

Absolutely an entertainer: a talk with Richard Thompson



*A constant presence since Fairport Convention's folk-rock heyday, **Richard Thompson** has become a much-loved musical institution across Britain and North America. Loyal fans welcome his regular album releases, tours, as well as forays into experimental terrain.*

*Here, in an extensive interview, the painter and writer **Julian Bell** ventures far into Thompson-land, focusing on his relationship with the history of song.*

Captions Left:

Opposite:

1 The rooms I rent

What is song? The question's too big to answer. Recast it and you see why. What are songs like? They're like – one reply might go – rooms we occupy. We know them best by being inside them: through entering the expanses of shaped sensual time that singers open up. These rooms seem to satisfy some desire for shelter that's rooted in us, and however long we spend outside, amid noise or in silence, we can't wholly stand aside from that desire, not at least without dying a little. Well, I speak for myself. I do work that allows me to indulge such a craving: at one end of a studio, I'm at an easel, painting, at the other, some CD or music show is keeping me company. (Sometimes I think it's for the sake of that I paint.) Quite often, the songs I'm hearing are those of Richard Thompson. What if I, neither a singer

nor a player, could understand how he builds and furnishes those aural apartments I rent? Again, too ambitious a question. Might I at least get some notion of the history of the craft he practises?

Thompson, at 62, has by now some four hundred published songs to his name. Some were released in the late 1960s, in the influential early albums of Fairport Convention, the band he co-founded; more, in the six recorded with his onetime wife Linda between 1973 and 1982; most, in the solo albums that have been appearing at two- or three-year intervals since then. Typically, these gather reviews that are at the very least respectful and sales that are at the very most respectable. Thompson is not blessed – or cursed – with a Midas touch. But he's always been in work, while, thanks to the high regard of his fellow musicians,