

Sandy Hill

Photographs:
Benjamin Harte



We meet two Oxfordshire women who have rediscovered their musical muse later in life

At the age of 57, singer Sandy Hill fulfilled a lifelong ambition — releasing her debut album, called *Tickled Pink*. It features some of the UK's most respected musicians, including Jools Holland, the legendary bassist Herbie Flowers and veteran cockney instrumentalist Joe Brown, and has received rapturous reviews in the musical press.

The album was expertly produced by Joe's multi-talented daughter Sam, who has woven a wonderful mix of different kinds of music around Sandy's attractive voice. The result is one of those rare albums that make you feel good, from the first to the last track.

But Sandy Hill is no newcomer to the music business. She worked at the world-famous Abbey Road studios in their 1969 heyday and started her career working alongside the Beatles, George Martin, Cliff Richard, Pink Floyd and the Hollies.

Sandy lived and worked abroad for many years, returning to the UK permanently in the 1990s, finally settling in a village near Henley-on-Thames.

Nick Dent Robinson talks to Henley-based singer Sandy Hill about working with the greats at Abbey Road studio while Nicola Lisle discovers how Oxfordshire inspired composer Beatrix Forbes

"I always wanted to sing and make my own album," Sandy explained. "From a very early age I loved music. When I was just five or so I would always put my head against the speakers of the big old radiogram in my parents' home in Chelmsford.

"I would listen intently to music — in the early days to Elvis, Billy Fury and Joe Brown and in later years to the Beatles and the Carpenters — but always and especially to Cliff Richard! In fact there's a lesser-known Cliff Richard song on my album called *London's Not Too Far* that I recall from way back then. Hank Marvin wrote it.

"There was something about the quality of Cliff's voice that I always loved and that song — about a little girl wanting to go to London to find the man she's seen on TV — foreshadowed what happened later to me," Sandy explained.

"My school and my parents never encouraged me to sing — in fact they were very discouraging about the possibility of a career in music — but I was always quietly determined that I would eventually do that.

"So when I was 16, I just telephoned Abbey Road studios and said I would like to work for them. Amazingly, they asked me to come and see them which I did — and they gave me a job!

"I found myself working in the tapes library which is where everyone started. It was



In the pink

wonderful. There were about 100 staff but only nine females and just two of us were young, so we had plenty of attention," she recalled.

"In the late 1960s everyone who was anyone was coming through the doors at Abbey Road. It was such a happy time. The managers I remember were Gus Cook and Ken Townsend. By a strange coincidence I just discovered Ken now lives near the same village as me and I have sent him a copy of *Tickled Pink*.

"Abbey Road was a very intimate place and, being so young, a lot of people indulged me. George Martin was always very kindly and I recall noticing even then the great pride he had in the Beatles. He was walking past me with Ringo one day — Ringo had long hair, a moustache and was wearing a full-length fur coat and George Martin seemed so tall and slim. I will never forget George's gentle smile

of almost paternal pride as he glanced at Ringo — a sweet moment.

"I had some lovely conversations at a table in the canteen with George Harrison — often just discussing mundane things like my daily commute to and from Chelmsford. I was still living at home. George was a lovely person, very caring and down to earth," Sandy said.

"We would often sit together and chat. I also recall Paul McCartney making a fuss of the little tea lady — I think her name was Dolly — and him laughing and holding the door open for her as she came into the studio, trying to balance so many mugs of tea on a tray.

"I have vivid memories of watching as they photographed the Beatles going back and forth over the zebra crossing outside for the cover of

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the *Abbey Road* album. Little did any of us realise then how iconic that photograph would become.

"I progressed from the tape library to doing studio bookings and other administrative things. But I remember finding myself singing one day on a session with Ginger Baker. There were other times I sang in the studio, too, but it was all very casual. I never talked much about my ambition to sing — but it was just quietly burning away inside me.

"Eventually, I left *Abbey Road* for a better paid job away from the music business. But I really missed that world. Then I saw an advertisement for someone to sing with a vocal harmony act doing international cabaret. I thought this was my chance to sing professionally," Sandy explained.

"I was nervous, but I passed the audition and after a few weeks of rehearsal we went abroad on tour, singing. It was a great experience.

