

# Show of Hands at The Anvil, Basingstoke

Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2023

Concert review by Carl Filby



Basingstoke is not the most inspiring place as I knew from occasional work trips there many years ago and an empty shopping mall on a Sunday evening, amidst what seem like acres of concrete underpasses, bridges and roads doesn't help! However, the town does have the excellent 1,400 seater capacity venue, **The Anvil**, though as I was going there to see **Show of Hands** in concert, my spirits didn't really need much lifting!

For those who have only just taken an interest in folk music or have just returned from a 35-year spell in Guatemala (I don't think they have toured there!), **Show of Hands** started out as a duo comprising singer-songwriter **Steve Knightley** and multi-instrumentalist **Phil Beer**. Knightley is renowned for his song-writing and Beer has been an in-demand session musician for many years whilst also being a member of the Albion Band and touring with his own Phil Beer band. Singer and double-bassist **Miranda Sykes** was a member of Phil's band and since 2004 has been the 'unofficial' third member of SoH performing regularly with Knightley and Beer and in her own right.

In what I understand has become a regular format for these shows, SoH effectively provide their own support and play a short first half, featuring each musician in turn, sometimes assisted by one other. Knightley warms up the audience with Mark Knopfler's **Romeo and Juliet**, followed by the more recently self-penned **The Ride** which highlights one of the numerous small tragedies caused by 'lockdown' whilst at the same time keeping the mood light with a self-deprecating and somewhat apocryphal, anecdote or two. 'Doctor' Phil (all three received an honorary doctorate of music from the University of Plymouth in 2015) is then invited to join him for **The Long Way Home** before Knightley leaves the stage for Beer and then Sykes to perform a selection of songs including **When You Think It's All Over It's Just Begun** performed in tribute to Gareth Turner, Melodeon player from Little Johnny England who passed in September. Knightley then returns to the stage to lead a very willing audience in **Keep Hauling** to end the first half.

The second half opened with the iconic and at one time controversial **Roots** and then it became something of a procession with one great song followed by another much to the apparent delight of the audience who were encouraged to join in at every opportunity which they did. **You'll Get By** was followed by Peter Gabriel's **Secret World**, and then **Arrogance, Ignorance and Greed** which as a song struck me so forcefully as a criticism of the economic system when I first heard it.

I'm a late convert to Show of Hand's music as I had 3 young children in the nineties when they first started to gain widespread acclaim and my folk clubs visits had dwindled to more occasional outings rather than regular trips. So, it was around the time of their brilliant **Arrogance, Ignorance and Greed** album that I first became aware of them and it was something of a surprise to hear that some fans apparently preferred their more traditional earlier songs. It was rather ironic then to hear that Knightley's **Galway Farmer**, which followed **Exile**, has in some quarters been labelled as a traditional Irish song.

The show rolled on with **Blue Cockade** sung beautifully by Sykes, followed by the rurally relevant **Country Life**, then Phil Beer taking the lead for **Crow On The Cradle**, before the penultimate song **Santiago** which was received with much appreciation from the audience. Inevitably perhaps the final song of the scheduled show was **The Best One Yet** though Knightley joked that they had been given instructions at that point to say 'goodnight' and pretend that the show was over.

No band lasts for 30+ years without attracting a loyal following and being aware of what pleases their audience and no-one was going to be disappointed with this concert. Clearly, **Knightley**, **Beer** and **Sykes** know what their audience wants from a concert and they delivered in spades in front of what they said was the largest audience (at near capacity!) of the tour so far. It being my first SoH concert I did feel ever so slightly like an interloper or perhaps 'newcomer' is a better description and in a way that illustrates how well the band communicate with their audience, creating an instant rapport that owes much to familiarity and warmth on both sides.

At the end I had positioned myself at the exit in order to make a fast getaway to catch the train back to London on the return half of my 180-mile round trip, but I couldn't quite bring myself to leave until the end of the extended encore which featured **Cousin Jack** and **The Setting**. I would have liked to have stayed and chatted to the band in the foyer after the show as Knightley announced they would do at the end but I didn't quite fancy sleeping overnight on Waterloo or King's Cross stations which would have been the outcome.

Was it worth the trip? Absolutely! My only tinge of regret being that I didn't 'discover' **Show of Hands** earlier than I did, nor managed to get tickets for any of their previous concerts!

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