

The ex-Steeleye Span fiddler tells *RNR*'s Tom Povey that he's as busy as ever and just as enamoured of music as he was when he started out

In the moment with Peter Knight



Peter at the Kitchen Garden Café, Birmingham

As he enters his fiftieth year as a professional musician, Peter Knight continues to look forward musically with an ever-increasing number of projects and collaborations. After forty-three years as the fiddle player with Steeleye Span, also doing the occasional solo project, and going fishing, Peter left the group in 2013. The six years since then have been very productive for him.

November and December 2019 were a typically busy couple of months. Peter toured, first with his Gigspanner trio, followed by The Gigspanner Big Band when they were recording a live album, and then a short duo tour with John Spiers, before guesting with Steeleye Span for their fiftieth anniversary gig at London's Barbican Theatre. I spoke with Peter at the time, at his home in France just before he left for those three tours, and I asked him whether he was surprised at the way his career has developed.

"Not really because I've never thought of my musical journey as a career. I've just thought of it as stumbling through life with a fiddle in my hand, making certain decisions based upon certain things. I've been a lucky man. I've been lucky to have been in Steeleye Span. When I was asked to join, it was nothing at the time, paying ourselves

thirty quid a week. When I asked Bob Johnson to come to Steeleye Span he was working for the Performing Rights Society. We met in a coffee shop in Regent Street and he said, 'Well, I'm secure here, Pete.' He then phoned me up about two days later and said, 'Of course I'm going to do it.' I've never seen anything as a career move. I've followed the music wherever it's taken me in my life."

Peter started Gigspanner as a small side project while still with Steeleye Span. A friend, Trevor Watts, was playing with his band in Hastings and asked Peter to join as a guest. Percussionist, Vincent Salzfass, was in the audience with his wife who said to him while pointing at Peter, "You should play with that bloke." Vincent rang Peter.

They got together and played a few gigs locally in Hastings but Peter realised that fiddle and drums alone were not enough to sustain the music both melodically and rhythmically. He knew of Roger Flack and admired his playing so invited him to join them.

I asked Peter where the name Gigspanner came from. Who thought it up? "I'm guilty of that. It was a working title really. A gigspanner is a bottle opener. It was a name used by the jazz bands in the 40s and 50s. Someone would say, 'Who's got the gigspanner to open this bottle?' I'm not sure now it's a name that really represents the music that we play."

The initial Gigspanner trio started playing in pubs around Hastings. Deborah, Peter's

wife, noticed that queues of people were forming down the street to get in to see them play so she suggested doing some larger gigs and then a tour. Their first album, *Lipreading The Poet*, was released in 2008. Following further tours, a live album, *Doors At Eight*, was released in 2010. Peter continued with Steeleye Span until their album *Wintersmith* and then left at the end of 2013 to focus on Gigspanner and other projects. In 2015, Phillip



Gigspanner, from left: Vincent Salzfass, Peter Knight, Roger Flack. Photo: Elly Lucas

Henry and Hannah Martin were invited to guest with Gigspanner before joining in 2016 to tour. I asked Peter how Phil and Hannah came into the mix.

“We met Hannah’s mum at a festival and she said that Hannah’s inspiration for playing the fiddle was me, which is a lovely compliment. We then saw them at another festival and I really liked their playing and their singing. I’d never met them before but I went up to them and said, ‘That was lovely.’ We all said that we’d have to get together at some point. My wife Deborah organised it and The Gigspanner Big Band was formed. They loved playing with us and we loved playing with them. We took our material to them and they played on it and they brought their material to us and we played on that.”

Vince Salzfaas had to stop touring during 2016 for personal reasons and in 2017 Sacha Trochet joined. The Gigspanner Big Band released their first album, *Live*, in August 2017 to coincide with their appearance at Cropredy. Later that year, the Gigspanner trio released their fourth album, *The Wife Of Urban Law*.

In the summer of 2016, Peter played a set at the FolkEast festival with John Spiers who had recently completed twelve years with Bellowhead. Peter explained how this came about. “It was John and Becky [Marshall-Potter] at FolkEast who put us together. We did a little bit of rehearsing. John [Spiers] knew of my interest in improvising. He said, ‘I do it at home all the time but improvising on gigs is a very different thing.’ What has happened since then is that we have discovered a rich seam of music between us in which we share that common enjoyment of creating something that we have never created before and we could not create it on our own. We arrive at a beautiful bit of music that to me is dissonant and harmonious at the same time. It’s very exciting and very unusual.”

Peter and John recorded a duo album, *Well Met*, in 2017, which was released in early 2018 followed by a tour in March of

that year. After a few guest appearances with The Gigspanner Big Band, John officially joined in the summer of 2019. Peter explained, “John had guested with us and then when he wasn’t there we missed his input. We all think he’s a fab musician so we all thought it’s an obvious thing that we had to do.” So now they are six.

When I spoke with Peter, John was staying with him to rehearse for their then-upcoming duo tour. They had just been rehearsing with the others for the Gigspanner Big Band tour and live album.

I asked John about his playing with Peter.

“I think it’s that we play very differently from anything I’ve encountered before. In the duo, because there are only two of us, we can both have the folk tune that we are referencing as the main bit of the piece in our heads at the same time. Then we can both go away from it in different directions, also at the same time. So Peter will take on a flight of fancy with the melody and I’ll change the chords and substitutions underneath it as well. The music you are listening to, if you just heard that bit on its own, you would have no idea that it came from the melody that we started with. Obviously we crystallise back in and out of it so that the audience and we ourselves know where we are.

