6
A&M 1971	Was Dog A Doughnut/Sweet Jamaica	1977	4
A&M 2109	Bad Brakes/Nascimento	1979	4
A&M 2126	Randy/Nascimento	1979	4
A&M 2683	If You Want To Sing Out, Sing Out/I Want To Live In A Wigwam	1984	4
A&M 2711	Father And Son (same on both sides; promo only)	1985	10

12-Inch Singles (promo)

Label/#	Title	Year	NMS
A&M 8440 DJ	Was Dog A Doughnut (Remix) (same on both sides)	1977	15



Vinyl Albums

Deram DE 16005	Matthew And Son (mono)	1967	20
Deram DES 18005	Matthew And Son (stereo)	1967	15
Deram DES 18010	New Masters	1968	15
A&M SP-4260	Mona Bone Jakon (brown label)	1970	12
A&M SP-4280	Tea For The Tillerman (brown label)	1971	12
A&M SP-4313	Teaser And The Firecat (brown label)	1971	12
Deram DES 18005/10	Matthew And Son/New Masters (2 LPs)	1971	15
A&M SP-4365	Catch Bull At Four	1972	12
Deram DES 18061	Very Young And Early Songs	1972	12
A&M SP-4391	Foreigner	1973	12
A&M SP-3623	Buddha And The Chocolate Box	1974	12
A&M QU-53623	Buddha And The Chocolate Box (quadraphonic)	1974	20
A&M QU-54280	Tea For The Tillerman (quadraphonic)	1974	20
A&M QU-54313	Teaser And The Firecat (quadraphonic)	1974	20
A&M QU-54365	Catch Bull At Four (quadraphonic)	1974	20
A&M QU-54391	Foreigner (quadraphonic)	1974	20
A&M SP-4260	Mona Bone Jakon (mostly stereo label)	1974	10

(Please see Discography page 19)

older brother, David. He's always been an important figure in my life. I think he also wanted to help me maximize my ability to shape the musical inheritance I was going to hand over. When I pass away obviously that's what a lot of people are going to still remember. I remember in my song called "Sitting" I said, [recites lyrics] "I'm not making love to anyone's wishes only for that light I see. 'Cause when I'm dead and lowered low in my grave that's going to be the only thing that's left of me." So in a way I had an idea of the purity of the soul and the need to guard it against corruption, against becoming lost in the world. So that was already in my songs. So coming back to that I realized looking at my songs that there is a value and an explanation in a way of why I am who I am today. And if I don't fill in those gaps people will not read between the lines. And the lines that have been written are so scarce and often so distorted that nobody will ever understand. And that I felt was almost criminal. I said, "No, I've got to get involved." Not only that but there were a lot of friends and fans that in a way I've been slightly unjust to and I wanted to make amends, and so here was my chance.

Are you enjoying the feedback today from your fans? I know that you occasionally read the message boards on www.catstevens.com.

I do log on sometimes to www.catstevens.com and www.catstevens.co.uk. Those two sites really have a lot of activity, a lot of messages. And I've given a few, I've sent a few messages out there. But I'm petrified of being inundated [laughs] with e-mail if I ever opened up that channel. I also have a Web site called www.mountainofflight.com, but from a safe distance I enjoy it. I love reading some of the warm letters of support, even after this strange escapade of me trying to go and visit Jerusalem and being sent back, so many people understood and sympathized with my position. They understood it.

When was the last time you had a guitar in your hands that you actually played?

Good question. I would think it was the "Year Of The Child" 1979, that was my last concert. I may have carried a guitar off stage that day, but that was it.

I heard you showed up at Live Aid to play.

Sing, I didn't have a guitar with me, and that's probably why they were a little bit suspicious [laughs] and wondered what kind of show I was going to give. I'd written a song called appropriately "The End." [laughs] It had a great and wonderful universal message about the fact that whether you're Muslim, Buddhist, Christian or Jew, you better know we're gonna recognize you. Everyone is going to be held to account in the end for what they do in this life. But unfortunately they didn't have enough faith in little old me [and] I got diverted. It was a great moment. It was a time when people were thinking again about charity, thinking seriously about giving. No one knows quite what happened to the funds today. Again there's all those problems that happen with those kinds of mega events.

I'm staying at a hotel in Piccadilly, very close to where you grew up in the West End. Bring us back to your childhood and days of wonder growing up amid the bustling and vibrant theater district. Discuss how that impacted you as a person and songwriter.

