



RTSURE

Richard Thompson

Inimitable guitar and songwriter. By Andrew Male.

Raised in north London's Muswell Hill in the 1950s, Richard Thompson was a shy kid with a pronounced stutter, who spoke through his guitar. His father, a Dumfries Presbyterian who worked as a Scotland Yard detective, gave him two significant gifts, a love of Django Reinhardt and Scottish folk music, and the cold eye of the secret observer.

Through a friend of a friend, Thompson was invited to play guitar with a pair of local grammar school kids, Simon Nicol and Ashley Hutchings who practised above Nicol's father's dentist's surgery, in a gabled Arts and Crafts house called Fairport.

Thompson's work with Fairport Convention combined the romance and mythology of indigenous British musics, with a unique guitar style that seamlessly bent, blended and interweaved a travelogue of different modes, scales and genres. Growing up fast, after surviving the tour-van crash that killed his girlfriend, Jeannie Franklyn, and the band's drummer, Martin Lamble, Thompson looked for new spiritual directions on the shelves of Watkins' esoteric bookshop in Charing Cross, before settling on Sufism. Illuminated by poetry and mysticism, and his

Thrills, Muswell Hill and belly-aches: solo Richard Thompson with the tool of his trade.

marriage to singer Linda Peters, Thompson finessed a songwriting world-view he himself described as "beautiful tragedy", with dark meditations on romantic defeat elevated to rapturous heights by his effortlessly lucent guitar and Linda Thompson's sweetly mournful harmonies.

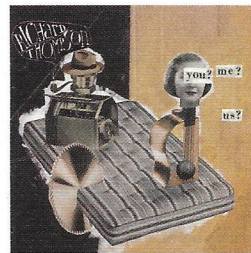
The high standard of the first three Richard and Linda albums, and Thompson's own self-effacing manner, has, on occasion, tended to overshadow the astonishing solo career that followed the couple's divorce in 1982. His voice has become a nuanced and often fiery instrument that perfectly echoes and answers his preternatural guitar playing, while the strange landscape of his songs – a Middle England of dark gothic imagination bordering an abyss of pain and despair – is a world that can be repeatedly revisited without ever losing its peculiar magic or giving up its secrets.

"THE STRANGE LANDSCAPE OF HIS SONGS CAN BE REPEATEDLY REVISITED."



CAST YOUR VOTES!

This month you chose your Top 10 Richard Thompson albums. Next month we want your Kevin Ayers Top 10. Send your selections to www.mojo4music.com or e-mail your Top 10 to mojo@bauermedia.co.uk with the subject 'How To Buy Kevin Ayers' and we'll print the best comments.



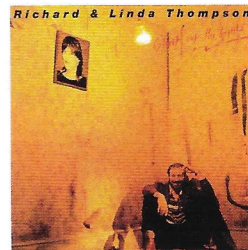
10 Richard Thompson

You? Me? Us?

CAPITOL, 1996; DOWNLOAD £8.99

You Say: "The most underrated thing in his canon." Ben Watcher, MOJO Facebook

Any list of Thompson records needs one stripped-down recording, because that is where the songwriter's most intimate experiments lurk. Honorable mentions have to go to 2005's wonderful *Front Parlour Ballads*, and the acoustic demos that came with 2010's *Dream Attic*, but lend an ear to Disc 2 on the hugely ambitious 19-track double CD collection, *You? Me? Us?*. The grungy "Voltage Enhanced" tracks are terrific (especially *Razor Dance*), but it's nine complex, troubling and exquisitely detailed short stories on the "Nude" CD that make this a desert island disc. Yes, you could edit it all down to a perfect single LP, but everyone's edit would be completely different.



4 Richard Thompson

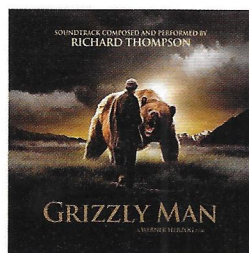
Shoot Out The Lights

HANNIBAL, 1982; RYKODISC REISSUE 2006, £12.10

You Say: "The haunting end of a marriage, on vinyl." Keith Dennis, via e-mail

Begun then scrapped with producer Gerry Rafferty in 1980, when *Shoot Out...* was eventually finished at Olympic Studios, with old Fairports pal Joe Boyd, Richard and Linda's marriage was on the rocks. And while Richard had always written about doomed relationships, enwreathed in sinister metaphor, *Shoot Out's* songs carry an extra weight and cohesion thanks to circumstances of their creation. Aided by fellow Fairports Dave Mattacks, Dave Pegg and Simon Nicol, Richard and Linda perform on a knife-edge of emotional pain, while Boyd's of-its-time production lend this already emotionally fragile record a brittle, claustrophobic potency.

