

## An interview with Chris Fox - a (charming) 'contemporary folk troubadour'

by Sandra Lawes



Based in his native Cambridgeshire, singer-songwriter Chris Fox is rapidly making quite a name for himself on the folk scene. His new album *'In Plain Sight'* has received some wonderful reviews. Sean Laffey (**IRISH MUSIC MAGAZINE** September 2022 issue) wrote:

*"An intelligent and versatile songsmith, Chris Fox has a keen observational ear, creating melodic songs that have genuine sing ability and that all important ingredient of longevity, a catchy tune. From each track on IN PLAIN SIGHT it's obvious why Chris Fox is in the vanguard of English contemporary Folk"*

★★★★

Marc Higgins of Fatea Magazine adds

*"Like Jake Thackray, Chris has impeccable timing, light and as understated as good jazz. A full bloodied folk anthem - Chris stands head and shoulders above a crowded field"*

Chris has played Folk clubs from Southampton to the Western Isles and at numerous festivals including Cambridge, Ely, Beardy, Purbeck Valley, Folk on the Pier, Black Deer, and most recently at Costa del Folk Portugal, where he quickly established himself as a favourite with the audience.

I had the pleasure of interviewing him in the middle of his tour to promote his latest album *'In Plain Sight'* when he spoke frankly about his background, his music and his plans for the future.

**How would you describe the music that you typically create? What makes you different from other folk musicians?**

It's hard to pigeon hole, but the best description is 'genre-hopping contemporary folk'. For me the lyrics are the start of the process, I use a variety of musical styles drawn from folk and roots. I also use a loop pedal to create a layered landscape. I write my own material but sometimes I play some covers if it suits the venue and the audience.

**What is your favourite song to perform?**

My current favourite is *'One More for The Road'* from my latest album *'In Plain Sight'*. This song seems to have a life of its own and connects with people in different ways. Every gig I've played at, someone from the audience has come up to me and offered their personal interpretation of the song. I was even asked to play it at a wake for a very dear friend. It's got something about it that I can't quite explain, but I sense the energy in the room change when I perform it. That's a great feeling - like a job well done.

**What sort of venue best suits your music?**

Folk Clubs and Folk Festivals suit my work the best. I like to engage with the audience by telling the stories behind the songs along with some banter.

**How long have you been a folk musician? Is it your full-time occupation?**

I chose to learn the trumpet at school – because it was loud! I was only ten and lucky enough to have a great teacher who taught me to have fun with music and to keep listening to my heroes. It was Louis Armstrong's music that kept driving me back to the practice room, although I didn't get inspired to make my own music until my late teens. I heard Damien Rice on the radio and that prompted me to buy a cheap guitar and teach myself to play – which set me along the road I'm on now.

I've been writing and performing my music for nine years now. It's a hobby that's grown and grown - very exciting, I never know what's coming next. At the end of 2022 I decided to go full-time so I could put out my new album '*In Plain Sight*' and be right there with it and ride the wave.

### **How did you keep going during the pandemic?**

Having music to work on in such dark times was a great form of therapy – it certainly kept me sane (or pretty close to it!). I did 57 livestreams, put out a single and wrote 70% of my new album. I had been tipped by Maverick magazine as '*one to watch*' in 2020 and I had been looking forward to my best year ever for bookings. All that was snatched away by the pandemic, but I was determined to keep my music alive and worked hard to be ready for when things got back to something like normal.

### **What musicians do you admire? If you could open a show for any artist, who would it be?**

Some of the artists who have influenced me the most are Beck, Chris Smithers, Jack Johnson, Dolly Parton, Johnny Cash, Rhiannon Giddens, Joe Topping, Dan Wilde and B.B King. But recently, when I was performing at Costa del Folk in Portugal, I saw Show of Hands headline the festival. They were incredible, and it's now my number one ambition to open for them!

Musical partnerships and collaborations happen organically – you can't force things. But I'd love to work alongside Steve Knightley in a song-writing project – his lyrics are amazing. And also Boo Hewerdine, who I recently supported at The Junction in Cambridge, another great songwriter.

