

THE LOWE DOWN

Singer/songwriter Jez Lowe chats
to Philip Freeman

JEZ ISN'T QUITE LIKE other singer/songwriters, in folk music or in anything else. For one thing, he doesn't have the strange disability that inflicts too many songwriters: the one that can't tell a good line from a bad one, distinguish therapy from art, or separate purely personal concerns from those that might interest an audience – beyond a doting coterie of friends.

Jez has a sensitivity with words, a way of bringing a cliché to life by a slight twist, so it's seen afresh; he makes sharp observations and mints wonderful phrases. At the same time, he builds intriguing tunes and sets them so their wistful beauty shows to the full. What makes them intriguing is a feel, quite different from the folk song tradition. Or is it?

He was quick to remind me that the North East of England has

a tradition – derived from, but more subtle than, the music halls – which goes back to Tommy Armstrong and beyond, and includes the likes of Johnny Handle and Alex Glasgow. A way of making songs about ordinary life and those involved as unremarkable as whippets and pigeon lofts. "I remember me dad singing things like *Blaydon Races* and *Hedgehog Pie*, but I wasn't really conscious of any tradition. It was just there. It was all about me."

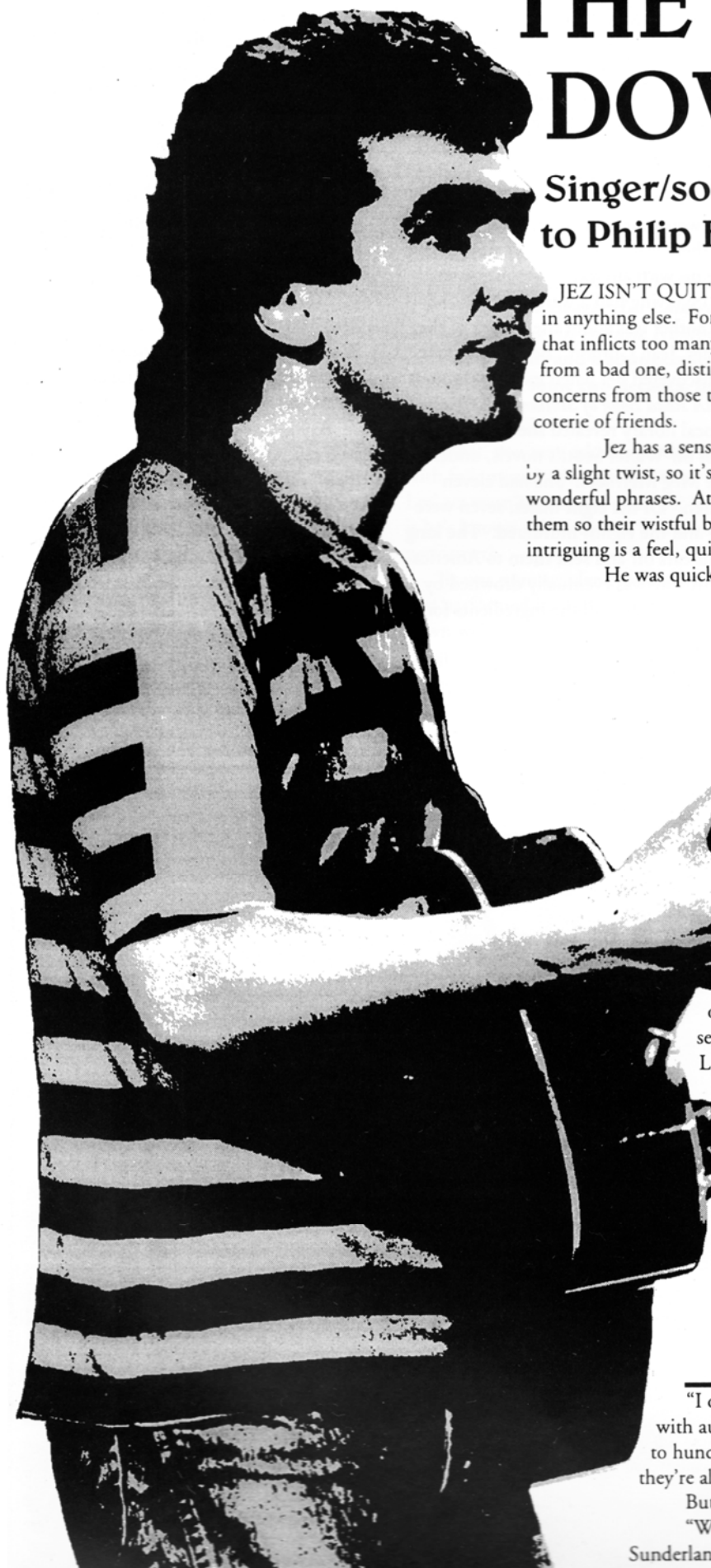
Similarly, folk clubs in the north often belong to a world of northern clubs generally, of which they're only a part; a tradition very different from the more self-conscious folk clubs, created by the likes of Bert Lloyd and Ewan MacColl. An extension, if you like, of the family knees-up. It's less radical sometimes, but often more thorough-going. It also does a better job of bringing people of all ages together. Above all, it's an affirmation of life and values. Folk clubs are where Jez is most at home, often where he goes down best. They love him and, in return, he defends them passionately.