It was the backdrop. And in a way one of the major influences of my life and career was the fact that I grew up in the center of London and the hub of the West End where theaters and coffee bars and jukeboxes played throughout the night. So in a way it was natural that I fell into the entertainment world. It was a natural step. There were many great shows which came by. Right across the road from us was The Shaftesbury Theatre, so *Hair* was one of those shows. One of the first places I played was The Saville Theatre. I played there with George Fame and Julie Felix back in 1967. It was strange to go out of my front door just down the road [laughs] to The Saville Theatre. And again some of my early gigs, some of my first shows were at little kebab shops and pubs and folk clubs just outside my door more or less, just a few hundred yards away.

You played at Les Cousins, a folk club.

It was an inspiring club. I never really played that often there, maybe only once. It was a very elitist folk club, and I was one of the young trainees. I certainly was not ready to stand up next to Bert Jansch or John Renbourn or Davey Graham, who frequented that club. And Paul Simon also. He was launching his career more or less from Britain; he had a lot of support here. Judith Pepe was one of these strange ladies who used to help him in his career advice. She had a little clothes shop down the road on Greek Street. Anyway, it was an inspiring venue, but eventually I was looking at not necessarily being a performer but being a songwriter. That's an important point really, which maybe some people don't know. I thought I could stay in the background, write songs and have other people sing them. Unfortunately the songs that I wrote were so quirky. [laughs]

That brings up one of your quirkiest and infectious early songs and a big hit for you in Britain, "Matthew And Son."

That was a fusion of many different things at that time. I was full of socialistic ideas at that moment, but they were not inspired by the right motives I would say because I had a girlfriend who was spending most of her time working. And I thought that left me little time [laughs] to actually share with her. Anyway, that was one point. The only point was I saw this sign somewhere in the city that said "Matthew And Son." That kind of stuck. Then came the little riff for that, which is a very obvious kind of suspension riff. I think the musical element came out great because that was my influence from things like *West Side Story*, which had been in the West End. If you listen to the follow-up to that, "I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun," that again is very Bernstein-ish in some respects, a staccato. It had a lot of that.

Your version of "The First Cut Is The Deepest" sounds like *The Small Faces* could have done a bang-up job. Rod Stewart of course later covered it to great effect.

In a way I always wanted someone like Percy Sledge to sing that song. I didn't know the song was that special when I wrote it. P.P. Arnold found it. Mike Hurst, my producer and P.P. Arnold thought it was a great song and was particularly special. I had a kind of feel for that having a slow rhythm 'n' blues

type of thing. Again, I was writing songs that I thought other people would be singing. Eventually I had to sing them myself.

Your song, "Here Comes My Baby," was a smash hit for The Tremeloes, proving your rising status as a songwriter.

That was amazing when that happened. It was extremely exciting to see my song going so high in the charts by another group. That was great. It was interesting when that whole thing happened. Brian Poole and The Tremeloes, I think they split. Brian Poole felt he was the tops and he just couldn't carry this group with him. And then The Tremeloes made a record [laughs] and it went to #1.

You've mentioned some of your early songs such as "Matthew And Son" and "I'm Gonna Get Me A Gun" that had a pop edge. Then there was a transformation for you in the '70s where your work became much more introspective and folk. What prompted this change in styles?

There were always hints of my folk roots anyway even in my early albums, songs like "The Tramp," one called "Blackness Of The Night," one called "Portobello Road." When you hear those they're kind of folk songs in a way. It's only when the producer and the arranger got together that really my songs started changing. I was starting to write in a way also for my arranger that things became a bit too poppy. I wanted to get away from that. In fact one of the last songs that I recorded with Mike Hurst was an attempt to get him on board that kind of style and that was a song called "Where Are You." It never made it, and so we parted. I knew that was the way I wanted to go. It was only later that I met Chris Blackwell. I had an idea of writing a musical on the Russian Revolution. One of these was "Father And Son" and suddenly he said, "Why don't you sign with Island Records?" It was a great offer.

You spoke earlier of songs fitting within two groups. One of yours defies categorization — "Sun/C79."

It was a kind of fictitious story about a guy, about a pop singer, a rock star who sees his wife-to-be in row C-79. That was the idea. Later she comes backstage. They fall in love and they marry. Then you go back to the beginning of the song where he's singing his song and saying, [recites lyrics] "Sit you down young gentlemen, there's something I want you to know, it happened a long time ago."

What was the first song you wrote that came from within, less emulative of your influences?

I suppose songs like "Peace Train" was extremely unique I think. "Ruby Love," if you want to look at it from a unique point of view because of my background, [had] Mediterranean influences. Those would be two.

