

Singer Al Stewart remembers his teenage years in Wimborne and Bournemouth

12:00pm Wednesday 23rd July 2014

HE has achieved huge success as a singer-songwriter and has – by his own reckoning – made and lost a million dollars three times.

But although he long ago moved to California, Al Stewart remembers in vivid detail his life as a pop-obsessed teenager in Wimborne.

He will be back in the town on Friday, August 1, for a sold-out concert at the Tivoli – and to visit his old home at Canford Bottom.

"I got a very nice message from the person who now lives in the house I grew up in," he told the Daily Echo from California.

"This lady invited me to look at my old bedroom.

"I remember Wimborne very well – the Square and the bank, going there with my mother."

Alistair Stewart was at boarding school in Gloucestershire at the time his mother lived at Canford Bottom.

"I seem to remember sitting in the classroom and writing out every record that was released in the UK along with the catalogue number and, if I could find out, the writer and producer," he said.

He can still reel off the catalogue numbers of hit singles from more than 50 years ago.

As a young man, Alistair Stewart would go into the Bournemouth record shop Minns Music and tell them with uncanny accuracy what records were going to be hits, often basing his predictions on the US charts.

"I would go into Minns on the day they were released and tell them they had to stock this record because it was the next number one. They never listened to me," he said.

He added: "When I was 15-16 years old, I would have been a really good A&R man at a record company because I really could pick them."

Life changed for Alistair in September 1962, the day after his 17th birthday, when he was on a bus from Canford Bottom to [Westbourne](#).

He decided to get off at Moordown after spotting a guitar reverb unit in the window of a music shop.

He struck up a conversation with the shop owner's son, Jon Kremer, and although he never bought the reverb unit, the two began a friendship that has lasted to this day.

Stewart remembered: "I didn't really know many of the locals because I was at boarding school. I didn't meet a lot of people in the village and the ones I did weren't that interested in music, whereas I was fanatical about it and so was Jonny Kremer."

"When I met him, it was like a kindred spirit. We would talk for hours about record collections and what we wanted to buy and what we had already bought."

After leaving school, Stewart went to work at Beales in Bournemouth – not in the record department, but in the linen department.

He also played guitar with The Tappers, who later backed a young Tony Blackburn as he attempted to become a pop star.

When Stewart joined Dave La Kaz and the G-Men, Jon presented the band to the Echo, claiming hyperbolically that the guitarist had written 40-50 songs.

Bournemouth's music scene was thriving at the time.

Manfred Mann were a weekly attraction throughout 1963.

Stewart knew Andy Summers, later of the Police, and remembers sitting in Fortes coffee shop off Bournemouth Square with star-to-be Greg Lake and Lee Kerslake, who would later become drummer with Uriah Heep.

He took 10 guitar lessons from Robert Fripp.

But the biggest star of the local scene, he recalls, was Zoot Money, whose walk he would mimic behind the singer's back.

In August 1963, The Beatles played six nights at the Gaumont [cinema](#) in Westover Road.

Not only were Al Stewart and Jon Kremer there on the first night, but afterwards, they contrived a ruse to meet the band. Stewart tells the story on stage, while Jon Kremer set it down in his memoir *Bournemouth A Go! Go!*

Wearing suits, the pair managed to get backstage by telling the manager that they were from the Rickenbacker guitar company.

Before long, they found themselves outside the band's dressing room.

Having dropped the Rickenbacker pretence, they spent a few minutes chatting with John Lennon and trying his guitar.

"People tend to forget that we weren't living in an age of mega-security," Stewart recalled.

"You can't just walk backstage and talk to Justin Timberlake. In those days it was very lax."

Throughout this time, Stewart wanted to be the writer of a hit pop record or a member of a successful group.

But he said he was not cut out for that kind of success.

"The one thing in my life I ever loved, I found out I had no ability to do. I was in half a dozen bands in the Bournemouth area and I really wasn't very good. I couldn't sing and I couldn't play and that was two strokes against me," he said.

Then, he said: "Along came Bob Dylan. He couldn't sing and couldn't play either but he could write."

Stewart found himself among a handful of British folk singer-songwriters and made his first album, *Bedsitter Images*, in 1967. He was disappointed by his first three LPs, but in the 1970s it all came together – most memorably with the platinum-selling album *The Year of the Cat*.

"In 50 years, Wimborne is probably one of the only places in the world I haven't played," he said.

"I could have done this gig at any point in my life. This is the first time, at 68, that anybody's offered me a gig in Wimborne."

In Al Stewart's August 1 concert at the Tivoli is sold out.

Jon Kremer's book *Bournemouth A Go! Go!* is the source of the local pictures on these pages and is available from Natula Publications.

Paul Simon's flatmate

AFTER leaving Dorset and moving to London to play folk clubs, Al Stewart found himself sharing a flat with a young American singer called Paul Simon.

He remembers being the first person to hear Simon play the song *Richard Cory*.

He said: "Songwriters need instant feedback. Paul was looking around the apartment and the only person there was me.

"He thought I was an idiot 19-year-old stupid kid. However, he still needed to play the song.

"I said it was absolutely brilliant. I went out and sang it before he did."

However, Stewart's nose for a pop hit seemed to have deserted him.

"The day before, he had finished *Homeward Bound*. At 19 I had lost what I had at 15. The advice to Paul was throw that *Homeward Bound* song away, that's never going to go anywhere," he said.

"The single is going to be *Richard Cory*."

Their flat-sharing days ended soon after Simon received in the post a copy of a single he had recorded with Art Garfunkel, *The Sound of Silence*.

Simon was not impressed with the way their track had been overdubbed with a band and he rang the US to ask Columbia Records to pull it.

But that was impossible, because the single was well on the way to becoming a career-defining hit.

[Back](#)

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