**"...It sounds like
some sort of
precious gift..."**

"I don't know how people can slag off folk clubs, not with authority, unless they're someone like me, who goes to hundreds of them. When I go to folk clubs, I find they're all packed and they're all different."

But he accepts that the club scene has changed.

"When I was at college, there were ten folk clubs in Sunderland alone. You could go to two a night for a week."



Jez went to school with Ged Foley, from the age of ten onwards, and a lot of his early work was with Ged, as a duo or part of other bands. They worked together consistently from 1973 to 1979, when Ged went off to join Battlefield Band.

"In fact, our last gig together was in Swansea, but I can't remember where"

Their school was a Catholic one and it's tempting to talk about Catholicism, as a force behind his songs. But the idea is too simple; Jez's songs are full of good humour, as well as seriousness, and there's that economy of touch, something he learned from traditional song.

It was when Ged left that Jez went back to songwriting.

"I wrote some stuff when I was young, but it was very juvenile. Pop songs, really. When I started singing in folk clubs, I stopped writing, because singing new songs was the worst thing you could do."

He looked, instead, for new versions of songs – versions that hadn't been done before, and found he loved the old stuff more and more. They often needed reconstruction, or a bit of rewriting and, no doubt, it was then the apprenticeship, that was to blossom so impressively later, was served.

It's hard, if not impossible, to get Jez to talk about songwriting. It's a mystical process to him and he's not quite sure how it works.

"It's just something you've got to do, but it makes it sound like some sort of precious gift, if I talk about it. I start coming out with phoney little judgements. It's just something you've got to do. It's an urge."

The one thing he's certain of, is that he doesn't like setting things in a particular period of time. That gives his work some of the quality of fairy tales. It's not too far-fetched to liken the approach to some early Beatles songs, and in both cases, it comes from being ordinary. Except to articulate that ordinariness, in songs of outstanding beauty and wit, is extra-ordinary. For once the word is used literally.

How did he start making it his career?

"I didn't know you could make a living doing this. I knew there were guests at folk clubs, but I thought they were teachers or something. I didn't realise they did it full-time."

Was he working already?

"I had a job, but I made a decision to give it up and see what I could do."

It was in 1979, he decided to try and

make a go of it. And started to succeed, in a large measure, due to the choice of material. Many were his own songs, written to fill the gap left by Ged. But he didn't admit he'd written them.

"There were only a few who could get away with saying they wrote songs, then; Bill Caddick was one, and a few others"

Jez's first album came out on Fellside, in 1979, but didn't contain many of his own songs. There were more on the second, *The Old Durham Road*, where some of his best-loved songs are to be found: *High Part of the Town*, *Black Diamonds* and the like. Only then, did he start confessing that the songs were, indeed, written by Jez Lowe.

In many ways, Jez's career is a slice through the folk world, an example of changing fashions. In fact, Jez has never been fashionable. Too intelligent for some tastes, not exotic enough for others, he's unassuming in his manner and a streak of Puritanism leavens the Catholic background. Not only did people not realise he was singing his own material, they also cast him as a working class hero, which he never quite was.

"I like rough around the edges..."

"When I first started, there was a strain of people who saw me as some kind of singing pitman: this guy coming up from the pithead, with a guitar in his hand, singing about Black Diamonds. My dad was a miner, but I was grammar school and college. Pop music was my background. There are people up there, who are ex-coalminers and sing about it, and that's great; same as there are in South Wales, but that's not what I am."

In 1980 Jez played Pontardawe Festival. Also there was another solo performer, Jake Walton, on hurdy-gurdy. Jake was one of very few people in Britain playing gurdy at the time, and giving lessons to the young Nigel Eaton among others.