Tell me about the British tour you did with Jimi Hendrix and Engelbert Humperdinck. Walker Brothers.

I heard that they used to pull tricks on you such as sending a wind-up toy out on the stage during your show.

I heard about that too. I can't remember it for the life of me. [laughs] Probably things like that happened so often that I wouldn't even remember it. Life on the road. It was exciting, that tour. I remember that I'd done

my particular spot and had gone back to the dressing room and suddenly someone was shouting, "He's started a fire on stage." So we all came dashing down [laughs] and we saw Jimi Hendrix and his guitar on fire. I'd never seen anything like that before. I couldn't imagine [laughs] what was going to happen next. In essence he and Engelbert Humperdinck, I didn't get to know Scott Walker, but Jimi and Engelbert were both human beings who you could relate to, especially off stage. Jimi was a quiet man off stage. In some respects he was pushed by different people I suppose in different ways. And he was shaped by the public that loved him.

Tea For The Tillerman is a brilliant album, your first gold album and one of your most popular to date. Share your recollections behind the making of that landmark effort.

For me it represented a picture of childhood and childish wonderment. And I would say also the spirit of inquiry. I think that was the representative album of those kind of qualities and sensitivities. To me the childish picture on the front told the story.

How long did it take for you to create the artwork on the album cover?

Maybe four or five hours, probably something like that. I think the fact that the album had the feel of being homemade, it wasn't overly produced, it was minimalistic when that word wasn't even known at that time. There was a lot of space, that was also kind of the touch of Paul Samwell-Smith, who gave a lovely aesthetic air to the studio and to the productions. So I think that was one of those special milestone albums which conforms itself out of the blue and suddenly it's there.

Years ago, you cited your last album, Back To Earth, as a favorite. In retrospect, is that your favorite album today? What about that last album made it special?

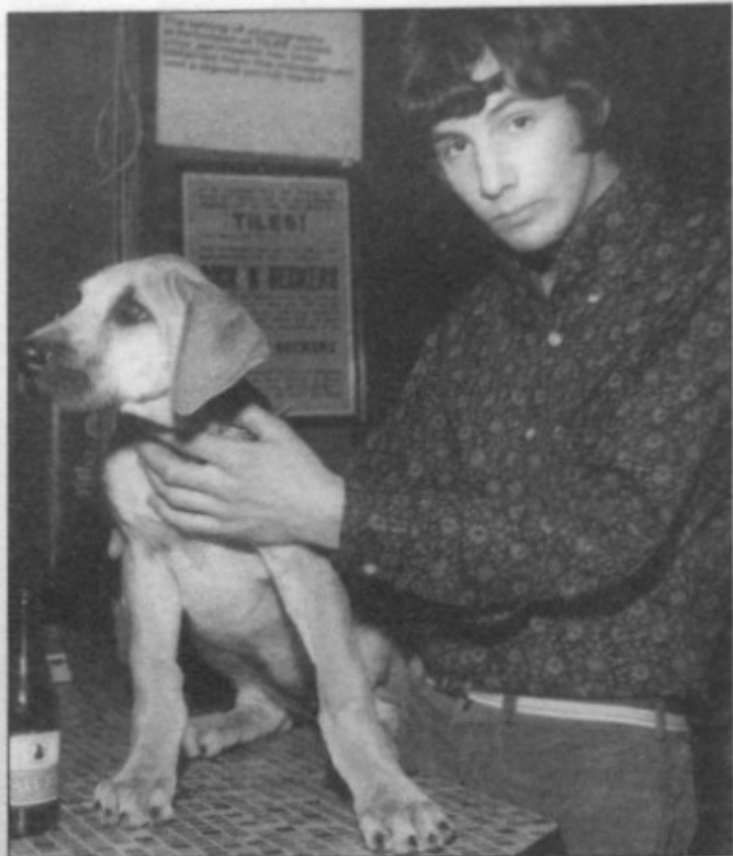
I suppose my songs had become a little bit more matured in the new style that I had developed. Catch Bull At Four was a sign of maturity, but whereas the more adolescent stage was perhaps more emotional and in some sense more sensitive. But each album has its own taste and character.

Your lyrics can stand on their own as poems and stories. What inspired you as a lyricist?

I suppose you'd have to go back to the musicals, which first of all influenced me. All of those musicals were part of the story. So painting stories with words was like my art. I liked to do that. Influences? I suppose I loved the stories behind certain blues songs, Leadbelly's songs, songs about the days of slavery when people were struggling for freedom. Those are real songs, real words. I think [Bob] Dylan came in to make everybody think again about how words can be used in a contemporary music genre. I think that that helped. And along that vein came Paul Simon and various people. But again I think the biggest influence was maybe the musicals in the beginning.