### **Have you ever participated in any music competitions? Did you win any prizes?**

I was runner up in the Milkmaid Folk Club Song Competition in 2018 and the following year won the Sheringham Showcase to open for Fairport Convention at Folk on the Pier. In 2019 I also won the Lichfield Song Writing Contest but then I decided to retire from the world of music competitions. I liked winning, but didn't like the feeling of taking the win away from somebody else. The idea that I may have beaten someone in a competition and caused them to feel like giving up on their art was too scary.

I also felt that the high I got from winning was a bit toxic – I was worried that I could start to fancy myself as 'special' and there's no room for that in my creative process. Music is an art form and all art is subjective.

### **What is the best advice you've ever been given?**

Like almost every artist, I suffer from performance anxiety. I deal with it by rehearsing and making sure I'm thoroughly prepared - I want my set list to be battered, tallied, stained and dog eared when I walk on stage, that's mostly how I build my confidence.

I treasure the advice I got from Caroline Dyson a tremendous classical singer. In my early days on the open mic circuit, I asked her how she dealt with performance anxiety and fears of a hostile audience. She told me that based on her decades of experience "*they (the audience) don't want you to be bad, they want you to be good. They want you to do well because it's much easier to watch somebody do a good job than someone making a mess of it*".

This was a light bulb moment. I realised that the audience were on my side, and all I had to do was figure out how to do a good job and that's been my primary goal ever since. When I do make a mistake during a performance, I just point it out to the audience and make fun of myself, they love it! The simple fact is that no matter how many times you practice, something is going to go wrong! This is a great lesson in learning to give yourself a break - we all make mistakes and we are humans not robots.

### **What would you be doing right now, if it wasn't for your music career?**

As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be some sort of creative artist. When I left university, I thought I might work in film and TV. The storytelling appealed to me, and folk singing is just another way of telling stories.

So, if I wasn't a singer-songwriter, I'd probably be working in videography.

### **If you could change anything about the folk world, what would it be?**

Some (luckily not all!) folk headliners refuse to have support acts. They have this written into their contracts making some folk clubs feel they have no choice but to go along with that because they need those headline acts to make things financially viable. As an up-and-coming artist, the support slots I have generously been given by some big names have been really valuable in giving me exposure to bigger audiences, adding real credibility to my reputation and leading to my own headline slots.

It's also a shame that some audience members don't turn up for the support slots. I think it's important to support the next wave of artists and keep an eye on the 'up and comers'. They are the future of the industry and need to feel there is a future for them.

### **What's next for you?**

I am currently touring my new album *'In Plain Sight'*. Bookings for festivals and clubs in 2023 are coming in; both solo and with John Parker for our duo 'Chris Fox and The Running Man' which is exciting to see. I'm also going back into primary schools in Lancashire in May '23 to run song writing workshops so here at Fox HQ, we're busy planning a 'Northern' tour to complement that.

I'm also starting to think about the next album. I'd like to write a concept album based on a specific theme. I have a few ideas swirling around but need to finish the tour before my mind can really make room for a new project.

I'm also planning to bring some more instruments into my live shows, so I'm learning the Banjo and Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer. I'm keen to see both how audiences react to these and how the new instruments influence my writing.

### **How can folkies find out more about you and your upcoming gigs?**

The best way is to visit my website [www.chrisfoxmusic.org](http://www.chrisfoxmusic.org) and sign up to the mailing list - you get some free music for your trouble! The website is the absolute hub of what I do - you'll find all my upcoming gigs there and links to all the usual social media platforms – Facebook, Instagram etc. The other main information source is Bandcamp <https://chrisfox2.bandcamp.com/album/in-plain-sight>

### **Is there anything else about you or your music that you would like to share with Unicorn Folk?**

Firstly, a huge thank you to everyone for reading this interview! Secondly, I'd like to encourage you all to get back out there and support live music. Since Covid 19, audience numbers have dropped off massively and its important folkies get back to supporting this great music on a grass roots level. Promoters work so hard creating magical events often for no profit, just for the love of the music. Buying tickets in advance is the best way audiences can help ensure this amazing tradition continues.