

## BIOGRAPHY

### SAM LEE

Sam Lee plays a unique role in the British music scene. A highly inventive and original singer, folk song interpreter, a passionate conservationist, committed song collector and a successful creator of live events. Alongside his organisation



The Nest Collective and fellow collaborators Sam has shaken up the live music scene breaking the boundaries between folk and contemporary music and the assumed place and way folksong is heard. He's injected a renewed passion into this old material, helping to develop its ecosystem by not only inviting in a new listenership but also interrogating what the messages in these old songs hold for us today. With his forthcoming album, *Old Wow*, he's summonsed up a truly compelling and emotional album that takes his work to yet another level. He may not intend to, but Sam Lee always surprises. When he released his first album 'Ground Of Its Own' in 2012, he dared to dramatically re-work old songs by matching his direct and rich singing style against an extraordinary backdrop of sound, making use of anything from Jews harps, trumpets, fiddles, banjo or the drone effects of an Indian Shruti box. This bravely original set made possible by a prestigious Arts Foundation award, set up to 'support artists at a breakthrough moment in their careers' made an immediate impact and the album was short-listed for a Mercury Music Prize. Three years later, Sam's second album 'The Fade In Time' saw him break further new ground and receive accompanying accolades including a Songlines Award for artist of the year. This time the backing included cello, ukulele, Japanese koto, willow flute, and, most startling of all, an exquisite acapella treatment of *Lovely Molly* backed by the massed ranks of the Roundhouse Choir. This song received much attention being performed at the 2016 BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards at London's Royal Albert Hall winning Best Traditional Track and subsequently performed on BBC TV's 'Later with Jools', NPR's Tiny Desk sessions and in 2018 with the BBC Symphony Orchestra at the Proms where Sam hosted a Folk Prom alongside Julie Fowlis. But possibly the largest audience Sam found himself being heard by was when Guy Ritchie chose him to write the lead song for his epic Hollywood fantasy *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* from which 'The Devil and The Huntsman' was born receiving tens of millions of plays internationally.

And now comes 'Old Wow', yet another dramatic change of musical direction where, for the first time, Sam includes the instrument most notably absent from his recording career, the guitar and electric guitar at that, played by the album's producer Bernard Butler (of Suede and McAlmont & Butler fame). Sam explains,

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“but only because it’s played so beautifully and sensitively and you wouldn’t necessarily know it was guitar at all”. Other musicians involved include what he calls the “classic line-up” of piano (James Keay), bass (Misha Mullov-Addado) and percussion (Josh Green), along with Caoimhin Ó Raghallaigh of the acclaimed band The Gloaming (on Hardanger violin). Guest vocals are also contributed to the album with a remarkable appearance by Elizabeth Fraser of the Cocteau Twins, plus splendid harmonies from Cosmo Sheldrake and spoken word poet Dizraeli. It’s a thoughtful, soaring and moving set of songs, dominated by Sam’s soulful and sensitive vocals and no cliché in saying it’s his most assured recording to date. This is no coincidence being an album devoted to his love and passion for the natural world; a commitment that has dominated Sam’s heart and non-musical practice for many more years than he’s been singing. ‘Old Wow’ has become for Sam an epithet to that quality innate within nature to create wonder and connection. It came to him, he says, while on a vision questing journey on a Scottish mountainside “during a time of questioning of what was going on between me and nature, a bit of relationship counselling with an old lover if you like” in a moment of existential crisis “a buzzard came swooping down and screeched right over my head then circled above me for some while sounding down onto me. At that moment I felt the presence and reassurance of this magical power and suddenly at that moment the name appeared, Old Wow, and I’ve held onto it ever since”. Many of the album songs deal with that beauty and importance of nature, our wounded relationship to her and the threats brought by the ecological crisis we are just waking up to. With lyrics to traditional songs often re-written or “re-imagined with new relevance for today” Sam has distilled out of these old songs “a new potency and communicate, through polished up old wisdoms almost lost, now with a renewed sense of heart and orientation”.

Unlike many of those in the current folk scene, Sam was brought up in North London’s Kentish Town. He forged a unique love of music and nature when packed off on summer holidays with the children’s charity Forest School Camps, where kids of all backgrounds go deep into the wild and sing every night around the campfire. Though his first musical loves were Michael Jackson and Joni Mitchell, once he connected, aged 25, that the songs he sang as a child during those formative summers had older roots in our national heritage “I realised I was as free as anyone else to sing these songs”, it became “an obsession”. Through chance circumstance, he formed a close bond with the Scottish singer Stanley Robertson, (nephew of the legendary ballad singer Jeannie Robertson MBE), and was effectively ‘mentored’ for four years being gifted literally hundreds of songs and the ancient ‘way’ in how to sing them. After Stanley’s death in 2009, he became an avid collector of traditional songs, spending time seeking out the elders of the Gypsy Traveller community recording thousands of songs in England and Ireland from the last generation to sing this repertoire. It is from this unique collection, held within his public digital songcollectors.org archive, that Sam set out through his own albums to “highlight the beauty of these songs through unusual and contemporary settings”.

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Sam is, he agrees, “a restless workaholic”. He may be best known for his unique re-interpretation of traditional songs but is also involved in a staggering array of other projects. As an entrepreneur, he has created new and unusual avenues for a vast range of acoustic musicians, whether established or up and coming, via The Nest Collective and its associated events such as the Campfire Club, the Unamplifire festival, his political & social justice singing Fire Choir and more. He was the first-ever non-North-American board member of the pioneering industry conference Folk Alliance and in the UK sits on the Featured Artist Coalition board alongside Imogen Heap, Radiohead’s Ed O’Brien, Pink Floyd’s Nick Mason, Blur’s Dave Rowntree, and many others. As a broadcaster, he has presented several acclaimed BBC radio documentaries about music in the UK and beyond. Sam has now appeared on stages, festivals, conferences, and gatherings in virtually every corner of the globe singing lecturing and generally being a storyteller and advocate for the things he loves. As a campaigner, Sam has used music to promote his love of the natural world in a typically bold and unexpected way. His annual sell-out ‘Singing With Nightingales’ immersive experiences now take place across the South-East every spring for 6 weeks and have helped to highlight through song and artistic means the threat to these and other endangered species. He played a key role in the RSPB 2019 campaign to highlight this issue with ‘Let Nature Sing’ a recording Sam composed entirely of bird song which made it to the top 20 in the UK music charts.

Sam is also a founding member of the organisation Music Declares Emergency, in which the UK music industry is convening to acknowledge and address how it can combat the climate and ecological crisis. His close involvement with Extinction Rebellion led to a memorable finale to their two-week ‘International Rebellion’ in April 2019. Thanks to Sam, nightingales really could be heard in Berkeley Square, at least for one night, as he led a 1500 strong crowd for an evening celebrating the uprising and bring the awareness back to the endangered species and the environment. It culminated in the communal singing of his revised version of ‘A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square’ while the bird’s song was streamed through everyone’s mobile phones in a scene reminiscent of that great musical eco-warrior who went before, Pete Seeger.

Yes, Sam plays a unique role in the British music scene. And now, with Old Wow he has re-worked traditional songs to create what he describes as “a timeless bridge, music that can be looking both backward and forwards, and a soulful accompaniment to an urgent need to fall back in love with nature if we are to know how to protect it”.