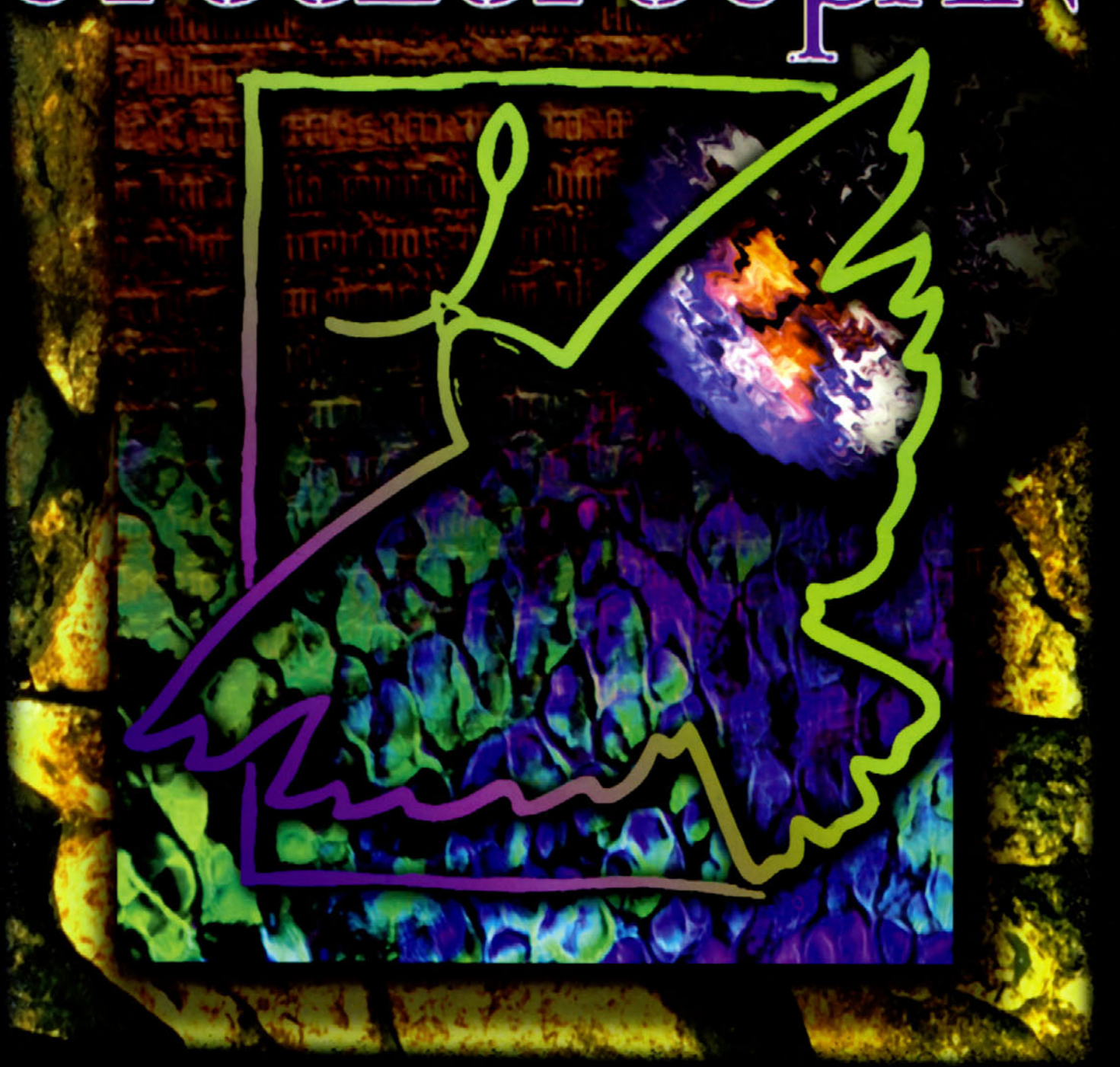
STEELEYE SPAN




STEELEYE
SPAN

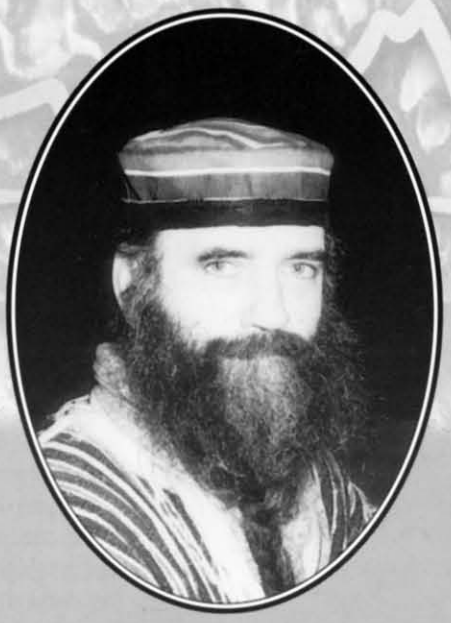
STEELEYE SPAN

MADDY PRIOR
Vocals

PETER KNIGHT
Fiddle & Vocals

BOB JOHNSON
Lead Guitar & Vocals

TIM HARRIES
Bass Guitar, Keyboard & Vocals



LIAM GENOCKEY
Drums

GAY WOODS
Vocals

"Steeleye Span is like a bus", Maddy Prior explains. "It goes along, and people get on and get off it. Sometimes the bus goes along the route you want to go, and sometimes it turns off, so you get off. The only problem, she says, is that nobody's driving, and the bus tends to get lost."

STEELEYE SPAN

Twenty-Seven Years on the Bus

by Steve Winick

After years of wandering, Steeleye Span have found their way, recovering a sense of identity that was largely lost in the 1980s. Their first studio album in seven years, *Time*, shows them to be much like the Steeleye Span of the mid-1970s, committed to combining traditional music with rock and roll in powerful and interesting ways. "The point we meet at is traditional music," says Prior, the band's long-time singer. "And rock...rock only in its application to what we do."

"The point we meet at is traditional music"

This firm resolve is particularly appropriate in light of the band's history. It was the first ensemble in Britain that was put together specifically to play "folk-rock" or, as some would rather say, "electric traditional music." The years have since brought other material into the band's repertoire, ranging from 1950s rock and roll to Berthold Brecht. But, at every concert since they were formed twenty-seven years ago, Steeleye Span has played traditional songs in a folk-rock style.

It is generally accepted that the style called "English folk-rock" was invented in 1969, when Fairport Convention recorded the seminal album Liege and Lief. Joe Boyd, who produced that album, once commented that it "opened the door through which a lot of good, mediocre and bad music rushed...."In the next twenty-seven years, Steeleye Span would push some of the first and best music through that door.

1969 was a momentous year for the members of Fairport Convention, filled with tragedies and triumphs that led directly to the founding of Steeleye Span. In May of that year, the band's van crashed, killing drummer Martin Lamble as well as guitarist Richard Thompson's girlfriend. After a period of recovery, the group held auditions for a new drummer and also added fiddler Dave Swarbrick to the band, which would later have consequences for Steeleye as well. By September they had released *Liege and Lief,* by far the group's most popular record at that time, and

Steeleye Span has played traditional songs in a folk-rock style.

perhaps the most highly-regarded English folk album of *all* time. By November, Ashley Hutchings, the group's founder, decided to leave. And before the year turned, Hutchings had formed Steeleye Span. Although the conventional wisdom has always been that Hutchings left Fairport because of disagreements about the band's musical direction, in an interview with *Sing Out!* in 1996, Hutchings suggested that he had had a "minor breakdown." "My personal opinion is that it was a delayed reaction to the crash," he said.

"I got fed up in Ireland on my own"

Hutchings suggests that, if Fairport hadn't broken up when they did, there would have been no Steeleye Span. The same goes for the Irish folk pioneers Sweeney's Men, who were as important to the Irish folk revival as Fairport were to England's. In their brief time as a group, they introduced not only electricity but also the now-ubiquitous bouzouki to the Irish tradition. Originally a trio made up of Andy Irvine, Johnny Moynihan and Joe Dolan, they began to make waves in Dublin in 1966, combining the popular ballad-group aesthetic with gentler, subtler playing on bouzouki, mandolin, guitar and whistle. Soon Dolan had been replaced by Terry Woods, who added Appalachian banjo and other American influences to the group.