Did The Beatles have an impact on you?

Not lyrically. Musically they were incredibly exciting. The fusion of those four personalities in the studio was revolutionary. I met George [Harrison] and John [Lennon] in David Bailey's studio one day. I was just



Cat Stevens in the 1960s in London.

having a session. We had a very fleeting meeting where I was slightly griping about how long it took me to make it. [laughs] And they said, "Well, you've had a pretty good time," [laughs] because they had taken so long to get from Hamburg to Madison Square Garden. It was just one of those things. I was a little bit dumbfounded meeting them. [laughs] I didn't know quite what to say.

When you broke in America in the '70s, you were on quite a roller coaster ride, either writing, recording or touring. How did you maintain your sanity and protect your integrity during this tumultuous time?

I suppose that I was lucky enough to have two record chiefs, one in the U.K. and Europe and one in the States, who understood the importance of giving space to the artist, and that was Chris Blackwell of Island Records and Jerry Moss of A&M. Both of those people have similar qualities in that they understood that to get the best out of an artist, particularly people like me, it was best to give us freedom to explore our artistic ambitions and tastes. And that's what happened.

Many musicians feel that once they achieve that elusive hit single, all of their problems will vanish. Yet if they are lucky enough to land a hit, they find that those problems don't disappear and then they're really in a spiritual crisis.

I wrote a song once called "I Never Wanted To Be A Star." You can believe it or not as you wish, [laughs] but there is some element of truth in it. I said in that song that [recites lyrics] "I only wanted a little bit of recognition, a little bit of love." And oftentimes that's what young artists are, they're frustrated. They want to be recognized. They want to be acknowledged. They want attention so people

would not dismiss them. It's as simple as that. I suppose there was some kind of a truth in that song. But my ambition I thought at one stage was if I had £10,000 in the bank, that's it, my life is secured. And that's when a pound was worth what it was. [laughs]

When did your disillusionment with success come into play? Did it occur fairly quickly?

Disappointment is part and parcel of the competition game which is played in the music business. You're never ever able to maintain that titillating moment of success when things are going so well, when you're at #1. It doesn't last. And then people ask you and expect you to come up with something as equally unique. And sometimes they want you to repeat. That's where I realized to satisfy my own artistic desires, I cannot stay in one place at the same time or continuously. I had to risk a certain amount of sales in order to progress artistically. At the same time I think I was one of those artists that people went along with and there were a continuous number of fans who enjoyed whichever way I went.

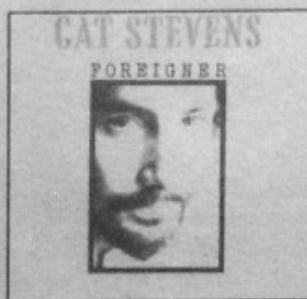
Share your memories of some of your key tracks, starting with "Hard Headed Woman."

I suppose that was another yearning for the ideal partner in life when everything would be balanced. I'm talking about marriage, making a commitment.

"Where Do The Children Play?"

"Where Do The Children Play" is a song of, if you like, recording the destruction of this world and looking at what we're leaving for future generations.

How about "If You Wanna Sing Out, Sing



CAT STEVENS
Mona Bone Jakon
A&M (314 546 883-2)

Tea For The Tillerman
A&M (314 546 884-2)

Teaser And The Firecat
A&M (314 546 885-2)

Catch Bull At Four
A&M (314 546 886-2)

Foreigner
A&M (314 546 887-2)

Buddha And The Chocolate Box
A&M (314 546 888-2)

Steven Demetre Georgiou, a.k.a. Cat Stevens, was no stranger to the British charts (having scored a handful of hits never released in the U.S.) by the time he made his mark in the States, where he found his niche as a composer of some of the most infectious tunes of 1970s radio. Unfortunately, his music has since all but disappeared from many classic rock stations in the wake of comments Stevens (who today goes by the name of Yusuf Islam) made concerning the Ayatollah Khomeini's death sentence against *The Satanic Verses* author Salman Rushdie. (From Stevens' view he was, as a devout Muslim, merely upholding his religion's stand against blasphemy).

