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# Fashionably Late

Determined to make it on her own merits, Martha Tilston ducked the folk scene for years. She tells Noel Harvey how she took the road less travelled.

It is an indication of Martha Tilston's genuine concern for others – even journalists – that she arrives barely late enough to be fashionable, yet proffering apologies, and looking slightly anxious and out of breath. Her entrance is somewhat at odds with the unruffled calm she projects onstage, but at the same time is also pleasingly reassuring. Partly, perhaps, because it's easy to deceive yourself that people who write rhapsodic songs about nature and inner peace don't get flustered (they do), and partly because the inner cynic would prefer to believe that Tilston couldn't possibly be quite as nice as she appears (she is). Perhaps her upbringing has something to do with it.

She grew up in a large, but not

ostentatious house in Surrey, which she shared with her artist mother, theatre director stepfather, her sister, and 'lots of chickens, various visiting actors, their children, and an out-of-tune piano'. She also spent time in Bristol with her father, folk luminary Steve Tilston, and stepmother Maggie Boyle, the Irish singer-songwriter. Drop-in visitors included some of the finest acoustic guitarists around: Bert Jansch, John Renbourn, Wizz Jones, Ralph McTell and Philip John Lee (recalled affectionately as 'Uncle Phil'). 'I used to tell my friends I knew Dr Who,' she says, 'because Bert Jansch looked like Tom Baker. I had no idea he was such an amazing guitarist – I thought everybody played like

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that.' Accustomed to being surrounded by creativity, Tilston also assumed songwriting to be a commonplace pastime. Only after a school friend mentioned that her father didn't write songs did it dawn on her that her life was so unusual. 'I thought music was something you just did,' she says, 'almost like cooking or washing up. But now I realise how lucky I was. It was a really beautiful, special upbringing, if rather crazy at times.'

Ironically, it was the extraordinary prevalence of music in Tilston's life that weighted her decision to take to the stage. That, and a wariness of pursuing a career in her father's shadow. She went on to drama school, but music continued to beckon, and she readily admits to spending much of her time hanging out in the music rooms playing the piano. Stints with various theatre companies followed, including a production

of *Macbeth* at the Edinburgh Festival, featuring Danni Minogue and a company of street acrobats from Barbados. It was, she says, 'absolutely terrible' and then immediately corrects herself. 'No, it wasn't terrible, that's not fair. There were some great moments and some not-so-great moments. It was an experiment and quite bold, really.'

Bold experiment or not, it was enough to convince Tilston that she was fighting the tide. 'I kept coming back to music,' she says. On returning to London, she was 'discovered' by a music producer. He'd pick her up in a gold Rolls-Royce and throw her into a London recording studio with various producers and musicians, where they'd promptly set about hijacking her ideas. 'They kept taking it off into this hideous, poppy sound,' she recalls. 'It was awful, like being in a relationship that's not so bad you want to quit, but at the same time you're almost praying for it to get that way. He used to spin this "I'm gonna make you a star, babe" line. I never thought I'd be impressed by that stuff, but I was barely out of my teens and suppose I must have been.' The tipping point came one day sitting in the gold Rolls with her would-be Svengali. Instead of the more conventional hand-on-the-knee approach, he aligned a finger along the slope of her nose. 'I've got quite a sort of...you know...a nose,' she says laughing (for the record, Tilston has a beautiful patrician nose, rather like Queen Nefertiti's). 'The next moment he's saying, "I was just wondering how you'd look with a nose job." At the time I probably thought, "I wonder how you'd look with a nose job, buster," but it was good, really – perhaps like the moment you discover a partner is cheating on you, when you knew all along it was wrong.'

It was enough of a spur for Tilston to put the word about for a guitarist. Within weeks she'd hooked up with Nick Marshall, and was slogging her way round London's open-mic slots as one half of the duo Mouse. Recalling those days of new-found freedom, she flops back in her chair, closes her eyes and breathes an audible sigh of relief. 'It was bliss,' she says, 'utter bliss. I just wrote and wrote. The reciprocity was magical, absolutely incredible. Whatever it was that manager guy was offering, whatever it was worth, it was never going to be worth that



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## LUCY AND THE WOLVES

It's a good three years since Martha Tilston released her last full-length album *Of Milkmaids & Architects*, but this latest offering is well worth the wait. On first listening it might appear to lack the immediacy and stinging social commentary of earlier albums, but only because the predominant tone is shadowy and more reflective, and indicative of a developing maturity in Tilston's songwriting. Backing band The Woods play with uncluttered finesse throughout, while Maggie Boyle's flute and harmony on 'Wild Swimming' lend a maleficence to a song that had no innocence to lose in the first place. Ultimately, though, it's Tilston's vocals that make the album one of those rare works that'll gaff you simultaneously through the heart and solar plexus.

[www.marthatilston.co.uk](http://www.marthatilston.co.uk)

kind of creative reciprocity.'

For the next two years, Tilston consciously maintained a profile off the folk radar, making a name for herself on the underground acoustic music scene. She performed at squat parties and trance events, and toured through the summer months on the alternative festival circuit with the Small World Solar Stage. 'It was like running away with the circus,' she says. But by the end of 2003, Tilston had split amicably with Marshall and was performing solo to a growing fan base. She had toured as a support act with Damien Rice, released her first solo album *Rolling*, and was steadily gaining recognition on the mainstream folk scene. And not as 'the daughter of', but as an engaging and gifted singer-songwriter in her own right, with her own distinctive sound and audience.

Two more albums followed, and in 2007 Tilston was nominated for Best New Act at

## THE GUITAR

Martha Tilston's guitar was hand-built for her by luthier Anthony Thompson. There are very few in circulation and, unusually for a steel-string guitar, it incorporates an Alaskan yellow cedar top, with more conventional Indian rosewood for the back and sides. The sound, says Tilston, '...is absolutely amazing. Incredibly warm and rich. I wouldn't swap it for the world.'

the BBC Folk Awards. Given her earlier ambivalence over being labelled a folk singer, how did she feel about that?

Tilston ponders for a moment. 'If you want the honest answer,' she says, 'I freaked myself because I got so excited over it, and I never thought I would be. But the BBC awards are a specific type of music. A hundred years from now people may look back and define today's folk music in a completely different way. It's always been the people's music, so it's important to keep the awards in proportion and not think of them as defining what folk music is.'

For now, though, any attempt to categorise Tilston's music seems a bit of a waste of time. She's out there doing it. In the last three years she's become a popular headline name on the festival circuit, opened the Acoustic Stage at Glastonbury, toured Australia, and even taken time out to have a baby. And with her new album *Lucy And The Wolves* due out this April, a UK tour under way in May, and another visit to Australia planned for next year, she's set to continue covering the ground. Where she goes from there is anyone's guess. For years she's harboured a dream to bring theatre to live-music venues, though she remains cagey about the format. She lets on just enough to suggest it could have parallels with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, with musicians instead of actors, and a campfire as the focus instead of a pilgrimage. The music, she says, would develop organically as the performers pass a guitar around and tell their stories. Given Tilston's past record, it's an idea that seems likely to come to fruition. After all, she seems to have a penchant for the less travelled road, and isn't that what the heart of folk music is really all about?

Noel Harvey