Although all of Sweeney's Men's records are acoustic, there was a period in 1968 when electric guitarist Henry McCullough was part of the band. During this period they experimented with electric folk, becoming one of the few bands to have electrified Irish dance music before Fairport. Though McCullough left (to join Joe Cocker's band and play at Woodstock), the ideas were still fertile in the minds of Sweeney's two remaining members. When they moved to England, Hutchings quickly befriended them. A fan of their first album, which featured Irvine, Moynihan and Woods, Hutchings was originally interested in forming a band with that trio. However, Moynihan no longer relished working with Woods, and Irvine wouldn't join unless Moynihan came along, which left only Hutchings and Woods.

Hutchings and Woods were therefore looking for bandmates when Gay Woods, who had married Terry in 1968, came over to England to join her husband. "I got fed up in Ireland on my own," she explains. "I was a typist in Ireland, so I went to England to be a temp." She was an accomplished singer, but she had not performed professionally for several years, since, as she points out, "I had to earn the money!" Gay's arrival gave Hutchings the idea to form a band with the couple. "Terry Woods and I used to go up to Ashley's house and talk about the music, before it started to look like something real," Gay says. Still, they were sure they needed more people to flesh out the group. At one point, she claims, Robin and Barry Dransfield were going to be invited, but that band never came to fruition. Instead, Hutchings asked the folk duo of Tim Hart and Maddy Prior.

They kind of put me on the trail, and I thought it was all rather odd until I got used to it

Prior and Hart were among Britain's best-known folk performers in the late 1960s. Like many of her generation, Prior got her start singing American songs. Ironically, it was two American friends who persuaded her to listen to English folksongs. They also introduced her to Ewan MacColl, a singer and activist who was a shaping force in the folk revival, and to Cecil Sharp House, England's major folksong

archive. "They kind of put me on that trail," she says, "and I thought it was all rather odd until I got used to it." Hart had been in a rock band, the Ratfinks, before discovering folk music. The two met in their hometown of St. Alban's and began performing together in the late 60s. They were soon the toast of the folk club circuit, recording two highly regarded albums and touring all over England.

In 1969, Prior and Hart took part in a conversation at Keele folk festival about electrification of traditional music. Another participant in the discussion was Hutchings. As Hart told John Tobler in 1996, "We all sat around and expressed our annoyance that the electric input to folk music was coming from the rock side rather than the folk side...After that, Maddy and I gave Ashley a lift back to London and we got talking further." The result of these conversations was that, by the time he was sure of the Sweeneys' break-up, Hutchings knew whom he wanted in the band.

"two couples and a referee"

With Hart and Prior aboard, Steeleye Span began rehearsing.

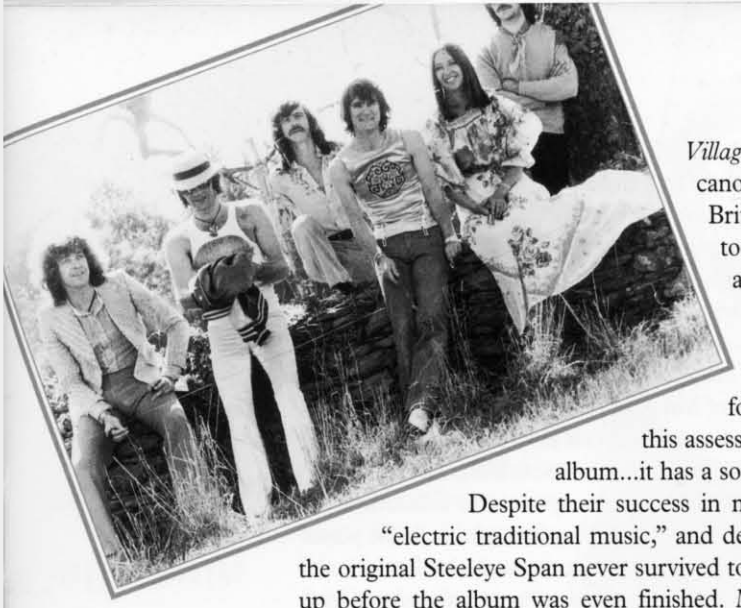
The quintet of Maddy Prior, Tim Hart, Gay and Terry Woods and Ashley Hutchings, the first line up of Steeleye Span, was an inherently unstable configuration which Prior today refers to as "two couples and a referee."

Hart elaborates: "Maddy and I were a clearly defined unit with our own ideas, Ashley had his ideas...and Terry and Gay had their ideas which tended to pull in a different direction."

In trying to describe the difficulty this band had in coming to a consensus, the great English folksinger and guitarist Martin Carthy tells the story of how Steeleye Span got its name. In late 1969, Carthy recounts, Hart approached him for ideas about what to call the new group. "I'd just learned this particular song, called 'Horkstow Grange.' One of the characters in it was called John Span, and his nickname was Steeleye. I said, 'Isn't that a great name, Steeleye Span.' And Tim said, 'Sounds like a name for a band to me!' He wrote it down." What happened next was typical of this line up: "Everybody had different names that they wanted to call the band, so they decided to put it to the vote. Tim voted twice, so the band was called Steeleye Span!"

Tim voted twice so the band was called Steeleye Span

After a few months of rehearsals at a country house in Wiltshire, the first step the new band took was to record an album, *Hark! The Village Wait* (1970). Asked why they leapt straight into the recording studio, Prior shrugs: "The record company had given us the money!" The world can count itself lucky, for had they gone out on tour, the band might well have broken up without ever recording a note. That would have been unfortunate; although a bit tentative, *Hark! The*



Village Wait is clearly a worthy addition to the folk-rock canon, and presents a richly varied array of songs from Britain and Ireland that is enjoyable listening even today. Strong vocals from four singers, and instruments as diverse as concertina, autoharp, electric dulcimer, mandola, banjo and harmonium in addition to electric guitar, bass and drums made the original Steeleye much more versatile than their fellow folk-rockers Fairport Convention. Prior agrees with this assessment of their first attempt: "I've always liked it as an album...it has a sort of freshness about it," she says.

We did't understand what being a group was about

Despite their success in making an album that came close to their ideal of "electric traditional music," and despite the generally positive response from listeners, the original Steeleye Span never survived to play a single concert; in fact, they decided to break up before the album was even finished. Musical disagreements were secondary to personal clashes, according to all concerned. Prior remembers it as a time of "stresses and strains and difficulties and arguments and throwing beer over each other's heads."

Gay Woods attributes part of the problem to the group's living arrangements. "We didn't understand what being a group was about, you know, leaving space for each individual to develop. We even had the cheek to try and live together!"

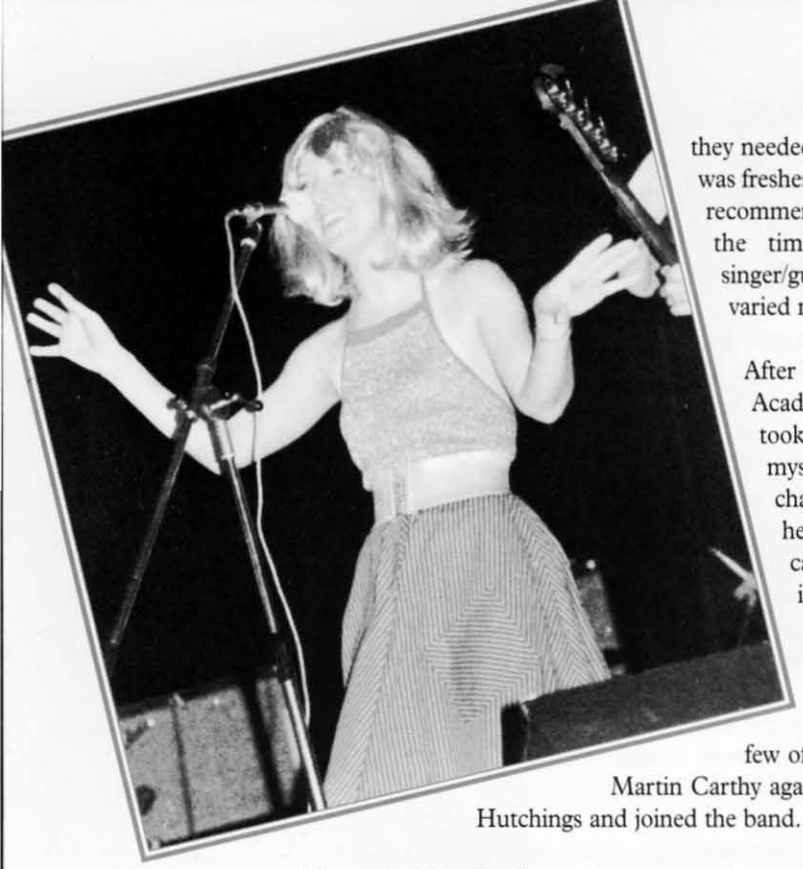
Prior agrees that living together was a mistake. "Our friend had a house, so we just said, 'Oh, that would be great!' Which in theory it would have been..." she trails off, laughing.

