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SET LIST

Richard Thompson



*In **Set List**, we talk to veteran musicians about some of their most famous songs, learning about their lives and careers (and maybe hearing a good backstage anecdote or two) in the process.*

The artist: **Richard Thompson** initially came to musical prominence while still in his teens, playing with the seminal British folk band Fairport Convention. In early 1971, Thompson decided to give it a go on his own, but after releasing his 1972 solo debut, *Henry The Human Fly*, he decided on a new musical collaborator: his new wife, Linda. The duo recorded several albums together during their marriage, concluding with 1982's *Shoot Out the Lights*. Thompson

has since forged a formidable solo career, recording 12 more studio albums, composing a handful of soundtracks, and performing numerous concerts around the world. A performance from Thompson's 2010-2011 tour can be found on his new DVD, *The Richard Thompson Band: Live At Celtic Connections*.

“The Money Shuffle” (from 2010’s *Dream Attic*)



Richard Thompson: A tribute, I suppose, to those fine selfless people in Wall Street who've done such a generous, probably spirited job in the past few years. [Laughs.] What else can I say?

The A.V. Club: It's the lead track on the *Live At Celtic Connections* DVD, which took place in the midst of your

tour to support the *Dream Attic* album—and, as it happens, it also leads off that particular album, a collection of new material that you chose to record in a live setting.

RT: This is true. It was new material recorded in a live setting. We recorded a whole album live rather than using the studio process. This is a form of madness. [Laughs.] It's absolute folly to do this, because you really limit your choices, you know? And we're one of those types of artists—I'm using the royal "we" here—who takes the live takes and overdubs everything in the studio and still presents it as a live album. But this is as it was recorded. We didn't change a thing. It's very naked and honest, I suppose. But, yeah, it's kind of a hair-raising process. I don't know if I can do it again. [Hesitates.] Well, if I live long enough, I'm sure I'll do it again.

AVC: Were you happy with the way it turned out, then?

RT: Yeah, I mean, I thought it turned out amazingly well. I love the fact that it's down to the wonderful musicians in the band, who have to learn 70 minutes of music and play it fairly flawless. "Fairly" being the important word there. [Laughs.] In the studio, you get to break it down, and you learn one track at a time, and you play one track at a time, and you can overdub it and kind of fix things. If you're out there live, then you really have to just play it properly the first time. But, yeah, the upside is that you get all that great energy coming from the audience as the payoff.

AVC: And it earned you a Grammy nod as well.

RT: Very nice, too. Thank you very much, indeed. I'll take it.
[Laughs.]

“Burning Man” (from 2010’s *Dream Attic*) AVC: Of the material you recorded for *Dream Attic*, is there any song that turned out considerably different from the way you’d imagined it when first writing it?

RT: I don’t know about any *dramatic* transformation, but there are a couple of songs on that record that are kind of almost improvisatory, so there’s no telling where they’re going to go. “Burning Man” is one of those where there’s just a kind of a blueprint for the band, and from night to night I’m not quite sure where it’s going to go. It’s fairly open-plan music.

Other songs I kind of have an arrangement in my head. You mentioned “The Money Shuffle,” where I have this kind of riff for the saxophone and violin to play, and I kind of know what the structure is, and I kind of know how many verses there should be, and that kind of stuff, so that’s a much more tied-down type of song.

Fairport Convention, “Meet On The Ledge” (from 1969’s *What We Did On Our Holidays*)

AVC: This was one of the first songs you wrote on your own, correct?

RT: Yeah, I think it was. I think the songs I’d written before that were collaborations, where I was sort of hiding behind other people. I was slightly afraid to reveal my “true self.” [Snorts.] Oh, God, I suppose you’re going to ask me what it’s about and everything. Which I haven’t got a clue! [Long pause.] It’s a song about ideals, I suppose,

and being true to one's ideals. You know, it's a song written when I was 19, when I'm going into the arts field. I suppose the song would be true whether it was going to be painting or drama or whatever. You have to stand true to certain principles. And I think the song questions if other people I knew had upheld those principles or if they'd fallen by the wayside. That's about all I know about that song! [Laughs.]

I mean, the song has become anthemic in a way that songs do, where the original meaning doesn't necessarily matter. It's the way people see the song, how they interpret the song. A perfect example is the Leonard Cohen song, "Hallelujah," where it's obviously a song about sex, but people seem to want to just gloss over that and turn it into this sort of quasi-religious song that gets sung in front of small children. But there you go. That's people for you: changing the meanings of things. [Laughs.] Once you throw it out there, then it's kind of public property, in a sense.

