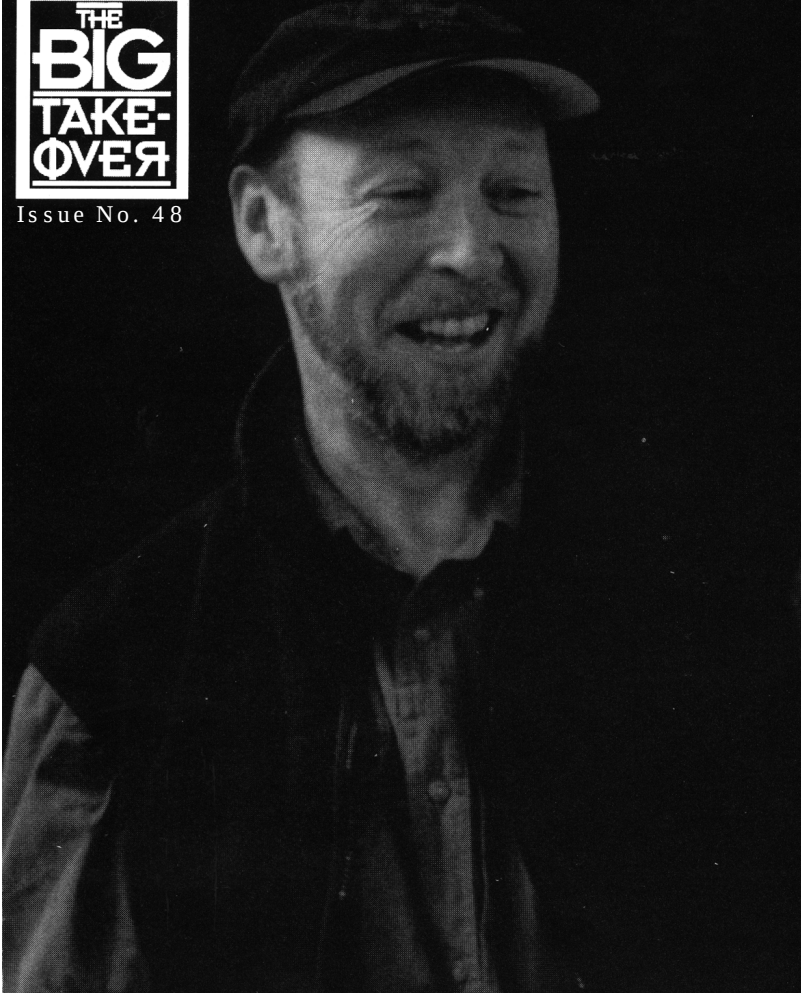




RICHARD THOMPSON

The '60s Folk Legend and "Michael Jordan of the Electric Guitar," on Mock Tudor, a New Greatest Hits LP, Nick Drake, and the Modern Scene

by Stephen Slaybaugh

"I think the problem is that music's become so corporate. It's not that people aren't creative, it's just hard for the good stuff to get through. Record companies, radio stations, promoters... it's all money."

Richard Thompson is truly one of rock's lasting figures. Like Neil Young, Lou Reed, or Bob Dylan, he has made vital and challenging music for more than three decades. At the age of 18 in 1967, Thompson was a founding member of **The Fairport Convention**. [Oddly enough, he'd previously been in a working Yardbirds-influenced R&B beat group with fellow teen and future late '70s **Stranglers'** punk star **Hugh Cornwell**, as Cornwell revealed in our interview in issue 46.—ed.] Fairport Convention was revolutionary in shaping folk music, particularly in the British Isles, thanks to their blend of traditional Celtic music with the rock sounds emanating from San Francisco and other hippie hotspots in America. Thompson also championed and collaborated with some of the other great, lesser-known artists of the late '60s Brit folk scene, notably **Nick Drake**, as we discuss below.

After leaving the group and releasing a solo album, Thompson teamed up with the former **Linda Peters** both musically and matrimonially, and the duo released six records through the '70s and into the '80s. Two of those albums, *I Want to See the Bright Lights Tonight* and *Shoot Out the Lights* are widely regarded as classics, highlighting Thompson's immense talent as both a songwriter and a guitarist.