After the breakup, the Woodses left to be part of a band called Dr. Strangely Strange, and then to form the Woods Band. Prior, Hart and Hutchings decided to push on with Steeleye Span, and set their sights on Martin Carthy. A more established figure within the folk club scene than Prior and Hart, Carthy would lend Steeleye Span some credibility among the folk audience. The fact that Carthy's touring partner, Dave Swarbrick, had gone off to be in Fairport Convention, and the fact that his marriage broke up that same year, made him a free agent and game for anything...once they managed to track him down. "My wife and I had just split up, so I didn't have anywhere to live," he explains." From about the middle of January until about the middle of May, I went on this tour."

So it was more or less what I did before only louder. I loved it.

Finally, Steeleye found him. "I went visiting my daughter one time, and the phone rang. It was Tim, and he said, 'How'd you like to join Steeleye Span?' And I said, 'Yeah, all right.'" After travelling to London to meet up with the remaining three Steeleye members, Carthy went out and bought an electric guitar. "I didn't think about it, I just did it. I didn't actually treat it as an electric guitar. I just put a set of medium-gauge strings on this Telecaster and played it the way I'd always played. So it was just more or less what I did before only louder. I loved it! Ooh!"

This line up set out to be musical ambassadors for traditional song and music, hoping to bring it to new audiences in an accessible way. Before touring or recording, however, they decided that



they needed another element to their sound. Carthy, who was freshest off the folk club scene, was their talent scout, recommending a young violinist named Peter Knight. At the time, Knight was playing as a duo with singer/guitarist Bob Johnson, but he had had a long and varied musical history before that.

After an auspicious start (four years at the Royal Academy of Music, starting at the age of 13) Knight took a few years off in his later teens to discover the mysteries of the opposite sex. But then his life was changed by his first exposure to folk music. "I heard an Irish recording by an Irish fiddle player called Michael Coleman, and absolutely loved it." Soon, he was sitting in at pubs where Irish music was played, and ultimately hooked up with Johnson to play the club scene. As Knight tells it, Carthy was rather conspicuously watching the duo at quite a few of their gigs. "We were saying 'Oh, God, there's Martin Carthy again!'" Soon after that, he got a phone call from Hutchings and joined the band.

It was a loud band, and if anybody suggest that we turn down, I'd tell them to get stuffed

The second Steeleye line up was soon on the road, playing the college circuit to crowds of several hundred people. As line ups go, this one seems to be famed for the sheer volume of its playing. "We all played bloody loud!" Carthy remembers. "It was a loud band, and if anybody suggested that we turn down, I'd tell them to get stuffed, because it was a great sound. We were using big amps, for God's sake. We were using the Fender dual Showman. It's a five foot high speaker! So in order to get any kind of sound, you've got to turn up to a volume."

Prior agrees: "People used to say, I can't hear the words.' We had 400 watts of PA! And you think anybody else plays loud, you should be in front of Martin Carthy! People fondly imagine Martin being very restrained...not a bit of it! There wouldn't be any chance of hearing the words. I never heard them, that's for sure!"

Steeleye was not going in the direction he wanted to go

Even so, Carthy remembers hearing very few negative reactions from folk fans, which went directly against their expectations. "What sometimes we forget," he says, "is that the folkies used to come and see Steeleye! They love 'em! We never really ran into any flak from these mythical purists. Of course there were some people who didn't like it, but we have to admit that the people we thought might be pissed off weren't pissed off. The only time we ever got trouble was from rock and roll purists. One guy actually went on the stage and tried to pull Peter's fiddle out of his hand, 'cause it wasn't rock and roll!"

This incarnation of Steeleye Span recorded two very different albums. *Please to See the King* (1971) incorporated Carthy's droning guitar style, and edged Knight's fiddle with distortion. The results were mixed, sometimes muddy but always interesting. The whimsically named *Ten Man Mop,* or: *Mr. Reservoir-Butler Rides Again* (1971) is Steeleye's most acoustic-sounding album, and also contains the most Irish material. The vocals are more to the fore, the fiddling is fluid, and the band sounds more comfortable with its new members.

Indeed, Carthy suggests that the band had become altogether too comfortable. "We'd come to an end," he laments. "We'd stopped thinking." Hutchings was one person who never stopped thinking, and he could see that Steeleye was not going in the direction he wanted to go. A long stint during which

he had been itching to blend traditional music and rock and roll

Steeleye played for a theatre company, and the increasingly Irish repertoire the band was playing, encouraged the naturally restless Hutchings to move on to his next project: an electric band that played purely English folk music, known as The Albion Band.

After a brief period of negotiation, Carthy left as well. After Hutchings left, he explains, most of the band wanted to bring in another bass player and continue in the same vein. Carthy wanted another challenge, and suggested asking John Kirkpatrick, a singer, dancer and melodeon and concertina player, to join. "I was the only one who was interested in that," he remembers. "The others just wanted to get going. And since I was the only one who was that interested in this other idea, something had to give, and I was really sad when I realised I was gonna have to leave. Since I was the one who felt strongly about it, I was the one who had to go...but it was a really hard decision to make."

The bass player chosen to replace Hutchings was Rick Kemp, an extremely solid player who had worked a lot with Mike Chapman and had had a brief stint with King Crimson. Unlike the other members of Steeleye, he hadn't had any experience with folk music at all, so he brought more of a straight rock and roll vibe to the band. In this he would be supported by Robert Johnson, Knight's former musical partner, who joined the group on guitar.

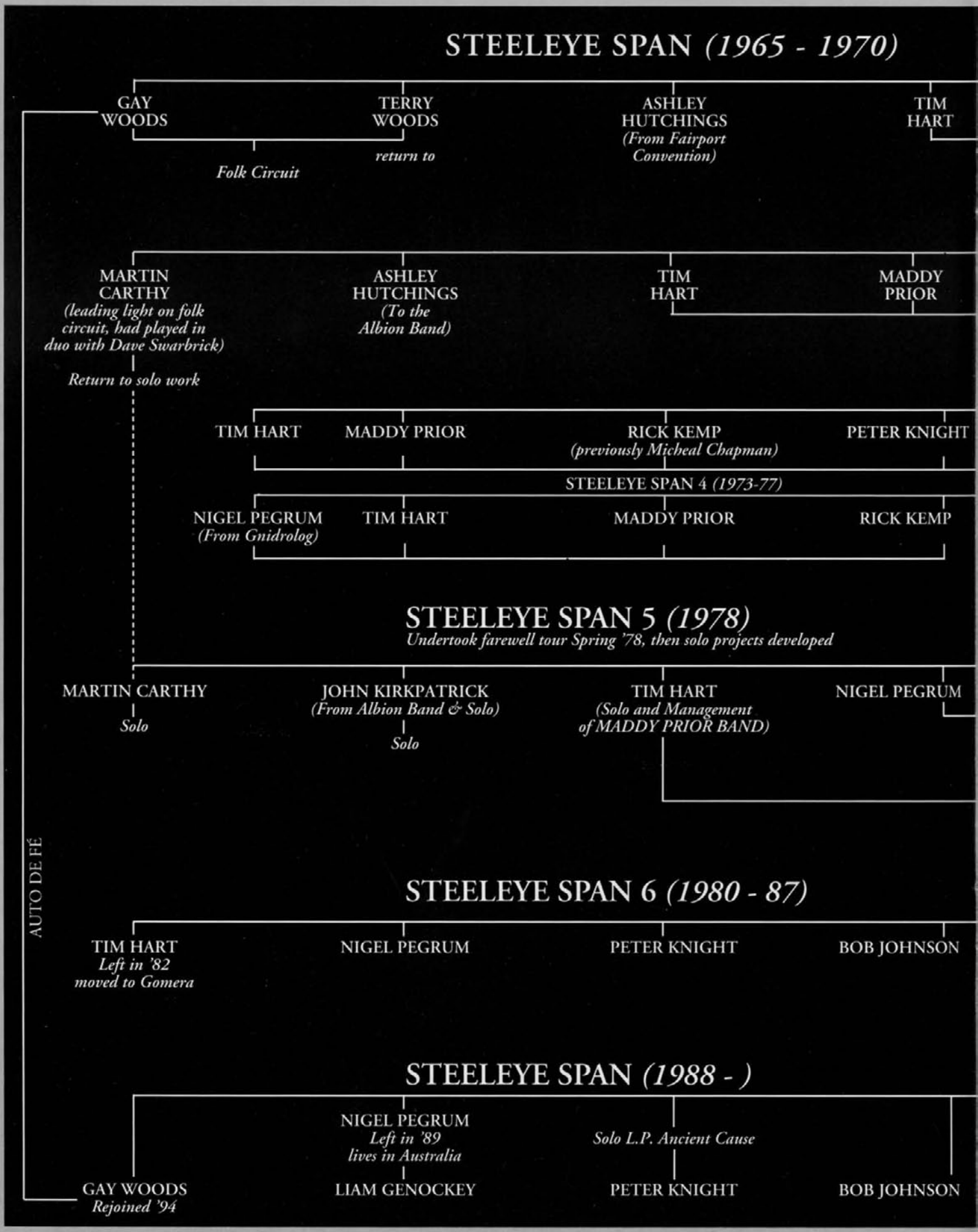
he seemed to get inside the song, inside the story of the song