"The Angels Took My Racehorse Away" (from 1972's *Henry The Human Fly*)



RT: [Laughs.] What was I thinking? I don't actually like betting particularly, but I like the world of horse racing. I like the colors and the smells, and the kind of people who get at horse races, you don't see them anywhere else. You don't see them walking down the street ever. They sort of crawl out from holes somewhere and turn up at racecourses. So I sort of liked that world, and I was happy to write a song about that world. There are strange starting points for songs, and some of those starting points are the title or even just a line. And

that song started with the Lanark Silver Bell, which is a Scottish horse race, and it's the oldest continuous horse race in Britain, possibly one of the oldest in Europe. And I just liked the name. And the song just came from playing around with that name.

AVC: You make a comment on the DVD about how *Henry The Human Fly* was the worst-selling album in the history of Warner Brothers. Do you have any idea if that record still stands?

RT: [Laughs.] I haven't been keeping up with Warner Brothers' prospects lately, but if they keep continuing with the same downward spiral, I think it may lose that record fairly quickly to many, many releases. I think it certainly was for a while, though, yeah. I was quite proud of that, actually.

AVC: That was your debut solo album, coming on the heels of Fairport Convention's *Full House*. Was there a particular moment when you suddenly decided, "I need to spread my wings"?

RT: I think I'd been in bands since I was in school—since I was 11, really—and I was just wondering what it would be like to not be in a band. This is at age 21 or something like that. [Laughs.] And I think I wanted to experiment, to do more songwriting, and I didn't want to be shackled to a band's demands in the songwriting area, where you have to write something that's accessible to the other people in the band. It's unfair. So I just wanted some alone time, to kind of figure out who I was and what kind of style I could play.

Richard & Linda Thompson, “Wall Of Death” (from 1982’s *Shoot Out The Lights*)



RT: I suppose I see that song as a kind of memo to myself—I think that’s a valid use of stage time, to write yourself memos—to not be satisfied and to stay on the edge. Because the edge is where you have the best perspective. If you’re kind of in society, if you’re in the middle of it, if you’re participating in it fully, then you don’t have any perspective. Traditionally, the artist has been slightly outcast from society or has the outcast’s perspective. I think that’s an important thing. So the song is a reminder to me to stay on the edge, to take chances, to take risks, to not be complacent and self-satisfied.

AVC: Based on reports about the making of *Shoot Out The Lights*, an argument could be made that it might never have happened were it not for Gerry Rafferty.

RT: Well, I *suppose* so. We did an album with Gerry Rafferty a year before *Shoot Out The Lights* that we didn't really like. It wasn't released. It just sat in the vaults... and it's *still* in the vaults. But probably four or five songs that were on the Rafferty album were also used on *Shoot Out The Lights*. We liked the songs; we just didn't like the recordings. So we hung on to those songs and moved them over to the next project, really. So in that sense it's true. [Pauses.] I dunno. That's a funny way of looking at it, isn't it? A bit backwards. [Laughs.]

AVC: When you look back at *Shoot Out The Lights*, do you find yourself musing on the fact that the album that's often considered your definitive album with Linda is also the last one you made together?

RT: Well, at the time we were recording it, we weren't breaking up. We were still together, and there wasn't any sort of anything like that, really. But, you know, the way these things happen is that you record an album, and then six months to a year later, it's released and you're touring it. And at *that* point, things had kind of hit the wall. So if those are break-up songs—and I don't think that they are—but if they are break-up songs, then it was all very subliminal and self-conscious.

“Tear Stained Letter” (from 1983's *Hand Of Kindness*)



RT: That's a handy song. [Laughs.] In the sense that you can open a set with it, you can close the set with it, you can save it for the encore. It's a good kind of upbeat party song or dance song. Also a song that's easy to cover. And it's an easy song to jam on: It's got a fairly easy chord sequence that's just unusual enough that it's easy for people to solo over. So, yeah, a handy song.

AVC: Were you surprised when it became a country hit twice over?

RT: Yeah, quite surprised. I'm glad that something that's a kind of twisted, cultish rock song translates to Nashville. [Laughs.] That's great. And I'm quite grateful to Jo-El Sonnier and Patty Loveless for making it a hit a couple of times.