The couple eventually split up and the male half continued on as a solo artist. Though he remains one of rock's finest songsmiths, Thompson always seems to be just out of earshot of mainstream audiences, and hence has largely been left to follow his own muse. As a result, he's developed a distinct blend of blues, folk and rock that still bears touches of Celtic influence, crafted together by an immensely creative and passionate guitarist. His most recent opus, *Mock Tudor* (Capitol), was released at the end of 1999, a straightforward platter of guitar-centered rock and folk songs revolving around memories of growing up in London's suburbs. Though it did not bear any commercial hits, the LP nevertheless appeared on many critics' lists of the year's best albums.

Now Capitol has released *Action Packed*, a greatest hits package covering Thompson's thirteen years with the label.

I talked with him from his part-time home in Los Angeles (he still spends most of his time in England) before an ensuing short tour of the States.

STEVE: Is this tour considered promotional for the *Action Packed* greatest hits package coming out, or is it a leg on the extended *Mock Tudor* tour?

RICHARD: That's a good question. It's somewhere in between, or you could say both!

STEVE: It's almost like a push-pull between your newest and oldest selves! Will the set list lean towards the back catalog or will you still be playing a good portion of *Mock Tudor*?

RICHARD: I've probably played up to a half dozen songs from *Mock Tudor* in recent shows, as well as a selection of things from the past going all the way back to the '60s.

STEVE: *Mock Tudor* was something of a conceptual record, so on the proper *Mock Tudor* tour, did you ever play the record straight through, going through the three sections that the LP is divided into?

RICHARD: When we first started touring for *Mock Tudor*, we did play two-thirds of the album straight off. But then I decided to break it up a bit to give some relief. So no, I don't think we ever played it straight through.

STEVE: Where were you when you were writing *Mock Tudor*?

RICHARD: I wrote it all over the place—in America, England, Hawaii, Germany, and various other places.

STEVE: In many ways L.A. epitomizes urban sprawl in America, and that's where you're living part-time at present; was there anything about the place that reminded you of London and in turn inspired the record in any way?

RICHARD: Probably not. American suburbs have more to do with the automobile than in England, particularly the one I'm sitting in at this precise moment. It's a much nicer suburb than the one I grew up in. I think I like suburbs, though. I feel safer in the suburbs. They are not as threatening as the city or the country. They are somewhere nicely in between.

STEVE: Making the question broader, were there any locales

that reminded you of London and in turn inspired the album?

RICHARD: I don't think so, no. I've got enough in my memory to draw on, years and years of suburbs built in to my brain! [both laugh] And I think sometimes they are easier to draw on when I'm away. I can be more focused.

STEVE: Fair enough. And now that it is out, I've heard that the greatest hits album marks the end of your work for Capitol.

RICHARD: Yes, it does. [*It's a typical way for a distinguished artist to conclude his service to a major label.—ed.*]

STEVE: Do you have another record deal lined up then, for another label?

RICHARD: I'm what they call "shopping." It was a good time to move on and it was the end of the contract.

STEVE: So do you have an album already in the can to use as bait while you are shopping around?

RICHARD: I don't have anything recorded, but I've got things pretty much ready to go for a variety of records. I'm not sure what the next project is going to be—whether it will be a high-profile, radio-friendly album, or more of a fans-only, weird record. I'm not sure what's next.

STEVE: Do you have even a strong inclination?

RICHARD: It's really hard to say. I've basically been working on three different projects, and I don't know which one is appropriate. I've done a *Mock Tudor* part two record. Then I have a quiet record, and I have a noisy record.

And I shouldn't define them any further than that, really!

STEVE: Alright then, I guess we will find out. Speaking of your fans, **Neil Young** toured with **Crosby, Stills & Nash** again recently. Do you have any desire to do something similar, to tour with Fairport Convention again, the wish of many of your most ardent fans who never saw the group?

RICHARD: Crosby, Stills & Nash are probably paid more! I don't know about an actual tour, but I have performed with them fairly frequently at the Cropredy Festival, which is an annual event in England every August that I really enjoy. I get such a jump playing with the lads! It's a great thing to do, and it's a great reminder of the strength of the band. I'm proud to have been a part of that. I don't know if it would be a great career move, though, for us to get back together. But if the price was right we might have a look at it!

