

Vashti Bunyan

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 120 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Martin Aston and Vashti Bunyan look back on her illustrious career.

In the sleevenotes to Vashti Bunyan's debut album *Just Another Diamond Day*, released in 1970, her producer Joe Boyd wrote, 'I have never known anyone whose music is so completely a reflection of their life and spirit.'

Two years earlier, Vashti had begun a journey, both literally and figuratively, with her partner and their dog, and their horse pulling a converted baker's cart from London to the Isle of Skye in Scotland, to find an off-the-grid way of life. Or as she put in a later song, 'Wayward', 'All I ever wanted was a road without end.' They'd over-wintered in the Lake District, and Boyd – who'd long admired Bunyan's fragile, pure ballads and gorgeously soft-spun voice – was finally able to record Vashti's songs, which she'd mostly written about her journey and her choices; observations and stories that alternated between poetic, whimsical, touching and profound.

Her Barbican show marks the publication of a similarly inspired memoir, *Wayward: Just Another Life To Live*, centred on that same memorable journey northwards. But Vashti also writes about childhood and her choice to eschew singing and songwriting for a family, only later to embark on another journey, toward self-determination and the kind of place in contemporary music that should rightfully have been hers from the start. The ebb and flow of an extraordinary life resembles a classic folk song in its own right. Unfortunately, that suggestion includes the word 'folk,' which Vashti admits still triggers conflicted emotions.

'I didn't go to folk clubs or sing folk tunes, and it wasn't the direction I wanted to go in,' she explains. 'But you're right, and that's what Joe Boyd thought. He'd visited me in the middle of that journey, and told me, 'You were living the most folk life that I knew, that's what I thought you were,' so he hired musicians from Fairport Convention and the Incredible String Band to play on *...Diamond Day*. And over the years, it's served me well because some people love that record.'

Prior to the album's release, the only experience Vashti had of performing for an audience 'was by myself at the Cheltenham Festival in 1966; this huge theatre with about five people watching.' She doesn't regret being signed by Rolling Stones and Marianne Faithfull manager Andrew Loog Oldham, but things hadn't gone to plan. 'I wasn't allowed to tour by Andrew, they thought it would spoil me the way they thought it had Marianne. They wanted to keep me under control. It added to my complete isolation as a musician.'

Worse, after just two singles - the Jagger/Richards cover 'Some Things Just Stick In Your Mind' and the self-penned 'Train Song' - all subsequent recordings by Vashti went unreleased. Escaping the shackles of compromise and disappointment were weighing heavy on her mind when Donovan suggested that Vashti move to his new artists' community on the Isle of Skye. She took him up on the offer – but going the slow way, in line with her longing for a simpler life, in touch with nature.

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With Vashti choosing to continue her journey instead of promoting the record, it 'disappeared off the face of the earth,' she says. Likewise, Vashti's musical ambitions. But over time, *Just Another Diamond Day* grew into a cherished cult item, its reissue in 2000 by the Spinney label triggering rave reviews and frenzied 'holy grail' status amongst record collectors. Contemporary musicians such as Devendra Banhart and Joanna Newsom feted Vashti, leading to guest appearances with Banhart and Animal Collective and, finally, the sublime solo albums *Lookaftering* in 2006 and *Heartleap* in 2014. Sparser and less arranged than *...Diamond Day*, both albums are closer in sound and vision, she says, to her original demos, recorded between 1966 and 1968.

Vashti would have preferred *...Diamond Day* to have had more of what the late Robert Kirby's string arrangements brought to her sound, 'more in the direction of carols and classical music,' she explains. 'His strings were magical to me.' It's a sound that Fiona Brice, her current arranger, 'is being faithful to, in remembrance of Robert. Fiona's amazing too.' Vashti first met Fiona through current Bella Union label boss (and former Cocteau Twin) Simon Raymonde, who had been invited by Glen Johnson of the roving collective Piano Magic to play piano on the track, 'Crown of the Lost', that Vashti had been asked to sing on for the 2001 album *Writers Without Homes*. In 2003, Pavement founder Stephen Malkmus invited Vashti to join his *Down The Dustpipe* festival bill at London's Royal Festival Hall.

Now Vashti's journey has reached the Barbican, and a performance that breaks new ground for her. Covid had cancelled what would have been the 50th anniversary show of *...Diamond Day* in 2020, but all but one of the players chosen for that lost show are returning, 'which I'm so looking forward to,' she says, 'to be part of a bigger band,' which includes Fiona Brice on violin, a recorder quartet and her regular guitarist Gareth Dickson. The set list will incorporate early singles and selections from her three albums: Vashti thinks they'll play 'I'd Like to Walk Around in Your Mind', 'Winter is Blue', 'Glow Worms' and 'Jog Along Bess' from *...Diamond Day*, 'Lately' and 'Against The Sky' from *Lookaftering*, 'Mother' and 'If I Were' from *Heartleap*.

'Thinking about playing live still keeps me awake at night!' she says. 'I'm always terrified beforehand but as soon as I'm on stage, it's wonderful.' Vashti's audience, wherever and whenever she may play, can only agree.

After the concert Vashti will be signing copies of her memoir.

Performers

Vashti Bunyan vocals, guitar

Band

Fiona Brice music director, arrangement, piano, keyboards

Gareth Dickson guitar

Emma Smith violin

Nicky Sweeney violin

Ian Burdge cello

Ian Wilson and The Flautadors recorder quartet

Produced by the Barbican



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