Johnson, whose guitar playing was influenced by his Mississippi namesake, was the logical choice for Steeleye in several ways. For one, as Carthy points out, "we'd actually sort of robbed Bob of his partner when we asked Peter to join the band." Also, despite his own claim that "Peter got me into the band 'cause I was his friend...nobody else had heard of me at all," Johnson was remembered by true folk aficionados as a fine guitar player. Although Johnson had given up professional music and was working as a computer programmer, Carthy still recalled seeing him in the clubs and being mightily impressed by his "dense, very clever arrangements" and his "very, very classy" guitar playing.

The chief reason that Johnson was a perfect match for Steeleye, however, was something of which the band was completely unaware: for years, he had been just itching to blend traditional music and rock and roll. "The idea was always for me that the electric guitar, and the rockier, harder more simple sounds of rock and roll were quite suited to the harsh, hard stories behind a lot of those ballads and songs," he says. "It had been in the back of my mind before joining Steeleye Span, actually, on several occasions. I wondered what it would be like to play folk music but in a rocky way, an electric way. But it was not something I could ever suggest or think about in the bands that I was in. So it was very much a fluke that I was actually asked to join the band that was already starting to do the sort of thing that I did once think about myself. Not very often in life that things happen like that."

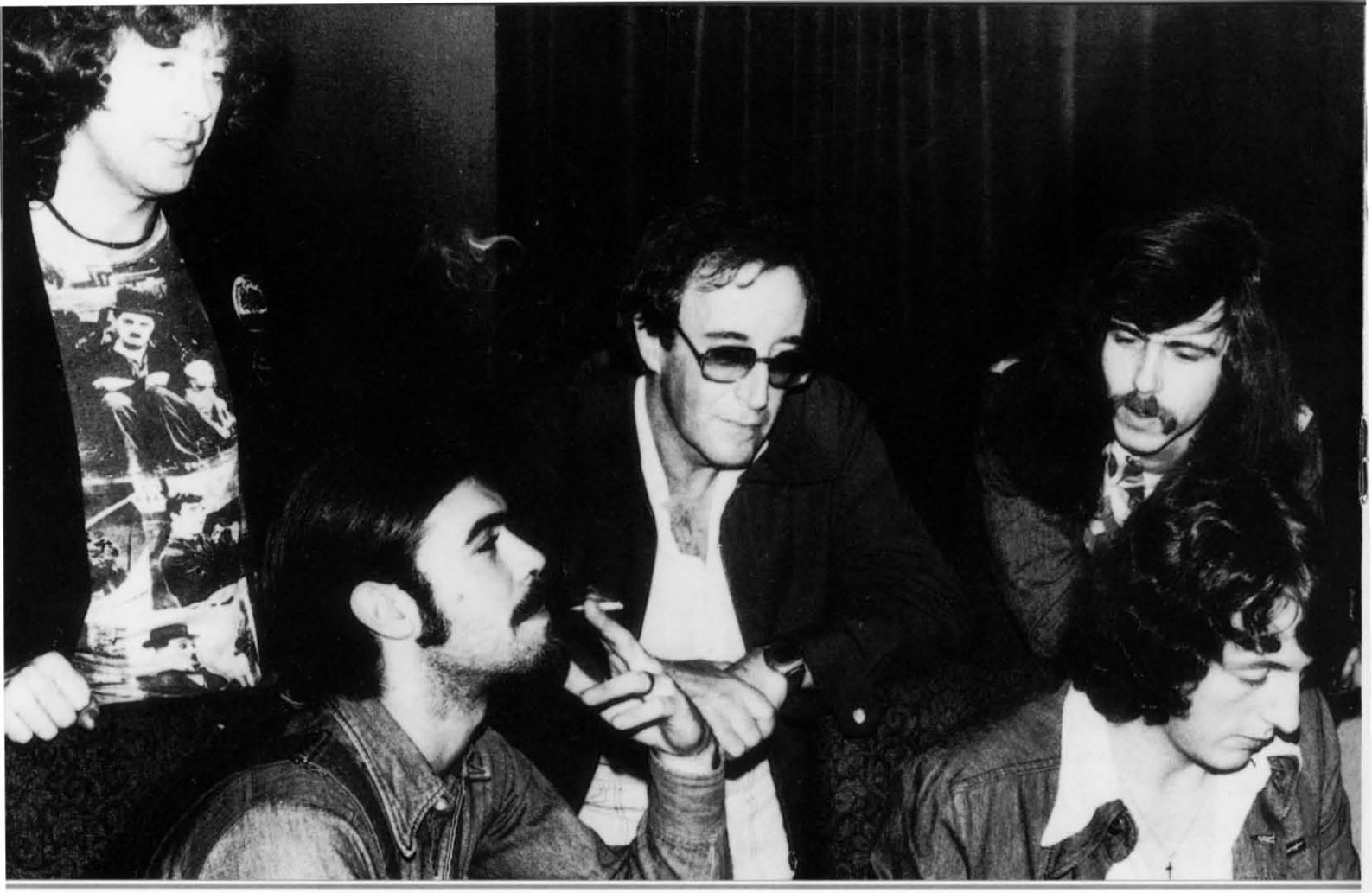
S T E E L E Y

Formed after meeting of princip



E S P A N

ole members at Keek Folk Festival



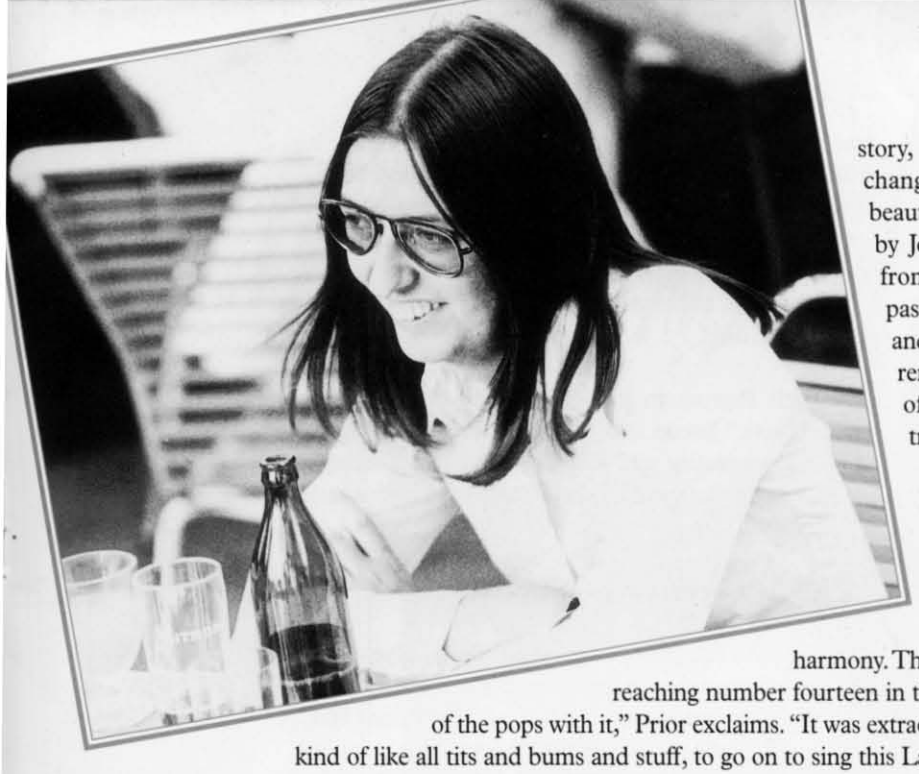
Johnson's progression as both a fan and a musician had been from rock to folk. Starting with early rock and rollers like Chuck Berry and Carl Perkins, he "went backwards," as he puts it, to bluesmen Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf and early country stars George Jones, Buck Owens and Hank Williams. From there, he began to explore American folk music in the early folk clubs, and from there "went backwards" still further to British and Irish folk songs. Carthy was a big influence on Johnson in the folk stage, "...only because of the way he seemed to get inside the song, inside the story of the song," he explains, hastening to add, "I didn't try to sing like him or play like him."

Like Carthy, Johnson had always been captivated by the stories of the ballads, especially supernatural ballads about witches, ghosts and elves. "Even when I was little," he elaborates, "I was an escapist sort of person, and I read fairy stories. In English Literature classes we would read the ballads. I remember reading 'Thomas the Rhymer' then, at school." "Thomas the Rhymer" and other supernatural ballads, dressed up in Johnson's elaborate arrangements, became the backbone of Steeleye's repertoire, so much so that Carthy believes it is Johnson's personality, more than anyone else's, that has defined Steeleye Span.

We had these great tall hats, all with ribbons, all black, there were ribbons stuck all over them

Johnson, Kemp, Prior, Hart and Knight made a formidable band, and Steeleye's next two albums, *Below the Salt* (1972) and *Parcel of Rogues* (1973), are considered classics of the genre. For some staunch Steeleye fans, these two records have never been surpassed. Prior sees this as a transitional period, before drums re-entered the group's sound (only *Hark! The Village Wait* had featured drums), but after Kemp's percussive bass and Johnson's hard-edged rock guitar began exerting their influence. "Those two albums were very distinctive, very different from what had gone before and what came afterwards," she says. "I think Bob and Rick having an essentially pure rock n roll [background], gave it a different slant completely from what had gone before. It's a different balance and crossover. We were starting to move towards a more accessible rock format, rock and roll as it were."

In addition to this toughening up of Steeleye's sound, their material on those two albums was stronger than ever. Johnson's arrangement of the ballad "King Henry" from *Below the Salt* was in his words "my first deliberate, conscious attempt to go into the ballad collections, find one and try and arrange it in some way and make it rocky." It is a long song that tells a strong, simple



story, broken up into several parts by changes in rhythm, all handled beautifully by the band and particularly by Johnson and Kemp. Other classics from *Below the Salt* include the pastoral ditties "Rosebud in June" and "Spotted Cow" and the group's rendition of "John Barleycorn," one of the best-loved of Britain's traditional songs.

Despite the strength of the "folk" material, *Below the Salt*'s runaway hit was "Gaudete," a Latin chant celebrating the birth of Christ, sung a capella in five-part harmony. The single was Steeleye's first big hit, reaching number fourteen in the British charts. "We were on top of the pops with it," Prior exclaims. "It was extraordinary! As it was then, which was kind of like all tits and bums and stuff, to go on to sing this Latin chant was extraordinary!" Not everyone loved it, however. "When we recorded it, the engineer loathed it. Absolutely hated it. So that's why it's got a very long fade in and a very long fade out," Prior explains.