STEVE: Fairport Convention is still widely hailed for having fused Celtic and British folk music with rock. What are your thoughts on those who have done similar things since then?

RICHARD: At various points in history, it's been necessary to remind people of what traditional music is. In Victorian England during the 1890s, people were worried that traditional music was going to disappear, so they began to go around and collect it. They listened to traditional folk singers and notated the music to keep it alive. And in the 20th century there has been a need for that as well—Fairport felt that there was a need to remind British people of what their own music was. Traditional British music wasn't just the stuffy Victorian influenced songs that had all the naughty bits crossed out that you learned in school. It was something that was still alive, that people were still singing, and that was still vital. We felt that if you updated it and put it with contemporary rhythms and instruments, it could be something that was really alive, that meant something again. It was people's culture and they deserved to know about it, enjoy it, and feel proud of it. So that was what Fairport was trying to do, and I think that is what a band like **The Pogues** was trying to do in the punk era. And it's still happening. Folk music and folk-

rock are certainly still healthy in the British Isles. In Ireland, the music crosses over and is not really divided off from pop music. There have been regional patches of success for folk music being performed and revived in England.

STEVE: In general, how viable do you think the folk idiom is these days? Isn't the "man and a guitar" at a disadvantage from the start, in this more technological musical world?

RICHARD: Well, I don't think folk music is something that's going to go away. It may go underground occasionally, and it may not be popular, but it's always going to be there. It's homemade music. You can sit at home and sing with your friends. I don't think that that practice will ever disappear. I think traditional music ideas sometimes continue by other means and cross over into the realm of popular music.

STEVE: I almost see a connection between those ideas and people making music on computers.

RICHARD: Yeah, certainly someone like **Moby** takes traditional elements of music. Being a collagist, he chops them up and reassembles them. And that's an interesting thing to do, although it may not be a lasting art form. There's probably something else right around the corner.

STEVE: You said in another interview recently that you thought popular music these days is bankrupt. Do you still feel that way?

RICHARD: I think the problem is that it's become so corporate. It's not that people aren't creative, it's just hard for the good stuff to get through. Record companies, radio stations, promoters... it's all money. The music business is not for people interested in music anymore, it's for people interested in money. At least there used to be a pretense of an interface between the two—even that isn't there anymore. Music has become so disposable in many factions. It's just a commodity. I just despair of this cycle. I don't think it's going to last forever, but right now the real music is not the mainstream. [*The basic credo of this publication for 21 years!—ed.*]

STEVE: You've worked with a lot of cool people in the past, like **Fred Frith** and **David Thomas**. Do you have any collaborations in the works?

RICHARD: Um, I don't think so. I might have just done something, but I can't think of what it is! I've done tracks here and there for people's records, but it's usually just one track at a time.

STEVE: For instance, as you know, there's been a resurgence of interest in the music of one of your past collaborators from three decades ago, [the late] **Nick Drake**. What are your feelings on that?

RICHARD: I suppose the cream rises eventually. In the case of Nick, it took an awfully long time! It's been a slow groundswell. During his lifetime, there really was no interest at all. He probably sold a couple thousand albums at the most, and that was it. I think he had great potential, but it just never happened while he was alive. His albums are very nicely recorded, there are fantastic string arrangements, and they are lasting songs. He was a fine artist.

STEVE: Obviously, the Volkswagen commercial [with his song, "Pink Moon"] has helped. It is very ironic, isn't it?

RICHARD: It's strange. It's very strange to unexpectedly hear Nick coming out of your TV on a commercial. [*Considering how bizarre that always is for all of us, Drake's long-time admirers, 26 years after his death, we cannot even begin to imagine how peculiar it must be for Thompson!—ed.*]

STEVE: Have you had any endorsement offers now that *Entertainment Weekly* called you "the **Michael Jordan** of the electric guitar?" Has Nike called you up yet?

RICHARD: [laughs] Alas no, just guitar strings and things. It's all terribly mundane. Not even San Pellegrino or another good clean product of the burnt out rock star has made me an offer. But I'm waiting. I dream of the day! [This article originally appeared in *Columbus Alive*. Reprinted with permission.] ♻