Thank God, then, for these reissues, all six of which contain the original lyric reprints and track listings (no bonus tunes included). Stevens' third outing, 1970's *Mona Bone Jakon*, contains his U.K. Top 10 hit "Lady D'Arbanville," an infectious ode to a departed lover, along with a number of other catchy acoustic guitar-driven songs ranging from the hushed intensity of "Fill My Eyes" and the lighthearted acoustic blues-style "Pop Star" to the brooding ballad "Maybe You're Right" (about a love turned to bitter regret). There are even a few sublimine keyboard-driven pop rockers ("I Wish, I Wish," "I Think I See The Light"); proving that Stevens was always perfectly at home on those occasions when he busted out of his subdued folkie mode.

Stevens' U.S. breakthrough, *Tea For The Tillerman*, released later that same year, was a stronger effort still. It contained two hits, the affecting "Wild World," a wistful goodbye to a lover, and the meditative "Father And Son," with its quiet clash of wills. Always an expressive vocalist, Stevens sings with genuine sincerity whether the subject is pure whimsy ("Into White"), spiritual searching ("On The Road To Find Out") or social commentary ("Where Do The Children Play?" which takes aim at an industrial progress that steals a child's natural habitat).

Arguably the crown jewel in the Stevens musical canon, the songs on 1971's *Teaser And The Firecat*, reveal a more pronounced spiritual depth and yielded no less than three hits — the earnest "Moonshadow,"



the driving "Peace Train" (with its plea for a more harmonious world) and, best of all, "Morning Has Broken," an adaptation from a hymn praising the Creator's handiwork. Featuring Rick Wakeman's exquisite piano work, "Morning Has Broken" is a thing of sheer lyrical beauty, both message- and music-wise. Elsewhere Stevens doesn't tamper with a winning formula (though "Ruby Love," with its Greek verses and bouzouki accompaniment, offers a touch of the exotic), and *Firecat* contains its share of intimate just-a-singer-and-his-acoustic-guitar moments. "The Wind" (about trying to forget a relationship that could have been but wasn't to be) being the prettiest.

Released in 1972, *Catch Bull At Four* saw a shift away from the readily accessible melodies of Stevens' past records to more complex and, on the surface at least, less overtly catchy songs. It's a harder rocking effort too, with Stevens' lyrics taking a more cryptic turn. The suite-like "18th Avenue (Kansas City Nightmare)" with its ever-shifting rhythms and the dramatic "Ruins" invite listeners to create their own meanings. When Stevens tries a more direct approach, you get the sense of being given a real personal glimpse of the man. The impassioned single "Sitting" addresses his growing spiritual commitment ("Bleeding half my soul in bad company. I think the moon I had the strength to stop/I'm not making love to anyone's wishes, only for that light I see/Cause when I'm dead and lowered in my grave that's gonna be the only thing that's left of me").

Stevens' most ambitious and least radio-friendly effort, 1973's *Foreigner*, finds him moving past his acoustic-based sound to embrace elements of funk ("Later") and out-and-out experimentation (the sprawling "Foreigner Suite" clocks in at a self-indulgent 18 minutes). The record's single, "The Hurt," may have been as infectious as anything Stevens released, but it's the only song here that sounds as though it had half a chance of making it as a single.

1974's *Buddha And The Chocolate Box* was a welcome return to form for Stevens. Vibrant acoustic guitar-driven songs such as "Sun/C79," "Ready" (the latter a Top 20 single) and the folk-pop hit "Oh Very Young" finds Stevens settling back into a more familiar but infinitely more satisfying groove — the lyrics, too, are easier to grasp. The keyboard-driven "Music" extols song as a means of world harmony, and "King Of Trees" is an impassioned ballad mourning the destruction of mother nature while the ballad "Jesus" links Christ and Buddha as messengers of love.

Stevens went on to release a few more recordings before retiring from the pop music business in 1978 to devote himself to his Muslim faith and a life outside of the spotlight. Yet the man who once disavowed his pop past has since softened his views and has come to appreciate his well-crafted body of work that shone in that rich, creative climate known as the singer/songwriter era.

— Tierney Smith

Out, a song that appears in the film *Harold & Maude*?

That was telling people or saying to myself and others that life is full of choices and it doesn't matter what you choose so long as it is true to you. I may have changed my point of view of course [laughs] at this point because I think there are right and wrong choices.

"Father & Son"?

It was about a son who was eager to join the revolution, to leave the farm of his father. And his father was trying to keep him home and telling him you shouldn't just grow up chasing dreams that, [recites lyrics] "You still may be here tomorrow but your dreams may not."

Was your father supportive of your music?

