

Rod Stewart, model railway enthusiast

Experiences in childhood often influence the shape of the life to come. In Rod Stewart's case it was the view out of his window when he was a boy. No, not at a concert hall or a soccer pitch, as young Rod looked out over a railway line in London's suburb of Highgate. Now he by no means wished to become a railwayman. Well, not yet. It was only via a brief career as a soccer pro and then a longer one as a musician, both the classical dream careers of British schoolboys, that he got round to the railways, or rather to a model railway sized a mere 28 by 7 meters (!) on the third floor of his house in Beverly Hills.

But let's go about this step by step. Rod Stewart was the youngest of five children and was born in London to Anglo-Scottish parents one night during a bombing raid in January 1945. He learned to play the guitar at the tender age of 11, almost bagged a contract as a professional soccer player, worked as a gravedigger, traveled Europe busking and as a Beatnik in the early 1960s. In London's budding music scene he tried his luck with various bands, hoping to break through as a lead singer, among others alongside Jeff Beck, Ron Wood and Ray Davies (he almost became the lead singer of the Kinks...). He scored his first successes with Jeff Beck and real recognition, and with Ron Wood he sang in the (in)famous band The Faces, while also trying to establish a solo career for himself.

In 1971, with his hit "Maggie May" he had finally arrived in the world of the rock 'n' roll superstars. Originally a B-side, the single went to no. 1 in both Britain and the States. And in 1975, he fled the rapacious British tax man and set up home in the USA. A new era in his life commenced, one to which he wrote his own soundtrack in the form of the album "Atlantic Crossing" – alluding both to his change of residence and of record label. It was the beginning of a far more commercial focus to his music. With "Sailing", the first single from the album, was once again a smash hit. He quit the Faces and in distant California somewhat lost contact with the English music scene, which was in the fitful throes of Punk and New Wave. Stewart remained unimpressed and instead surfed a different wave with "Da Ya Think I'm Sexy", which again carried him straight to no. 1. Disco was the buzzword, he gained new fans, sold even more albums, but lost credibility with the older fans and the critics.

In the 1980s he sailed in becalmed waters. Landing fewer hits and with greater periods in the doldrums in-between. Yet his concerts always showed just how strong his reputation among his fans was, as he regularly filled the large arenas, with the audience, much to Stewart's amusement, singing along to every song in full voice.

Things began looking up again at the beginning of the 1990s. "Downtown Train" was a hit and provided popularity and a source of royalties for another songwriter with a gravelly voice: Tom Waits. After 18 years, he reunited with Ron Wood for an appearance on "MTV Unplugged" and he returned to his musical roots. The resulting album went from nowhere to number 2 in the American charts. Once again, record numbers attended his concerts. On New Year's Eve 1994 3.5 million people watched him on the beach at Copacabana. A record figure, unbeaten even today. In 1998 he changed record labels after more than 15 years. A year later he became seriously ill, cancer of the thyroid. He was operated on and then had to learn how to sing again, laboriously. This made working and promoting his next album more difficult and as a result it was less successful than hoped for. The record company cancelled the deal and Stewart had to start looking around for a new record contract. But this new change of label and a four-part series "The Great American Songbook I-IV" really hit the jackpot. He interpreted songs penned by famous classic song writers such as George Gershwin and Cole Porter, achieving sales that matched those at the peak of his career. There are also plans for an album of soul classics. Not a bad idea for someone whom James Brown once described as the best white soul singer and who would have loved to share the stage with Sam Cooke.

Soul Brother Number Two? We will have to wait and see, after all, he has his family to think about too – seven children from five wives – and, of course, the model railway... But for Stewart it is all just a question of organization. In order to be able to carry on tinkering about during a US tour he put himself and his family up, together with various model railway modules, over a period of several months in a suite of rooms at a Chicago hotel. After a concert somewhere in the States he would quickly fly back in his private jet so that – after only a few hours' sleep – he could carry on fiddling about with the railway before devoting himself to his wife Penny and his youngest son. According to Stewart, his model railway is an occupation that challenges him in several ways: as a painter, carpenter and electrician. But its principal function is to relax him and he pities anybody who does not have a similar hobby. When, at the end of last year, his impressive model railway system was presented over several pages in a specialist American publication "Model Railroader", he announced proudly that he would rather be on the front page of a model railway publication than on the cover of a music magazine.

And there's no need to worry about Stewart going into premature retirement. He still enjoys performing too much for that. And so, for the moment, everything will stay the way it is: Rod Stewart, 63. Profession: singer. Dream occupation: model railway enthusiast.

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