I could feel the emotional response and the dramatic response

perhaps we could be a pop band and all that rubbish

The success of "Gaudete" helped push *Below the Salt* to number 43 on the album charts, but it was *Parcel of Rogues* that first took them into the top 30. Even more searingly electric than *Below the Salt*, it includes some moments that verge on heavy metal. Still, the strong vocal harmonies and the focus on traditional material, particularly several Jacobite songs, made it a hit with some folkies as well. Songs like "Alison Gross" and "The Wee, Wee Man" continued to demonstrate Johnson's love of the supernatural, while "Hares on the Mountain" and "One Misty Moisty Morning" were successors to *Below the Salt*'s more pastoral pieces.

Also on *Parcel Of Rogues*, Prior showed her commitment to more worldly concerns in her arrangement of "The Weaver and the Factory Maid," which, she says, "is a song about change, you see. How different generations respond to change. In 'Weaver,' the young man thinks [the factory] is quite good 'cause there's all these girls, and the old man thinks it's terrible because the whole trade is going downhill. And those are not attitudes that have changed." In fact, the older generation's rejection of new technologies while youngsters enjoy their liberating qualities was a feature of the electric folk movement in Britain, out of which Steeleye Span arose, making the song a sort of analogy for Steeleye itself.

A single song on *Parcel Of Rogues* featured a guest drummer. Soon, at the urging of Rick Kemp, the band began looking for a full time

drummer to fulfill its rock and roll destiny. They came up with Nigel Pegrum. "It took us a while to find Nigel," Prior remembers, "because we wanted someone who was quite musical. He played flute as well. He came in on that level as well, so we didn't have to have drums all the time, although it worked out that that's mostly what he did."

With Pegrum in tow, Steeleye Span became the "classic" lineup that would reach dizzying heights of popularity and sobering depths of disarray, a lineup that would disband, regroup, and fragment again.

But Steeleye would survive.

As the seventies progressed, Steeleye Span's stage show began to evolve considerably. The increasing popularity of the Prior, Hart, Johnson, Kemp and Pegrum line up meant that they were filling halls, and Pegrum's presence made it feel much more like a rock group. Prior and Hart began to think of ways to produce the drama of a rock and roll show out of folk elements, something they had wanted to tackle since their folkclub days. "One of the most effective openings I think we ever did was with the mummers out-fits," she recounts. "We did the 'Lyke Wake Dirge.' We had these great tall hats al with ribbons, all black, there were ribbons stuck all over them. They looked amazing! It was so impressive when we walked on stage. It absolutely stunned everybody." Other folk drama elements that the band brought on stage included a mummer's play and rapper and longsword dance. "I think the tradition is very colourful visually," Prior continues. "It's got incredible colour and vitality and energy in the whole range of the customs, so I used to use a lot of that. And I enjoyed that aspect of the visual crossover, because it's all there as part of our tradition."

but that's not what the song became about. It became a celebration of the energys in the end.

To some extent, Prior sees this infusion of drama as a return to the original intent of traditional songs which had been thoroughly missed by the revival. "The one thing about the folk song revival," she explains with gentle regret, "was that it was rather colourless, and deliberately so. You were considered a channel through which this music would flow. But [traditional singers] didn't think of themselves as channels! Far from it! They wanted you to understand that this was a serious story they were telling you. And that was one of the releases for me of Steeleye. I could feel that emotional response and the dramatic response."

There was still another unusual and dramatic feature of the Steeleye live show in this period: the encores. After the set was over, the band would hastily change clothes, the men would slick their hair back and Prior would don a blonde wig and "a really tarty outfit." The band would then perform old rock and roll standards like "To Know Him Is to Love Him" and "Rave On." While Prior feels the encores were funny,

she thinks the group did get carried away. "Every now and again, people would say, 'That's a really good idea. Why don't you do it as a single?' which of course was an absolutely disastrous idea! And we put them on albums, and nobody would understand why they were there, 'cause they didn't make any sense. And we got carried away with the idea that people liked them, and we thought, 'Perhaps it could be successful, perhaps we could be a pop band' and all that rubbish."