I don't know if he even heard much of it, so I'm probably sure he wasn't really supportive. In a way he used to like the effect of my music, because it brought a lot of customers into the shop. He had a restaurant very near to the West End called Moulin Rouge. Later I changed it to my father's name. We turned it into a Greek restaurant officially and called it Stavros.

"Morning Is Broken" was based on a hymn.

Yeah, I found that in a hymn book when I was going through a sort of dry period. I hadn't written a song for a week or two. I was worried. I had to write something. I was looking for something to complete the album probably, *Teaser And The Firecat*, and then I discovered "Morning Has Broken."

Did you always feel a burning desire to create?

Yes, feeling that if I wasn't being creative then what was I doing?

How about "Oh, Very Young"?

I like that song. It's a very sweet song, again talking to the youth and indirectly asking ourselves, "What are we leaving our children?" and asking our children, "What are you going to leave your children on this earth?"

"Wild World"?

Again, it mirrors that kind of paternal advisor which you find in "Father And Son," giving words of caution to the young hearts going out to grab this world and go and taste the excitement of this world. So in a way, I don't know where some of these songs came from, but maybe it was a reminder to myself about the need to be cautious. So I could have been talking to myself quite often.

Everyone from 10,000 Maniacs to Boyzone has covered your songs.

It's always flattering to have someone else sing your song, and it's always interesting too because they have a different approach to it and a different style.

Did you know that Pearl Jam covered your song "Trouble"?

Oh, it was that group, was it? Yeah, they're big right now. I heard this track and I wasn't quite sure which group it was. Pearl Jam, right. They're very big at the moment.

Sarah McLachlan covered "Sad Lisa."

Yes, I heard that. I liked it a lot. Very classic.

Was there a real Lisa?

Yes, there was. She was Swedish. In a way I sometimes played with fiction and fact, [laughs] and I must also be honest in that sometimes I would exaggerate a personality. It's like doing drawings. Suddenly you make a caricature.

Do you still draw for pleasure?

No, I'm happy with the productions I'm making for Mountain Of Light, my label. I'm involved in all these books and packages which I take great delight in, making sure that the colors are right, the illustrations, the typeface, the spacing, the paper, everything to do with the feel and the presentation.

That makes sense, looking back at your artwork that graced your album covers. Their innate simplicity is delightful.

I think maybe my artwork for the albums tended to lean towards more of the naive style of painting, naive art. You'll find that a lot of that style I discovered in Yugoslavia. There's a very strange similarity to the kind of colors and characters I painted.

The message of a song such as "On The Road To Find Out" still resonates with so many people today.

I can't remember how it began. It was probably the rhythm and the riff. The melody carried us forward. It had a driving feel to it, and the words were reflecting the drive that I had in my life towards knowledge and towards understanding. And I was talking about all the options I was being offered like the marketplace of ideas. I was listening to, [recites lyrics] "Robins telling me not to worry, listening to the wind telling me to hurry." So it was that journey and listening to all the voices telling me which way to go.

Speaking of that journey, "Miles From Nowhere" fits that theme. In a song like that and with much of your work, you were able to instill a dynamic of building crescendos and emotion.

Usually I was aiming for a climactic moment. I suppose "Miles From Nowhere" has that. It's strange at that most climactic moment sometimes I would add a beat [laughs] and throw the rhythm off so you wouldn't quite know exactly where you were. That would be a moment of questioning yourself and of surprise.

I understand that the song "Sitting" remains one of your favorites from your work.

The melody is almost Gershwin-like if you analyze it.

Sweeping?

Yeah, sweeping. But the words stand out still extremely strong today.

On the new Very Best Of Cat Stevens collection (A&M 314 546 889-2), it includes a wonderful and previously unreleased track, "I've Got A Thing About Seeing My Grandson Grow Old."

There were a whole lot of tapes, which in a way have been hidden and locked up for 20 years. When Bill Levenson got us to think about opening up those vaults, we discovered all those hidden recordings and hitherto unheard of recordings. One of them was "I've Got A Thing About Seeing My Grandson Grow Old." For some reason it never got on any album, perhaps because I never