“We do the melody of ‘A Rosebud In June’, which is a Steeleye Span number. While rehearsing, we started off by playing the tune and then going out of it into something, then bringing it back in and again out of it, but we loved the bit in the middle where it came down to almost nothing really, just long notes. The only thing keeping it together was this common tempo in our heads. So we decided to start there and then crystallise the tune out of a fog of nothing. It is certainly different from anything I’d even considered playing before. I’ve never seen another gig where people do that. It’s quite magic to be part of it when it works. It normally works but there is also that element of danger that it might not work.”

Improvisation has been a key theme of Peter’s playing over the years. With Steeleye Span he would accompany Maddy Prior in songs such as ‘Betsy Bell And Mary Gray’, improvising a solo in the middle of the song. When guesting with Feast Of Fiddles, a regular highlight of his solo



Peter at Fairport's Cropredy Convention

section has been improvising through his composition ‘Sharp Goes Walkabout’. As Peter says, “My interest is definitely all to do with improvising in the moment. If the vehicle is a traditional song and playing with good people like John, that’s really what I like doing.”

The Gigspanner Big Band has now evolved away from two sets of musicians playing each other’s music. “What’s exciting about the last five days of rehearsal and about the new album,” Peter explained, “is that we are actually working like a band and the tracks are coming together. Regardless of who brings it in, and how much work they have done beforehand, it changes with everyone’s input. That’s how a band should work.”

From being a solo musician creating music in the moment through his improvisations, Peter is now part of a band that creates its music collectively. The process of creating music is a major theme of Peter’s masterclasses, which began six or seven years ago and which he gives once or twice a year. We talked about how these started. His wife Deborah had suggested he try one. He was hesitant and replied, “I’m not a teacher, I’m a player, but okay, I’ll have a go.” They started in a village hall with just twelve people. Peter described the preparation as “...quite painful because I wasn’t quite sure how to go about it.

“I thought that all I can really do is start from the point of ‘Why are people coming along to a class that I am doing?’ I thought the reason why they are coming along is that they heard me play my violin and they know that I love traditional music. They also know that I don’t stick to the notes and that I go into areas that intrigue them. I know they are thinking, ‘I’d like a bit of that in my playing.’ So that’s why



Peter (second from left) with mid-70s Steeleye Span

Peter at the Norwegian Church, Cardiff



they have come along. I say, 'You've got this instrument in your hand, and you are going to express something through the sound that you make. The first thing you have to do is have your intention right, and then the sound that you make, if you have the feeling inside you, is valid and as good as any beautiful note that anyone's ever played who's got the best technique in the world.'

"After the first weekend, I realised I actually quite enjoyed that because I opened some doors for people there and they kept coming back and coming back. What started off as a musician trying to earn a few bob on a weekend has now become a very rewarding responsibility."

John Spiers has guested at a previous workshop and was scheduled to guest again at the next one. I asked them both whether the workshop is really about learning to improvise. John answered, "It's almost more than that. It's about giving people the empowerment to do something which doesn't have the instant rewards of learning a tune. It's that 'I'm going to play my instrument and what I decide to do with it is good enough.' People are really scared of doing that because it's not what you think of when playing the instrument. All the really good musicians I know do that and I think it's the missing link. It should be as important as learning scales."

Peter continued: "You picked the key word there when you said 'scared'. It's the fear of getting it wrong. There're people that come to my classes that are professional and there're some that like playing the fiddle but they are not very good. We often get e-mails that say, 'I'd love to come to your class but I don't think I'm good enough.' I remember Tim Harries was a guest and Tim Harries is to me an extraordinary musician and he is on my handful of best

musicians that I've played with. He's a great improviser. Tim came away from the classes and said, 'Isn't it incredible that the people that don't think they are any good are the ones that are playing the best music in that improvisational way because it's a thought process.'

"When you have a conversation with people, eloquence is not always the thing. If someone believes what they are saying and they are trying to impart what they are saying to you, it's that train of thought and that unfolding of the thought process that is the same as improvising. It's the same thing but a different language. It's a musical language."

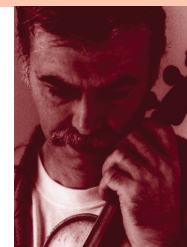
Looking ahead this year, collaborations continue to dominate Peter's musical life. Following a chance encounter at a Premier Inn, Peter will soon announce some gigs with other young musicians. "I think it's how you play music, really. I love music. I think that there are young musicians who see in this old musician something fresh and that I'm not just going through

the motions of doing what I know I can do. I'm more interested in what I've never played than what I can play. I'm constantly striving to keep myself interested in playing the best music that I can. I think that there are a few young musicians that have sussed that in me and they are the people that I'd like to play music with and they would like to play music with me, so that's all good."

2020 will be Peter's fiftieth year as a professional musician. How has he sustained these fifty years? "I've got great faith in people and that is what has sustained my music. As a musician, now that I'm nearer the end rather than the beginning of my life, and this was part of leaving Steeleye as well, I have to prioritise. Part of that prioritising is that I have to put myself in the best position that I can, with the musicians that I want to play music with, in order that I play the best music that I can. It's all very simple stuff. I'm not saying that philosophically music is any more precious than anything else. It's just that it is to me."

It is this simple philosophy that drives his music making – playing music he loves and finding other musicians who want to do the same. He has no record label, no agent, no PR budget; just himself and his wife Deborah. They manage the Gigsparner family, encouraged by the reception that their music receives as they tour all around the country.

Peter has no thoughts of retiring. "As long as I feel that I can still contribute to music then I don't get tired because being creative stops me from being tired. Physically, now and then, I think, 'I can't keep doing this,' when the workload is heavy, but mentally I'm very happy to play music until I drop, if the musical endeavour is one that keeps me interested." ♦



Peter in the 1980s; photo: Mark Leighton

At the Dolphin, Hastings, 2017