Photoshot, Getty Images, Rex

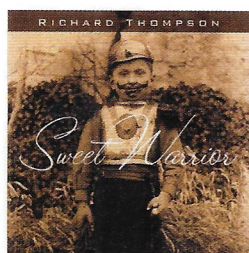


9 Richard Thompson Grizzly Man

COOKING VINYL, 2005: £14.48

You Say: "Scary, beautiful and expansive." Andi Gisler, MOJO Facebook

As illustrated by the 'making-of' DVD that accompanied the initial CD release, this guitar score for Werner Herzog's 2005 documentary about the life (and death) of American film-maker and bear enthusiast Timothy Treadwell was largely improvised by Thompson in just two days. Accompanied at significant points by Henry Kaiser's big-noise electric guitar, Jim O'Rourke's music-box piano, John Hanes' unobtrusive percussion, and the double bass and cello of Damon Smith and Danielle DeGruttola, RT's guitar moves from Celtic romanticism to unresolved modal melancholy and churning avant noise seeking out the "ecstatic truth" of Herzog's film, and Treadwell's tragic story.

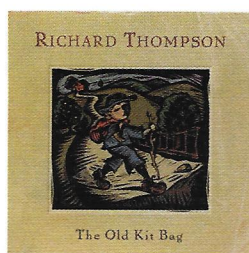


8 Richard Thompson Sweet Warrior

PROPER, 2007: DOWNLOAD, £7.99

You Say: "A Gulf War album? He can do that too." Dave Gross, via e-mail

A near-concept album about conflict (war, relationships, etc), written under the shadow of the second Gulf War, *Sweet Warrior* is one of Thompson's most politically-minded albums and one of his most satisfying. Ranging from joyous electric rockers (Needle And Thread, Mr Stupid, Bad Monkey), to fluent ballads (Take Care The Road You Choose, She Sang Angels To Rest), the album is raised above the merely great by the pitch-black *Dad's Gonna Kill Me*, which uses GI slang ('dad' = Baghdad) to document war through soldiers' eyes, and *Guns Are The Tongues*, a tense, swirling love story about the sinister seductions of terrorism.

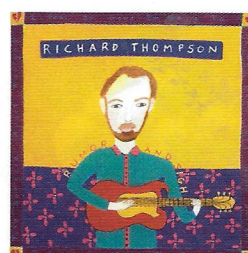


7 Richard Thompson The Old Kit Bag

COOKING VINYL, 2003: £13.75

You Say: "Stark and brilliant... absorbing." Michael O'Neill, via e-mail

For this self-financed, stripped down LP, recorded live at Hollywood's Capitol Studio "B", Thompson enters into an intense communion with his electric guitar, aided by Michael Jerome on drums, Danny Thompson playing upright (and often bowed) bass, and Judith Owen adding sweetly sorrowful backing vocals. On the first half of the album, titled *The Haunted Keepsake*, the feel is of some existential power trio, lamenting the human condition while tearing up the floor. For the second half, *The Pilgrim's Fancy*, Thompson tunes into the tangled thoughts of losers and loners, singing blues for all those caught "between the chaos and the dream".

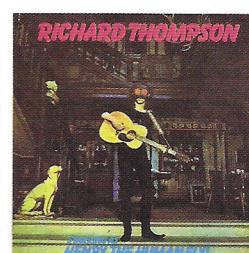


6 Richard Thompson Rumor And Sigh

CAPITOL, 1991: DOWNLOAD, £4.99

You Say: "That's how 16-year-old me got into him." Christopher Lavery, MOJO Facebook

Although now living in America, with *Rumor And Sigh*, Thompson began to craft a new language for British rock'n'roll. Mitchell Froom's chunky Sunset Sound production hasn't aged particularly well, but the songs are many of Thompson's best, tales of mental illness, heavy drinking and unrequited love told by ex cons and spurned lovers, grim parables of Thatcherism (*Grey Walls*, *Mother Knows Best*) and, with 1952 Vincent Black Lightning, one of Thompson's finest ever songs, a Shangri-Las motor-cycle tragedy, unfolding out on the A3 from London to Box Hill, yet played as if it were a 19th century folk song that has always been with us.

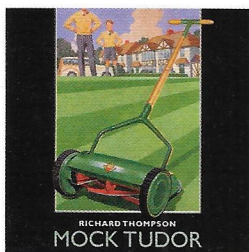


5 Richard Thompson Henry The Human Fly

ISLAND, 1972: DOWNLOAD, £7.99

You Say: "The key markers of his musical Zeitgeist." Cody Lee, MOJO Facebook

"I used to talk to Lal Waterson about songwriting," Richard Thompson told me recently. "There was a feeling we were both a bit eccentric and quirky, a bit out on the margins." Very much a companion work to Lal and Mike's *Bright Phoebus, Henry...* is also an album out of time. With backing vocals from Sandy Denny and Linda Thompson (then Peters), and droning accompaniment from Barry Dransfield's fiddle and John Kirkpatrick's accordion, this unholy dance of rock'n'roll chordings and macabre border ballads, conjures up a chilly folk netherworld of drunks, prostitutes and gamblers all scrambling to survive in their blasted Albion.