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Label/#	Title	Year	NMS
A&M SP-4280	Tea For The Tillerman (mostly stereo label)	1974	10
A&M SP-4313	Teaser And The Firecat (mostly stereo label)	1974	10
A&M SP-4519	Greatest Hits	1975	12
A&M QU-54519	Greatest Hits (quadraphonic)	1975	20
A&M SP-4555	Numbers	1975	12
A&M SP-4702	Izitso	1977	12
London LC-50010	Cat's Cradle	1977	12
A&M SP-4735	Back To Earth	1978	12
Mobile Fidelity 1-035	Tea For The Tillerman ("Original Master Recording")	1979	40
A&M SP-3160	Mona Bone Jakon (reissue of 4260)	1987	8
A&M SP-3736	Footsteps In The Dark — Greatest Hits, Volume Two	1984	100
Mobile Fidelity MFCD-035	Tea For The Tillerman ("Ultra High Quality Recording")	1984	120
London 820 321-1	Cat's Cradle	1985	8
A&M SP-3285	Footsteps In The Dark — Greatest Hits, Volume Two (reissue of 3736)	1986	8
Mobile Fidelity 1-244	Teaser And The Firecat ("Original Master Recording")	1996	40
Mobile Fidelity 1-254	Izitso ("Original Master Recording")	1996	25
Compact Discs			
A&M CD-3736	Footsteps In The Dark — Greatest Hits, Volume Two	1986	15
A&M CD-4280	Tea For The Tillerman	1986	15
A&M CD-4519	Greatest Hits	1986	15
A&M CD-2522	Classics, Volume 24	1987	15
A&M CD-3623	Buddha And The Chocolate Box	1987	12
A&M CD-4313	Teaser And The Firecat	1987	12
A&M CD-4365	Catch Bull At Four	1987	12
A&M CD-3160	Mona Bone Jakon	1988	12
Mobile Fidelity UDCD-519	Tea For The Tillerman (gold CD)	1988	40
Polydor 820 560-2	Matthew And Son	1989	12
Polydor 820 767-2	New Masters	1989	12
A&M CD-7103	Fan Box Set (four CDs)	1991	50
A&M CD-4391	Foreigner	1995	12
Mobile Fidelity UDCD-649	Teaser And The Firecat (gold CD)	1995	30
Mobile Fidelity UDCD-3-661	Three (gold CD but set with Numbers, Izitso, Back To Earth)	1996	100
A&M 541 387-2	The Very Best Of Cat Stevens	2000	8
A&M 490 672-2	Mona Bone Jakon (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 490 673-2	Tea For The Tillerman (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 490 674-2	Teaser And The Firecat (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 490 723-2	Catch Bull At Four (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 490 724-2	Foreigner (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 490 725-2	Buddha And The Chocolate Box (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 542 962-2	Greatest Hits (limited edition digipack)	2000	10
A&M 546 883-2	Mona Bone Jakon (remaster)	2000	8
A&M 546 884-2	Tea For The Tillerman (remaster)	2000	8
A&M 546 885-2	Teaser And The Firecat (remaster)	2000	8
A&M 546 886-2	Catch Bull At Four (remaster)	2000	8
A&M 546 887-2	Foreigner (remaster)	2000	8
A&M 546 888-2	Buddha And The Chocolate Box (remaster)	2000	8
A&M 546 889-2	Greatest Hits (remaster)	2000	8
Compact Discs As Yusuf Islam			
Resurgence 70001	The Life Of The Last Prophet	1995	10
Resurgence 7006	Prayers Of The Last Prophet	1999	10
Resurgence 4707	A Is For Allah	2000	10

played the mouth organ that well. [laughs] You can notice that in the actual recording.

Aren't there songs on the forthcoming box set featuring you playing with Elton John?

Yes, there is a session which I did with Elton as a backing session, a duet sort of thing that we did on this song called "Honeyman." It's still there, and if things go well that will be on the box set.

Have you heard it?

Yeah, I'm trying to think how to describe it... It was recorded around the time of Your Song. That album might have just been released. I don't think Elton had hit the heights at that moment, and I might have had Mona Bone Jakon out at that time.

Have you visited the studio as Levenson has been remastering your catalog?

I more or less leave that to him. But I was in New York while I was doing it and popped in just to get a feel for the sound. It was done at Sterling Sound Studios in New York. And it all sounded incredibly good so I just

