

by Fiona Heywood

Tim Edey

THE LIVING
TRADITION



Tim Edey at Celtic Colours - Photo by Jim Byrne

Success in the music world means different things to different people, and can be hard to define. But in terms of the outsider looking in, multi-instrumentalist extraordinaire Tim Edey seems to have success by the bucket load. Having just won himself not one but two BBC Radio 2 Folk Awards (Musician Of The Year and Best Duo with Brendan Power), and with a list as long as your arm of top notch musicians queuing up to play with him, he appears to have it all. But his road has not always been easy, and success has sometimes been hard earned. As is often the case, the story that lies behind this musical genius is as fascinating and inspiring as the music itself.

Tim Edey grew up in Broadstairs, Kent in a household full of music. His mother emigrated to London from Dublin via Cork, and took with her a love of Irish and Scottish music. Tim was raised listening to albums his Irish grandparents owned such as The Chieftains, The Gallowglass Ceili Band and Foster & Allan, and took a great interest in his Irish heritage and its music from an early age.

His father is from the Chester / North Wales border and he played the guitar and sang. "He and my mum encouraged me and gave me the love of music I have today really", says Tim. "We had family sessions in the kitchen when I was growing up in Broadstairs, Dad on guitar and me on piano box, whistle, and then melodeon when I was 14.

We played most mornings and evenings from when I was age 7 until I went touring at age 17."

"My earliest memory of playing was when I was around 4 or 5, doodling on the piano at home. We always had a piano in the house and I started and actually learned (self taught) to play music on the piano which I still love to this day. My parents had a huge folk and gypsy jazz record collection featuring many of my favourites like The Chieftains, Ry Cooder, Simon & Garfunkel, Django Rheindhart, Jonathon Kelly, Bix Biederbecke, Donovan, Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger."

Tim was exposed to a very eclectic range of music in his early days, and this is very apparent in his style and choice of music now. He describes himself as "a celtic jazzier" and loves all sorts of music, particularly those with swing like gypsy jazz and Orkney and Shetland tunes. Having such an exceptional talent, he could no doubt play alongside the best in almost any genre, and yet he seems to be drawn to his Irish roots and to the traditional side of things.

"I think my love of Irish and Celtic music certainly comes from a few sources. Dad plays folk music a lot and has influenced my music the most, so has growing up around so many Irish people. Then, when I was 10, I met a Faversham born but Dublin based singer and musician called Enda McCabe. I met him at Broadstairs Folk Week and ended up playing

in his band all over the south-east of England and France when I was 14 till around 18. He was a major influence."

"Melodeon players Dave Mallinson, Ben Dauncey, Luke Daniels and Andy Cutting were my first influences on box. Then two good pals of mine introduced me to two Irish traditional acts that literally shaped and changed my life forever! Rick Clarke gave me my first listen to Cooney & Begley (and also Christy Moore incidently) and then Andy Pigg got me the first CD Sharon Shannon ever recorded. At the age of 15, these records became my bible and I played along, firstly on melodeon to Seamus and Sharon's music, and then at the age of 17, guitar to Steve Cooney's playing. Joining Ed Boyd's band Red Ciel at age of 16 further shaped my music and guitar playing hugely - watching Ed play, getting tips from him and being introduced to the tuning he played in (DADGAD) was a huge thing for me."

Not only did Tim learn and master the guitar and box, but he also tried his hand at several other instruments and found that he could get something out of them too - he currently plays more than 10 instruments to a standard that most of us could only aspire to. He reckons that in some part, this is down to working for many years around the UK festivals for John Turner from the Cleckheaton folk music shop The Music Room, where so many different instruments were available for customer demonstrations, and for Tim to try out.

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Tim Edey & Brendan Power at Celtic Colours
- Photo by Jim Byrne

“... Tim also plays regularly with Seamus Begley, again bringing things full circle. Tim met Seamus and Steve Cooney in 1995 at The Swan in Stockwell, London, and thought it was the best live show of any musical genre he had ever seen. He went on to get to know them and recorded his solo melodeon album in Steve’s studio in Kerry in 1997. It was here that Tim’s obsession with the guitar became even more heightened, and soon after he began playing more frequently with Seamus.”



Tim Edey with The Chieftains
Photo by Pete Heywood



But it did not just all come magically to Tim – there was also a lot of hard work and practice. “I believe that if you put the time into music”, says Tim, “ideally from a young age, and as long as you genuinely love the music, then you can learn a lot. I practised for six to eight hours per day in my teenage years, and had absolutely no interest in the normal things teenagers did like partying, going to discos, meeting girls at Broadstairs bandstand and the likes, or indeed in popular music. I was obsessed with Cooney & Begley, Sharon Shannon, Capercaillie, Red Ciel and quite literally learned to play from sitting with a walkman, guitar and melodeon and playing along with earphones in every day, all day and night! I loved it and I still do. I have broadened my listening to other styles of music these days, but I always come back to these albums at some point.”

But sometimes there is a downside to being a genius, especially when you are at school and the other kids see you as different. His musical abilities and success brought Tim unwanted attention from the school bullies, and this attention had a lasting effect on him as a person and a musician.

“In my fourth year of secondary school I suffered from bullying which I am certain was not helped by being the school ‘musical celebrity’ for want of a better word. People were jealous as I was playing gigs and earning money at 15 years old - £100 a week regularly. The

bullying affected me terribly in a psychological way, and by the sixth month into year 10 as they call it, the family GP took me out of school and I was taught at home by my parents who were so patient and supportive. I had a nervous breakdown at 15, caused by the bullying. The music of the artistes mentioned above saved me from getting a lot worse, along with my family and GP of course. I didn’t leave the house for over four months and suffered from agoraphobia, OCD and depression. Sharon Shannon’s music in particular helped me more than any tablets (which I was not on anyway as was too young and not deemed bad enough for). Her music is the best anti-depressant on earth!”