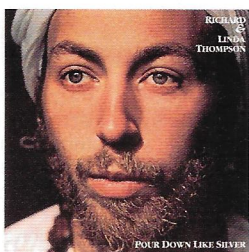


3 Richard Thompson Mock Tudor

CAPITOL, 1999: £8.22

You Say: "One of Richard's finely achieved yet under-appreciated gems." Richard Emmitt, via e-mail

Following 1997's *Industry*, in which Richard collaborated with bassist and long-time friend Danny Thompson on an album about the decline of the machine age, came this conceptual magnum opus set in 20th century English suburbia. Grouped into three categories (Metroland, Heroes In The Suburbs, and Street Cries And Stage Whispers) these 12 wise, lyrical, complex and human songs move from the remote outskirts to the venal city, an inky Kinksian portrait of failed romances, doomed hope and class division, made warm and spacious by Tom Rothrock and Rob Schnapf's production and Thompson's high E drone guitar sound.

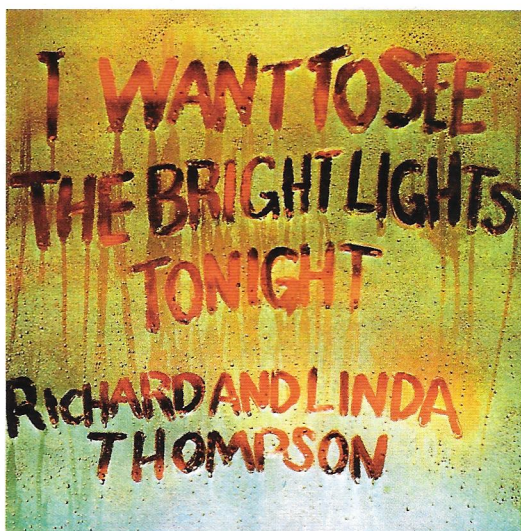


2 Richard & Linda Thompson Pour Down Like Silver

ISLAND, 1975: EXPANDED REISSUE 2004, £5.80

You Say: "Intimate and austere, but also beautiful." Ian Poole, via e-mail

The cover shows Richard in a white turban and with a beard; on the rear is wan-faced Linda, head wrapped in pale-blue hijab. Both stare with beatific intensity. Recorded at Chelsea's Sound Techniques before the pair's three-year retreat in a Norfolk Sufi community, ... *Silver* transforms Thompson's songs of booze, romance, and final reckonings into lean metaphysical allegories, the chordal Renaissance tones of Thompson's guitar, John Kirkpatrick's button accordion, and the stalking rhythms of Dave Pegg and Dave Mattacks combining with Richard and Linda's forlorn harmonies for an album of eerie power.



1 Richard & Linda Thompson I Want To See The Bright Lights Tonight

ISLAND, 1974: EXPANDED REISSUE 2004, £7.52

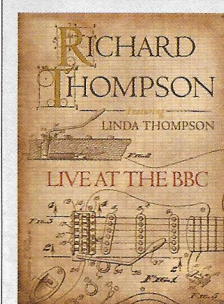
You Say: "The duo's great beginning." David Paddy, MOJO Facebook

As with 1972 solo debut, *Henry The Human Fly*, Thompson's first album recorded with his wife Linda is informed by fears of coming apocalypse and the cheerless folk narratives of the Child Ballads. However, *Bright Lights*' undeniably misanthropic vision of a cruel country populated by drunks, beggars and bohemians, with nothing at the end of the rainbow, is countered by Richard's rich, electric playing, glistening like silver light on black water, and Linda Thompson's sad, soaring vocals, coming together in a euphoria of ecstatic despair.



Richard & Linda: rich playing, sad, soaring vocals.

NOWDIG THIS



First, have an internet delve for bootlegs/burns of Gerry Rafferty's earlier production of *Shoot Out The Lights*. RT's best live recordings include *Small Town Romance* (acoustic at The Bottom Line, NYC, 1982), and *Two Letter Words* (RT, Danny Thompson, Pete Zorn and Dave Mattacks on the *Mirror Blue* LP tour in the US, 1994). His musical history lesson, *1000 Years Of Popular Music* is essential, as is the *Live At The BBC* DVD/CD box-set of Richard (and Linda) radio and TV performances. Biographer Patrick Humphries' *Strange Affair* (Virgin, 1996) is long overdue for an update.