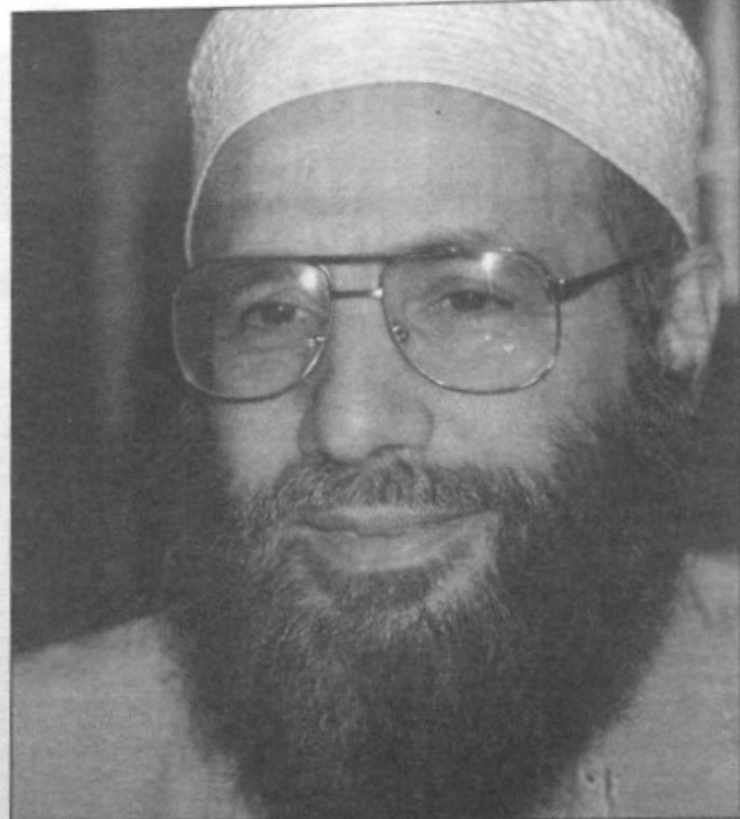
left him to it. It's great to know that these songs still stand up today. I'm having fun collecting these little digi-packs. [laughs] Bill is making sure and so is Sujata [Murty] making sure I get the number one edition.

Being very young when you were experiencing your success, your songs spoke of someone who was much older. Did you feel that way, that you were an old wise man in a young body?

I suppose my childhood passed relatively quickly and I grew up quite fast in the West End. You've got to learn life quick if you're gonna survive in an environment like that. Maybe I felt a bit wizened because of the street experience and the survival game. I suppose. Somehow there was something of the wise man within me even as a child.

In the '70s, who were the contemporary artists mining a similar style of music that you personally enjoyed?

Probably James Taylor and Neil Young. At one point I think Neil was extremely unique with his sound and his laid-back mellow style, that was appealing. I used to admire



Yusuf Islam

“‘Moonshadow’ is what I call the eternal optimist’s anthem, which is fine. If that’s the final word on my music, I think that’s what should be remembered.”

— Yusuf Islam

James Taylor’s guitar-picking skills. [laughs] He was a perfectionist in that area and he was so clean-sounding, and I love that kind of sound. His words were pensive, so you could listen to them.

You said, “I used to be a singer of songs. My songs — a lot of the time I would be singing about finding the truth and about peace, but I wasn’t living it so I was a hypocrite.” It’s an interesting statement for an artist to say and admit to, again indicative of your spiritual quest for something more than fame and fortune.

It was very difficult to see it directly at the time. I was almost veiled from my own identity. It was only when I read the words of the Koran that I started becoming challenged and my soul was suddenly exposed. That some of the power of the Koran itself was challenging me and saying that God knows what’s going on in your soul. And I was beginning to discover and agree with that. I knew that life was full of in some ways deceit. People deceive themselves. The most explicit description of this in the Koran was in the chapter called The Poets where it says, “Don’t you see the poets, how they say which they don’t practice.” Wow, bang on the head, that’s me. And I was then able to realize that one doesn’t have to act to create an illusion about one’s self. To find peace and security you just have to be yourself. In fact I wrote that line once. I said, “Come on now

it’s freedom calling, come on over and find yourself.” I can’t remember all the words. “Eleven apartments too and a house in Malibu,” whatever. But until you know what inside you really are — in other words, you’ll never have that freedom until you know who you are. That was the search I was on, the search for my identity. When I read the Koran I realized that I’m just one of your average human beings.

Who taught you how to fingerpick? Your style is deftly displayed on a song such as “Moonshadow.”

I suppose it was practicing some of those little licks, going back to Les Cousins and songs like “Anjie” by Davey Graham. Once you could play that [laughs] you could improvise your own thing. It was kind of a stepping stone in my way to mastering the guitar.

Lastly, “Moonshadow” is one of your songs of which there is a multigenerational appeal. Kids love it as do adults and teenagers.

I never intended that. I was very much an instinctive writer and an instinctive recording artist. I used to go with the flow and sometimes I wouldn’t know why. Something would feel right one way and not the other. “Moonshadow” is what I call the eternal optimist’s anthem, which is fine. If that’s the final word on my music, I think that’s what should be remembered.