Though they could never be a pop band, this line up was to bring Steeleye to its apex of popularity, with three highly successful albums. Their strong showing on the charts gave them the clout to ask big name stars to join them in the studio. *Now We Are Six* (1974), the album that announced Pegrum's presence, was produced by Ian Anderson of Jethro Tull and featured a guest appearance by David Bowie. Kemp knew Bowie from his rock and roll experiences in Hull, and when a sax player was needed they rang him up. The following album, *Commoners Crown* (1975), includes a ukulele played by none other than actor, comedian and Goon Peter Sellers. Johnson was enough of a Goons fan to know that Sellers played the ukulele, and when they felt a uke was called for, they got up the nerve to ask him in. Prior recalls that Sellers was quite nervous. "He'd never been asked to play ukulele before," she explains.

They were in Prior's words, "pushing too hard, too fast."

These two albums include Some of Johnson's best work in arranging the old ballads. "Thomas the Rhymer" from *Now We Are Six* is one of the few memorable tracks on the album, though it seems rather heavyhanded today. "Little Sir Hugh" and "Long Lankin" from *Commoners Crown* are among the most chilling of Steeleye's songs. Johnson explains that in arranging these and other "big ballads," the idea was "to illustrate the story musically, rather than just find the melody for the ballad and sing it from the beginning to the end." "Thomas the Rhymer" uses several different melodies, as well as a chorus that Johnson made from two lines of the original ballad, to tell the story of true Thomas's trip to elfland and back. "Little Sir Hugh" uses a similar approach to tell a stark and gory tale of murder with a chorus from beyond the grave.

Commoners Crown was arguably the best album this version of Steeleye produced, largely because of Johnson's songs. But their next album, anchored by one of Prior's arrangements, became by far their most popular. Anyone who listens closely to the lyrics of Steeleye's biggest hit is bound to be confused; the song blatantly contradicts itself. Prior began with a traditional song called "All Around My Hat," which had a good chorus but boring verses. She retained only the title and the chorus, and added the verses from another folksong, entitled "Farewell He." The resulting pastiche has a chorus in which the narrator proclaims her loyalty to her absent lover and

verses in which she vows to dump him! "It doesn't make any sense," Prior admits, "but that's not what the song became about. It became a celebration of energy in the end."

Backed by an insistent shuffle rhythm and fronted by Prior's lusty vocals, the song is as catchy as they come. Some of the group's followers felt that the use of uptempo rock rhythms and nonsensical words was a step down from the group's previous focus on musical and lyrical complexity, especially as many of the instruments, like Nigel Pegrum's flute, are absolutely buried behind the rhythm section. Others, like Martin Carthy, felt that the shuffle rhythm should have been left to B.B. King. But for the most part, British audiences loved it, and it ascended the charts all the way to number five. Prior stands by it to this day. "I think that the song works," she says simply. "That's one of the few folk songs that have gone back to the people. They know that song." Indeed, recently Status Quo recorded a version of Prior's arrangement, and invited her to sing harmony on it.

The album *All Around My Hat* (1976) was also a success, reaching number seven on the charts. If it made Steeleye Span a household name, it nevertheless changed their lives only a little. "It wasn't like we came out of nowhere," Prior states. "We were never rock stars, but we'd been filling halls for quite a long time by then." Like all of Steeleye's previous albums, it included supernatural ballads, love songs, a capella harmony vocals and a set of quite unusual fiddle tunes from Peter Knight. One of Steeleye's great underrated tracks is on this album, a ballad called "Dance with Me." It is a version of the old Scandinavian ballad of Sir Olaf, and it blends supernatural intrigue, lust and murder with great jazzy fiddling from Knight. Other standout songs include "Blackjack Davy," "The Wife of Usher's Well," and the a capella robbers' song "Cadgwith Anthem."

It was a fabulously interesting band, an exciting band

Unfortunately, the rigorous touring and recording schedule began to take its toll on the band at this point. By 1975, they had released eight albums in a little over five years, and had spent almost every moment of their lives rehearsing, playing, recording or working on

material for the band. They were, in Prior's words, "pushing too hard, too fast." *Rocket Cottage* (1977), their follow upto *All Around My Hat*, could have been the album that cemented their popularity and brought folk songs to a new level of popularity. Instead it was a disappointment. "You can tell how desperate we were," Prior tells me, discussing the band's decision to stick an unrehearsed and unlisted version of "Camptown Racetrack" on Rocket Cottage. "I can't think what we were thinking of with that." Many of the songs seem half realised, cursorily arranged; a far cry from "Little Sir Hugh" or even "King Henry." The fans felt the same way, and the album languished below the top forty.

Steeleye was gone for good... or so it seemed

Once again, the time had obviously come for Steeleye to change. By 1977, Prior says, "We were working, we were rehearsing, we were recording. It was nonstop. We were tired and exhausted and fed up with each other, and wanted to do other things. But we were locked into this very tight working situation." In 1976, Prior had gone into the studio with June Tabor to record the *Silly Sisters* album as a side project. She was also interested in solo work, and Kemp wanted to work on his own music as well. Still, Steeleye lingered on until Johnson and Knight finally called it a day in early 1977.

Once again, conventional wisdom fails where band breakups are concerned.Most chroniclers havsaid it was their desire to work on the concept album *The King of Elfland's Daughter* that caused Knight and Johnson to quit Steeleye. They insist it wasn't so. "Pretty well everyone was [thinking of] leaving at that point," Knight says. "It's just that Bob and I happened to leave, and it was easy just to say, well, Bob and I had left to do the *The King of Elfland's Daughter*, which actually wasn't the case at all." Years later, a source at Chrysalis confessed that Knight and Johnson were only allowed to record the fantasy rock opera to keep them happy so that they would remain in Steeleye Span; consequently the company made no real effort to market or sell it. The ploy failed, however, and Johnson and Knight left the band.

I actually think it's quite a jolly album.

Their departure immediately caused a problem. All parties agreed that the band had to break up ("In those days, you wouldn't think to take a year off," Prior says). But in the meantime there were contractual obligations for several tours and two more albums. Prior saved the day by inviting Martin Carthy and John Kirkpatrick to join. The new Steeleye Span, made up of Prior, Kemp, Pegrum, Carthy and Kirkpatrick, existed from May 1977 until March 1978, performing three tours and recording two albums. Carthy and Prior both remember it as an exhilarating time. For Carthy, it was the first time he was in a band that was, in his words, "a money making machine." "It was wildly different from anything I'd ever attempted before, but it was really enjoyable," he enthues, adding that he needed to practice the electric guitar three to four hours a night, even during tours. "It was a fabulously interesting band, an exciting band," he raves.

Without Johnson's long supernatural ballads and Knight's Irish fiddle tunes, the group looked in new directions for material. Kirkpatrick brought in an encyclopedic knowledge of English folk music, folk song, and morris dance. Kemp began writing songs on historical themes, including "The Victory" and the epic "Montrose." Prior had always wanted to perform Berthold Brecht and Kurt Weill songs, but never thought Steeleye was the proper place for that. With Carthy's encouragement, she changed her mind. The result was a new repertoire of material as strong as anything the band had done since *Commoners Crown*. The studio album, *Storm Force Ten* (1977) and most especially the final album, Live at Last (1978), document some of the exciting innovations this incarnation of Steeleye accomplished before throwing in the towel.

Finally, in March 1978, the unthinkable happened: Steeleye Span broke up. Carthy and Kirkpatrick went off to work together, eventually to form Brass Monkey. Kemp and Prior, who were married by then, went to work on solo careers, as did Hart. Pegrum joined a band called The Barren Knights. Steeleye was gone for good...or so it seemed.

Like a character from one of Bob Johnson's ballads, Steeleye Span did not stay dead for long. Two years after the final break-up, the band was back again, this time with the stable line up that had recorded the classic mid-seventies albums: Maddy Prior, Tim Hart, Rick Kemp, Peter Knight, Bob Johnson and Nigel Pegrum. "They asked us to make an album," Prior recalls, "and we got on so well, we thought we'd tour."

there I found myself, with a suit and a shirt and a tie on and a briefcase with all my notes in, getting on a bus and going to work!