The two got on really well and the sounds they started making together were among the most imaginative in eighties folk. For four or five years, they played together, though Jez still continued with solo gigs. They did annual European tours – Holland, Belgium, Italy, Germany. They also went to America, Jez's first time in the States.

The album, *Two à Roue*, is sparkling stuff.

"I suppose, in a way, I should have given more commitment to the duo, but I didn't want to let my solo stuff go. We never officially stopped, it just kind of wound down."

Following his work with Jake, Jez started looking for other ways of exploring different sounds. For the *Bad Penny* album, he asked Bev Sanders to join him, and following that, Jez Lowe and the Bad Pennies came into being, adding Rob Kay. The subsequent album was *Briefly on the Street*.

But the band never quite worked. It was a bit predictable, not fluid enough for Jez's style, though the songs were strong as ever and nearly all remain in the repertoire. The line-up changed in 1992, when Rob left and Jez brought in the Surgeoner brothers. Bob plays double bass, keyboards and accordion; Billy plays fiddle, keyboards and whistles. The new band came to Newtown that year, and while the line-up looked a lot more promising, I remember thinking, at the time, it was distinctly rough round the edges.

"I like rough round the edges," Jez protested. "I really do. Within reason. Lately, we've just taken a lot of stuff out of the repertoire and put new things in, because we were getting bored with them." That the line-up was a good one was triumphantly demonstrated on the magnificent *Bede Weeps* album. The arrangements were imaginative, there was a wonderful wide sweep of styles and virtually every song was a gem.

The songwriting is so good, the fact that Jez is a musician of high calibre, is often overlooked. *Bede Weeps* marked a new level of confidence and maturity in his work. Not before time, wider recognition was coming. The Performing Rights Society gave him an award, as part of their Composer in Education Programme, and he was, subsequently, appointed Composer in Residence, by Easington District Arts Department.

Out of that came the *Banners* album, a project put together by Jez and involving musicians from all sorts of disciplines, including colliery bands and rock guitarists, as well as folk musicians. It was the first time Jez had written to provide more inspiration for the future. Interestingly, the folk musicians didn't live up to their stereotype.

"They were really interested in what everyone else was doing. They were there when I had a heavy metal guitarist in, wanting to see how he did it. They were

there when we had the jazz bands. But no-one else wanted to see what *they* were doing. And they're the ones who are supposed to be narrow-minded!"

Unfortunately, plans to take the project to Sidmouth didn't materialise, and you sense Jez is disappointed the council didn't follow it through. Anyone involved in such projects knows that anti-climax. A problem with projects is, that far too often they're short-term only.

Following the trip to the States with Jake Walton, Jez has been getting more and more requests to go back. Eighteen months ago, he found a new agent and work has been rolling in. Proof of his popularity in America is that his latest album, *Tenterhooks*, is on Green Linnet. Does this mean he's fallen out with Paul Adams and Fellside? "Not at all. In fact, Paul produced the album. It's just that Green Linnet have more outlets in the States."

It's not only America that is taking him more seriously. When we met, Jez had just come back from a trip to Australia.

"It's really weird, when the first thing you hear as you go into a club on the other side of the world, is someone doing your songs."

His surprise is one of the Jez Lowe's hallmarks. He doesn't use an agent, preferring to do all the bookings, in Britain at least, himself. He doesn't give himself airs and even feels guilty that he's doing what he enjoys, when so many of his mates aren't working at all. In every sense but one, he's just an ordinary bloke: it's only when he performs, you realise why he packs the folk clubs out and why he'll be around for a long time yet.

- Jez Lowe is at Orepool Inn & Motel, Sling, near Coleford (16 Feb), Mid Wales May Festival, Newtown (17/19 May), Redditch Festival (28/30 June), Four Fools Festival, Warrington (23/25 Aug)

COMPETITION ...WIN the new CD by JEZ LOWE

Tenterhooks is the latest album by Jez Lowe, unquestionably one of Britain's leading singer/songwriters. A copy of that CD could be yours! Just send us the answers to the following questions. The first five correct entries drawn will be the winners.

1. One of Jez Lowe's early musical collaborators was Ged Foley. Which band does Foley play with now?:
a) Battlefield Band b) House Band c) Oysterband
2. On which label were all Jez Lowe's previous albums?

Answers to: *Taplas*, 182 Broadway, Roath, Cardiff CF2 1QJ to arrive by first post, 11th. March 1996

Feb/March 1996 #74

