

REISSUE OF THE MONTH

RICHARD THOMPSON

Walking On A Wire SHOUT!FACTORY



Atop the emotional tightrope... an expansive, career-spanning four-CD set for Anglicana's finest guitar warrior. *By Rob Young*



What is it about Richard Thompson? He's amassed a loyal international following but he ain't 'hip'; like his contemporaries Bert Jansch and the late John Martyn. He's affectionately loved and

critically respected, but he's never placed on magazine covers (except guitarists' ones). He's an Englishman comfortably expatriated in Los Angeles, a Sufi who trades in Christian biblical imagery, a diffident wit who's arguably at his finest when plunged into abject despondency.

But anybody looking for autobiography in Thompson's music has usually been confounded by such contradictions. Thompson has always insisted he's primarily a storyteller, and it's the storyteller's prerogative to remain behind the veil of song. Thompson has recently been touring a show called *1000 Years Of Popular Song*, suggesting he's very aware of existing in a continuum with a far deeper timespan than rock industry fastbuck economics would have you believe. This milestone box, with authoritative notes from biographer Patrick Humphries, is easily the most representative compendium of RT's music to date.

The folk ballads adapted by his first group, Fairport Convention, have survived the centuries because while the particulars date from their time, the situations, joys and tragedies are emotional constants. And so it is with much of Thompson's portfolio: the miseries, deprivations, injustices, heartbreaks and, yes, occasional ecstasies, will continue to apply.

None of the traditional folk songs electrified by Fairport are included in disc one (1968-75) of this four-CD

career summary. Instead we get four of the great songs he wrote for the Sandy Denny era of the group, "Genesis Hall", about a London hippy commune, "Crazy Man Michael", a vagrant insane with grief, the Dead-ly guitar juggernaut "Sloth", and the Fairport anthem, "Meet On The Ledge". "Roll Over Vaughn Williams", from his brief period of solo and spiritual freefall in 1971, remains a rousing, earthy critique of genteel folk and a call to arms for a revolution in British music.

The rest of disc one and much of disc two is a judicious Best Of Richard And Linda Thompson, drawing heavily on the excellent mid-'70s Island LPs *I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight*, *Hokey Pokey* and *Pour Down Like Silver*. Around this time Thompson was fond

of the Victorian fairground and music hall as a symbol of the world's giddy pleasures, and as a foil for his portrayals of society's unfortunates as sideshow freaks. The contrast is picked up in the texture of these records - leadweighted electric folk rock with

effervescent flashes of accordion, fiddles, crumhorns and mandolin.

The collapse of the Thompsons' marriage - which lent their final 1982 album *Shoot*

Out The Lights such a gripping edge of mania - has been well documented. The third disc of *Walking On A Wire* finds Thompson picking up the pieces. The upbeat *Hand Of Kindness* (1983) signalled a transatlantic interlude during which he was reunited with producer Joe Boyd and sundry

ex-Fairporters, as well as Early Musician Philip Pickett and folksters Clive Gregson, Christine Collister, Aly Bain and John Kirkpatrick.

There's something plastic about the rock'n'roll stylings of 1988's *Amnesia* that hasn't stood the test of time so well. The Mitchell Froom-produced *Rumor And Sigh* (1991), though, kicked off the period during which Thompson acquired a reputation as a safe pair of hands, each release a steady rockfall rather than a commercial landslide.

"Feel So Good" chugs with a Tom Petty-like pulse. Given its cold reception, there's an unexpectedly high track count from *Mirror Blue* (1994), with its dry and abrasive production, but in this company it stands as the high spot of Thompson's American years, all obtuse angles and snagging drones.

It's encouraging to find a scattering of rare live tracks, including a stratospheric guitar solo on "Hard On Me"; a taste of the Neil Young-ish soundtrack from Werner Herzog's *Grizzly Man*; and three cuts from the neglected 1997 wake for the death of rural England, *Industry*, recorded with former Pentangle bassist Danny Thompson. The enervated "Last Shift" and "Lotteryland" - about factories converted to heritage museums - make for a strident yet level-headed social critique updating the tradition of 'industrial folk'. *Mock Tudor* (1999) can be seen as a companion piece, notched with nostalgia for the suburban metroland in which Thompson was raised, and inculcated with the wartime memories that shaped family life in such areas.

War continues to scar his songwriting - witness the titles of recent studio LPs, *The Old Kit Bag* (2003) and *Sweet Warrior* (2007). "Dad's Gonna Kill Me", from the latter, is about a dying US soldier in the Middle East. Sung as it is by a Muslim living in Los Angeles, as an example of Thompson's utterly individual *modus operandi*, it's pretty much perfect.

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Q A Richard Thompson

How strange does it feel to compress a 40-year career into one box?

You start thinking, is that all there is? In which case, I've got to start working really hard. The last boxset [2006's *RT: The Life And Music Of...*] was more obscurities and rarities. This is aimed at someone who doesn't know me that well and wants the better-known songs.

Have the folk-rock years defined the way you're still perceived?

It's not as bad as

having one massive hit that you have to churn out for the rest of your life. I see myself as just working really hard and keeping vital and involved and forward-looking and creative, but people hanker after other eras...

What's your own favourite album? If I had to pick an album, I'd pick *Mock Tudor*. It's partly about growing up in north London - it was always grey. Not just in the cinema, but even when you walked out

everything was still black and white. Then the '60s was fun and swinging, which changed into a jaded, self-interested, self-advancing '80s.

How difficult is Werner Herzog to work with?

[Laughs] He's challenging. But I like that. He has produced a lot of operas, and chooses music very skilfully in his films, so it was terrific to work with him - he's a real artist. You don't always find that in filmmaking...

INTERVIEW: ROB YOUNG