The album in question, *Sails of Silver* (1981), exemplifies the incertitude that characterised the band through the 1980s. It contains only one traditional song, the rest of the material having been written by the group. The unfamiliar material and slick production values both contribute to the feeling that this is not a Steeleye album at all. Prior explains, "Because we'd all kind of gone in different directions, all doing different things, with different ideas, that certainty that we'd had before, we'd lost. We were so in disarray, and we didn't have the material we were confident with. So [producer Gus Dudgeon] had a lot more input, and I think that's why it sounds very sweet and rounded and nothing offensive in it, you know. And that wasn't what we were known for, and it isn't what we do, what we're good at." Still, she insists, it's not a bad album, really. "I actually think it's quite a jolly album. And very accessible."

Despite the almost complete absence of traditional material from *Sails of Silver*, the album that inspired Steeleye's reunion, their subsequent tours included many of Steeleye's old favourites, songs like "Little Sir Hugh," "Thomas the Rhymer," "Alison Gross" and, of course, "All Around my Hat." One live album, available only in Australia, documents the sound and repertoire of this era's Steeleye Span.

During the period of the initial breakup, and for years thereafter, all the members of Steeleye pursued other interests. Prior and Kemp both produced solo work, Prior's being particularly

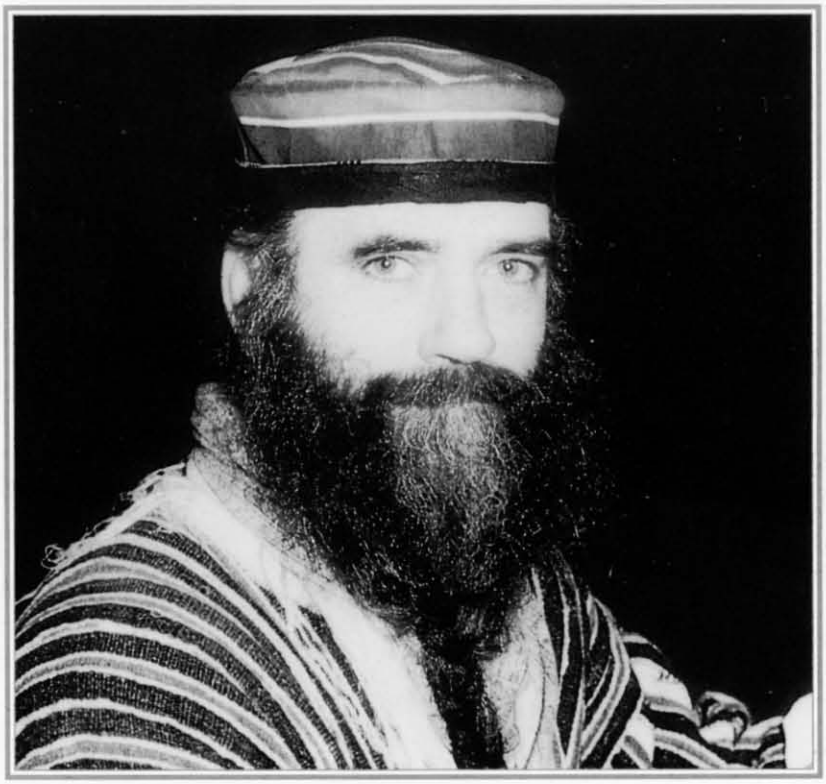
abundant; most importantly, they raised their children. Hart made some solo albums and played music on his own for a while. He left the group in 1984, was a rock manager for a while, and ultimately moved away to Gomera, in the Canary Islands. Pegrum was a record and film producer. Knight spent a few seasons fishing in the English Channel and found himself more and more drawn to improvisational music. He, too, has released a solo recording, *An Ancient Cause* (1991). Johnson never had a solo music career, because, he says, "Everything I was doing worked perfectly well in Steeleye Span! It just so happens it did. There was Peter playing and Maddy singing, and what more could I want?" As a result, he had perhaps the broadest range of vocational experiences; he operated a restaurant for a while, and later earned a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Psychology, winding up as a vocational counsellor. "It was mind-boggling, really," he says. "There I found myself, with a suit and a shirt and a tie on and a briefcase with all my notes in, getting on a bus and going to work!" A very different sort of bus than he was used to, to be sure!

"I quite often think we fell in love with the sounds and lost the point".

Years passed, during which the members of Steeleye toured regularly once or twice a year and then returned home to their lives, their jobs or their other musical projects. They didn't arrange much new material, and they went five years without making a studio record. When an album of new material did come out, 1986's *Back in Line*, it was disappointing for many of Steeleye's fans. As with *Sails of Silver*, there is very little traditional music on it. But for a couple of Johnson's more forgettable ballad adaptations, the album is made up of historical songs written by the band members. Prior and Kemp, for example, had moved to the Scottish borders and had developed a fascination with Robert the Bruce; hence, three songs about the Bruce on *Back in Line*. Although several of the songs are good, the album is one of their weakest.

where sound was concerned, Johnson filled in the Tim Hart gap

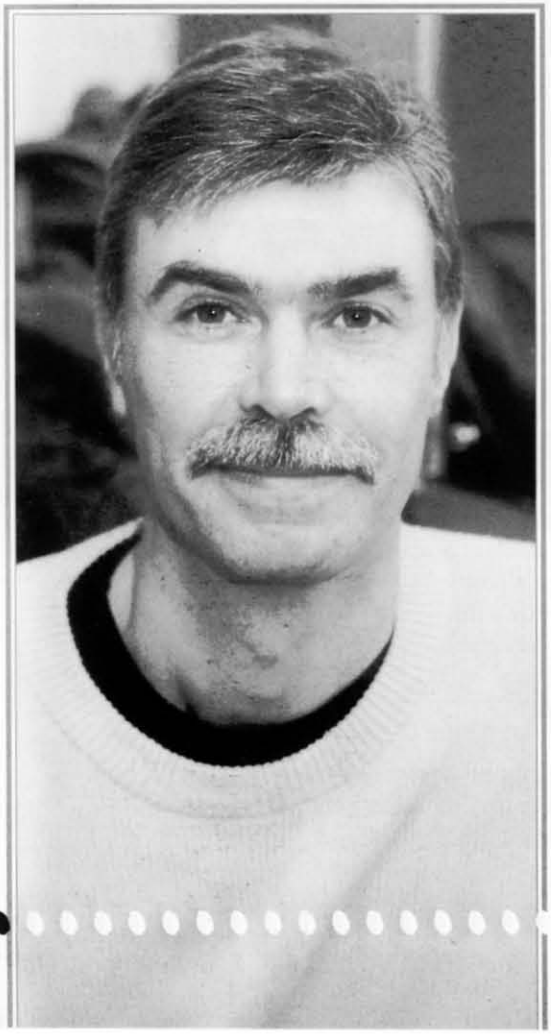
In trying to explain the slick but insubstantial feel of the album, Prior suggests that they were bamboozled by 1980s production values. "I quite often think we fell in love with the sounds and lost the point." More importantly, the performances on *Back in Line* are decidedly lackluster.



Clearly, there was a big hole in the band where Tim Hart used to be, and the keyboard work of Vince Cross was no replacement for Hart's voice and acoustic instruments.

As the band continued to drift, Rick Kemp quit for a variety of reasons including a Repetitive Strain Injury to the shoulder. There followed several years in which Steeleye brought in session men to play bass, unready to perform new material or to record. Then came 1989, which was Steeleye's 20th anniversary year. Clearly, some celebratory tours and an album project had to be done. Little did anyone know, it was to be the beginning of a resurgence in the band's energy and conviction.

Enter Tim Harries, a young bass player who knew Pegrum. Harries was just what the band needed, fresh blood, youthful energy, and a kick-ass musician to boot. A self-taught rock bassist since the age of nine, Harries also went to university and a conservatory and learned piano and classical double bass. After finishing his training, he had spent several years living the anonymous life of most professional musicians: pit orchestras for musicals, symphonic dates, chamber music ensembles, weddings and whatever else came along. In 1989, opportunity knocked twice, and Harries answered. First he was asked to join Bill Bruford's Earthworks, which he promptly did. A bit later Steeleye approached him. "They ended up with about two weeks before a tour, and they were desperate for a bass player," he says, modestly. "So I joined the band purely because there wasn't any choice. They had to have somebody!"