Music often has this effect, and countless people can bear testimony to the fact that certain illnesses, conditions and situations would be a lot worse were it not for the therapeutic effect of music. And on one level or another, I think most of us would agree that this is true in our own lives.

Despite the difficult situation he found himself in, with Sharon’s help, Tim managed to find a way to continue to play publicly, and further developed his art. He has even turned his experiences to positive effect and used them as material to write about. One of the loveliest tunes on his recent CD, *The Best Of Tim Edey*, is entitled *Why?* and was written by Tim as an expression of his frustration with OCD, which he continues to battle with. As a

travelling musician, his OCD has impacted on his working life, though Tim has managed to find ways to conquer most of these problems.

“I am convinced I first got OCD symptoms while I was bullied at school. Kids behind me would flick ink onto my shirt and then tap me on the back, I would naturally look around to check and this escalated to constant checking very quickly, and then led to various other symptoms. OCD is very common in musicians and having worked a lot with autistic people with my music, I certainly agree that OCD and autism go hand in hand. I also believe that in many ways musicians are all a tiny bit autistic - if we think about it, music is an obsession, especially folk based music! We play for hours in sessions or at home, what is it that makes us want to? Fun? The craic? The musical sound? I feel it is very similar to autism, but clearly as musicians we are very lucky that it is controlled.”

“The OCD has caused major problems from time to time in my own life. For example, I suffered from an awful fear of train tunnels, elevators, undergrounds and flying around the year 2002, and had to stop touring and gigging completely. I was on a bus with my good friend and amazing bodhran player Lucy Randall back from Oxfordshire, and I just couldn’t get a breath. I felt dizzy - it was an anxiety attack and I was hyperventilating badly. As I didn’t know the cause at this time, I was sure

I was dying from some awful condition. Luckily Lucy calmed me down and helped me get home to Kent. Things got worse and the obsession with travelling became so bad I even turned down all manner of gigs, from a USA tour that Steve Cooney couldn’t make with Mary Black, to local ceilidhs in village halls for wedding bands. I found being on stage impossible, being in public places also impossible, and survived for a year recovering on my savings from previous touring and the kindness of my parents. I sought out treatment and learned to ‘breathe’ again from a wonderful hypnotherapist, Paul Velasco in Kent. This cured the panic attacks, and then an amazing psychotherapist and anxiety specialist, Philip Andrews in Canterbury, got me flying again and I went to Dublin for a gig with Seamus Begley. Finally I was on a road to freedom.”

“However as great as that was I still couldn’t manage certain situations like elevators. I will never forget a great summer tour of Europe I did with Lunasa in 2005, standing in for Donogh Hennessy, the guitarist in the band. We stayed at a hotel in Brittany and I must have driven the poor guys mad as there wasn’t a staircase in sight apart from one of these awful outer building ones that looks like a fire escape.

A special key was needed to get to my room using this system of going up from reception, outside, then climbing these crazy bendy metal stairs and entering the floor with another key, and finally to

my room! The band were ever so patient with this new guitarist, and looking back the OCD caused nightmares with fears like this.”

As a person who works with teenage boys with Autistic Spectrum Disorders, I know how hard it is to overcome even the tiniest trait associated with such a disorder. For Tim to overcome his in such a way is nothing short of remarkable. But to do so, and then go on to be such an in demand artist, is astounding. Recently, Tim has embarked on a tour with none other than The Chieftains, bringing a lovely roundness to his story – he has come a long way from listening to their old albums at his grandparents house.

Tim also plays regularly with Seamus Begley, again bringing things full circle. Tim met Seamus and Steve Cooney in 1995 at The Swan in Stockwell, London, and thought it was the best live show of any musical genre he had ever seen. He went on to get to know them and recorded his solo melodeon album in Steve’s studio in Kerry in 1997. It was here that Tim’s obsession with the guitar became even more heightened, and soon after he began playing more frequently with Seamus.

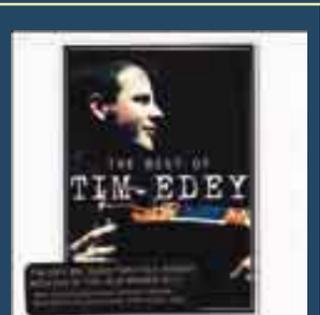
Tim also plays in an award winning duo with Brendan Power, with his own band The Collective, has played on Christy Moore’s recent album, and with many other artists such as Michael McGoldrick, Sharon Shannon (of course!) and Altan.

“...Sharon Shannon has been quoted as saying that Tim Edey is the nicest man in the world...”

Not many people get to play and record with the artists who were the catalysts for them starting to play in the first place. And for Tim, this is part of the measure of his success. “Playing or recording with all of my musical heroes is one of the things I am most proud of, a dream really. I have also managed to earn a living from doing what I love (most of the time), and to me that is being successful, and very lucky, although a lot of hard graft has gone into it too.”

And though Tim has become such a “superstar” in the traditional music world, you get the feeling that he is anything but a “star” in his own eyes. He has a gentle, unassuming demeanour, and a cheeky, endearing grin. He still appears genuinely in awe of the people from whom he has learned his trade, but by the way these artists now regard him, it seems the feeling is mutual.

Sharon Shannon has been quoted as saying that Tim Edey is “the nicest man in the world”. I think she just might be right.



Tim has recorded albums with Seamus Begley, Brendan Power and his Collective. His recently released ‘The Best Of Tim Edey’ is available from The Listening Post and via his own website - www.timedeey.co.uk - where you can also book a Skype lesson with Tim and see many videos of his work.

UK £3.25 • EUROPE €5 • USA \$7 • CANADA \$7

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