"I was in my mid-twenties and I worked and lived abroad for years after that. With various people, I sang across Europe and in the Middle East and then in India where I did three tours, including performing at Mumbai's Taj Mahal Hotel. I loved India.

"By my early 30s I had met my present partner Brian. As our relationship strengthened we lived in Paris and then in Miami and later in Portugal and Sweden, following Brian's business career. And my singing life just went on hold," Sandy said.

Then, after 20 years of travelling and living abroad, Sandy and Brian came back to the UK.

"By then I felt like a gypsy and England seemed quite foreign to me," Sandy said. "We lived in Henley initially, but embarked on building our own house in the village where we are now. It was a huge project and quite a strain. It took four years. Meanwhile Brian had set up his own company."

Sandy wanted to get back to singing again — but I was not confident enough until, one day, she spotted a small advertisement in the local newspaper offering vocal coaching by Sam Brown.

"I was nervous but it seemed a great opportunity and eventually I called Sam. From the beginning she was really encouraging and supportive. She just had a way of building my confidence and bringing out the best in me," Sandy said.

"Within three months we were talking about making an album. Sam has been wonderful as a mentor and critical friend, and as the producer of *Tickled Pink* she was amazing. Completely in her element and really innovative. Patient, too, with lots of laughter!

"She played piano, ukulele and accordion on the album — plus she also arranged some beautiful original harmonies. And she encouraged me to record a new song she had written, *Walk Right Back*, which was such fun to do."



Sandy Hill and, inset, Sam Brown

"It makes me happy if I can sing something and it moves someone and has meaning for them. That is wonderful and one of the best rewards you can ever have"



As a multi-platinum singer, prolific composer, skilled arranger, instrumentalist and producer, Sam Brown had much to offer Sandy.

Jools Holland has described Sam as "without question, one of the greatest singers I have ever worked with" while Eric Clapton has observed that the sheer range of Sam's talents and virtuosity are one of UK music's best-kept secrets.

With more than three decades in the music business, Sam has an unrivalled network of contacts, too.

Sam said: "With *Tickled Pink*, Sandy and I wanted to really concentrate on the quality of the music, choosing only the best and most melodic songs from a variety of genres and eras. We then used only outstanding musicians and supporting singers who performed in a way that gently wrapped the sound around Sandy's lovely voice," she added.

"We kept the sound relatively pure — not over-produced — and we also focussed hard on every aspect of the harmonies and arrangements. Everyone really contributed so well and I think all of us who were involved are pleased with the result. That is why I am happy that reaction to *Tickled Pink* has been so positive."

Sandy is anxious not to exploit the famous names on *Tickled Pink* too much. But she feels she was very lucky to have so many respected musicians involved in her debut album.

"It was, in many ways, the experience of a lifetime," she said. "It was just amazing to have a childhood hero like Joe Brown coming along to the studio to play banjo on *I'll Fly Away* — a classic piece of bluegrass banjo that Joe just relished performing. And I was so lucky to have Jools Holland featuring on piano on the Sam Brown composition *Walk Right Back*, making the song really boogie along.

"It was also wonderful to meet Herbie Flowers again — we remembered each other from my *Abbey Road* days. Sam's brother Pete contributed some beautiful guitar and mandolin playing. Pete also mixed the album and did a brilliant job.

"Everyone involved was just so talented — I was thrilled to have Steve Balsamo sing the duet with me on *Your Long Journey*. I remember him playing Jesus in the West End production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

"All of these talented people were so unassuming — and generous with their time, always just wanting to give of their best.

"The whole thing was very

impressive and lovely to have done. It has reminded me of all the things I used to value and enjoy about the music world. So much so, that I am already planning a follow-up album," Sandy revealed.

"I certainly

do not seek fame or great fortune from my musical career and learning new skills and developing is one of the joys of music.

"It also makes me happy if I can sing something and it moves someone and has meaning for them. That is wonderful and one of the best rewards you can ever have.

"There is a young waitress who works in a local coffee shop close to where we live who told me that when she gets up each morning she immediately puts *Tickled Pink* on the CD player while she prepares for work. She says it puts her in a really good mood and always makes her smile — the perfect start to her day. That to me is a very happy thought. So I want to keep on touching people with what I do."

■ *Tickled Pink* is available from Amazon, iTunes and other music outlets. For more information visit Sandy Hill's website www.sandyhill.co.uk

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