The line up featuring Harries and Pegrum recorded one album, 1989's *Tempted and Tried*. It was much better--or at least much more Steeleye--than the other 1980s albums, with more focus on traditional songs with a folky sound. Johnson's supernatural ballads were back as well, including a version of "The Cruel Mother." Even the original songs, mostly written by Knight, treated folkloric themes or commented on traditional culture; one of the most successful of these, "Seagull," is about the popular English game of shove-penny. Where sound was concerned, Johnson filled in the Tim Hart gap, playing acoustic guitars as well as his usual electric. Steeleye's fans quickly expressed relief at an album they could sink their teeth into, and the group's star began to rise again.

"they got a good kick up the arse".

Very soon after *Tempted and Tried*, Nigel Pegrum left the band and moved to Australia for personal reasons. His replacement was Liam Genockey, an Irish drummer who had played for years with Peter Knight in a band led by saxophonist Trevor Watts. Among Genockey's first appearances with the band was the Twentieth Anniversary Celebration tour in September 1989; one concert on this tour was filmed and released on video.

Genockey says he comes from a "rock and roll, blues background," but that he has played a lot of free-form jazz as well. In addition to Steeleye Span, he plays in a blues trio called Buick Six, and in Irish singer Paul Brady's band. He has been an active session musician on the British and Irish rock and roll scenes, and has played with folk-rock legends Richard and Linda Thompson. He has also played

African drums, in several groups that featured drummers from Ghana. Unlike many drummers in "ethnic" or "folk" music, he does not surround himself with dozens of percussion instruments that he uses once a night. At the same time, he is not a "straight" rock drummer like Pegrum. Instead, he hits, brushes and rubs every surface, every skin, every rim and cymbal of his standard trap kit, increasing his sound palette and the band's versatility. In the course of any concert, he can be heard rubbing the cymbals to produce a high-pitched pure tone, or drumming for a while on the sides of a drum rather than the head. Little things, perhaps, but they add a lot to Steeleye's sound.

"new boys" Harries and Genockey naturally formed a kind of unit within Steeleye

Both as the rhythm section and as the "new boys," Harries and Genockey naturally formed a kind of unit within Steeleye. It was important that both were musical explorers, eager for new challenges. "Once Liam joined," Harries says, "we managed to start off on some sort of process, some sort of development."

Prior agrees: "I don't think I really re-engaged with Steeleye for quite a long time. When Liam and Tim really started to get the hang of it, they gave us the confidence to recognise what it was that we do."

Genockey translates: "They got a good kick up the arse!"

What followed was a period in which Steeleye Span deepened their commitment to traditional songs while experimenting with new sounds. The results of these changes can be heard on the band's 1992 live album *Tonight's the Night*, which improved on *Tempted and Tried* and made it clear that Steeleye was ready for the 90s.

There's been a few people who've been in, gone out and come back in.

Some of Steeleye's best songs resurfaced in the repertoire, re-thought with the new band in mind. More importantly, new arrangements for traditional material became better and bolder. An example is Johnson's approach to "Tam Lin," one of the greatest British ballads. Having read that the legend of Tam Lin was known in eastern Europe, Johnson decided to use Bulgarian melodies instead of English ones. He found three completely separate traditional tunes from Bulgaria and crafted a long and haunting arrangement for the song, more ambitious than anything since *Commoners Crown*, and more inspiring as well.

In the midst of this period of growth, the band suffered another setback, and once again managed to turn it to their advantage. In 1993 Prior developed voice problems. As with many aging singers, her voice began to change in register and became unpredictable. Her husband suggested a solution: call up Gay Woods and ask her to join the band again. "People do seem to come in and out of Steeleye," Prior says, recalling the analogy of the bus. "There's been a few people who've been in, gone out, come back in. And so it didn't seem odd. It was the most sensible thing for me to do."

"As luck would have it, Woods had recently begun to sing traditional songs again. She and Terry split up in the late 1970s, largely because she thought folk club audiences were miserable, depressing and judgmental, and wanted to try her hand at rock music. After a few years with a rock band called Auto Da Fé, she quit performing to have a baby, and studied for a diploma in Jungian Psychology. But in January 1994, the folk world knocked on her door. "I got offered two gigs in a folk club," she recounts. "So I said, 'aaah, I'll take them,' you know? I did some old traditional songs. Like 'The Lowlands of Holland,' and 'The Trees They Are So High,' and 'Come All You Fair and Tender Ladies,' some of my real favourites. And they were lovely. It was nice just to stand up and see could I sing again." She was primed and ready for Steeleye Span.

Soon after Woods rejoined the band in 1994, Steeleye Span marked its twenty-fifth anniversary with a mighty reunion concert featuring everyone who had ever played in Steeleye, minus Terry Woods. Billed as "Steeleye Span: The Journey," it was quite a festive occasion, and gave latter-day fans the chance to see Hutchings, Carthy, and Hart in the context of Steeleye Span. Gay Woods, who had not seen Hutchings at all in the twenty-five years since quitting the band, enjoyed it immensely. "It was great to see all those people again, mindblowing!" Carthy agrees. "Fabulous, Fantastic! Brilliant!" he enthuses. "We got four hours rehearsal each band, and then we had to go and do it, and it really was a case of, as they say in Yorkshire, shit or bust."

"It was great to see all those people again, mindblowing!" "Fabulous, Fantastic!, Brillant."

"Since that historic concert, Steeleye has remained active. Even though Prior's voice is settled back to normal, Gay Woods has become a permanent member. This gives them additional versatility, introducing not only the possibility of female harmonies, but also Woods's extraordinary voice and large repertoire of songs. Their new album, called *Time* (1996), clearly shows Woods's influence in songs like "The Water is Wide," "Go From My Window," and a tongue-in-cheek "Old Maid in the Garret," which was Sweeney's Men's first hit in 1967. As Knight says, "Gay's voice is extraordinary, and has added a huge dimension to the band." *Time* is clearly Steeleye's best studio album in more than twenty years, showing that they're more than ready to move forward with traditional music once again.

What changes lie in the future for Steeleye Span? The band members are hesitant to discuss specific changes, except to say that, in Knight's words, "something is looming." It's hard to predict the ways in which Steeleye Span will change. The band has always struggled with the inertia that comes of being democratic; as Prior points out, democracy "means that everybody has an opinion, and it's got to be taken into account. You have the final veto of saying no. So a lot of stuff doesn't happen, more than does happen." When there's no one driving, the bus tends to stall, too.

Still, generalisations are possible. For Knight, the future involves striking a more perfect balance between traditional music and improvisation. For Genocky it means trying their hands at more material, playing longer sets and more challenging songs. For Johnson and Prior, whose love of traditional songs has never dimmed, it primarily means a search for new material to adapt.

"But of course, sometimes everybody's got a really clear idea of what's going on!"

"We don't ever actually have a plan," Prior confesses. "Whatever the material does, that's where we go. Bob comes in with an arrangement, but even that gets adapted. Is that right, Bob?"

"What?" Johnson asks, suddenly guilty. "I didn't touch her!"

"Prior rolls her eyes, laughing. "But of course, sometimes everybody's got a really clear idea of what's going on!"

Thanks to Maddy Prior, Bob Johnson, Peter Knight, Liam Genocky, Tim Harries, Gay Woods, Martin Carthy, Cindy Byram, David Bratman, Moishe Federman, Paul Hartman, Susan Hartman and Denise Sofranko.

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'Time' features the much loved line-up of Maddy Prior, Bob Johnson, Peter Knight, Liam Genocky and Tim Harries, as well as original vocalist Gay Woods (ex-Auto De Fe) who returns to the fold for a magical set that combines Steeleye's harmonic attack with their customary eye for a vivid song, including tales of Pagan goddesses and misunderstood witches – You Will Burn – mythological legends, noble folklore and the under-age pregnancy song – Underneath Her Apron.

Steeleye are an enduring legend now, boasting Prior and Woods incomparable vocal leadership, Johnson's guitar virtuosity and Knight's accomplished fiddle playing. Given that these are exciting times for folk music as a vibrant force. 'Time' is bound to excite interest and delight long time followers and new fans alike. The video includes interviews with each member of the band talking about the making of the album and the story behind the song.

The above album is available in the foyer of this theatre or at good record stores
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