

Sue Steward – Tribute

Although Sue was not a household name, she spent much of her life among household names, and it is people like Sue, who help to shape and inform our tastes, and give us insights into the unknown and unfamiliar, who are the real celebrities. The eclecticism of her interests and enthusiasms was boundless.

There will be memorial events in the autumn in London, at which much more will be said about Sue and her astonishing career, and in our limited time today we can only touch on some of the things that made her special. I am not going to recite the details of her amazing CV. For those of you who have not read all the wonderful obituaries that have been written, you can find links to them in your order of ceremony. Sue would have been astonished and moved by the scale of the recognition she has received.

Sue was born in Stathern, in Leicestershire, the eldest child of Fran and Jean Steward. Fran was a corn merchant, and Sue must have grown up with a strong sense of place, and of the land, because Stathern remained important to her throughout her life, and she was planning a book on the people who had formed its character in the mid 20th Century.

Family photographs can be found everywhere in her house, and she wrote movingly in an Observer article in 2009 about photographing her mother after her death. In this, she quoted a line from a bereaved nineteenth century mother, which you might find relevant today: "What a comfort it is to possess the image of those who are removed from our sight. We may raise an image of them in our minds but that has not the tangibility of one we can see with our bodily eyes."

As you'll hear, Malcolm really only got to know Sue when he was in his teens. She persuaded him to come to Liverpool by bus and train, and showed him her student life. This is Liverpool, remember, in 1964 or 65, sometime between the rise of the Beatles and the summer of love. For the first time, but certainly not for the last, Malcolm thought "Sue inhabits a different world to me". He'll now talk to us about her.

Sue was seven and a half years older than me and by the time that I was 7 or 8 Sue was already spending much of her weekend time in Melton with her school-friends, so I don't have many memories of her at home.

However, I do remember some noisy rows between her and my father, who she took after so much. I suppose I first got closer to Sue when she moved to London and worked for Virgin records mail order department. She would help my musical education to develop along the right lines by sending me such classics as Dark Side of the Moon, Carol King's Tapestry and Bridge over Troubled Waters. I spent many summer weeks staying with Sue and would wander around London whilst She was at work and occasionally pop in to see her at Virgin records and later on at Friends of the Earth in Poland Street.

At university and afterwards my musical development was slow and predictable and I was still listening to Pink Floyd many years later whilst she was involved with such bands as Henry Cow, Slapp Happy and Hatfield & the North. Although I felt culturally out of my depth, I loved being taken by Sue to concerts. In the seventies going to The London Musicians Collective with hours of improvisation by the likes of Fred Frith and David Toop was a bit of a challenge and in the eighties I went with Sue and Paul Lashmar to see her friend Celia Cruz in concert in Manchester.

She did appreciate my efforts in trying to keep up with her work, although when she moved into photography I must admit that I was beaten. I loved it when she came up to Format meetings in Derby and we could meet afterwards and to attend some of the Format sessions with her and hear her perspective on the photographs was awe-inspiring. She came alive when she was talking about work and when she was talking to any of her photography friends that we met

I would like to talk about what 'family' meant to Sue. Here today, in addition to me, her brother, is her sister, sister-in law and brother in law, several cousins and their families as well as her nephews to whom she was so close. My aunt who is over 90 and was Sue's Godmother never

leaves her home in Hastings and yet is here today.

Sue loved her family and was always the one to keep in touch with distant cousins, several of whom are here today. She was looking forward so much to going to Madeleine and Kris's wedding party in August and meeting her nephew Adrian's new son. From my personal point of view, she was a wonderful auntie to Quilon from the moment he came into our lives and always wanted to know how he was doing. She just loved seeing him and the two of them spending time together. One of their favourite things was simply to walk along the beach and collect beautiful pebbles. On our return to Gatwick recently from holiday in Australia, the first thing Quilon did in the terminal was to text Sue to let her know we were back in England.

Thank you Malcolm

After a couple of years of unhappily teaching biology in Liverpool, Sue moved to London. And thus began her long association with music, starting in the mail order department of the emerging Virgin Records, after which she became their publicity officer for a while. In those days, that was a very hands on job, and famously it involved burning the bones on the beach for the Tubular Bells album cover with Trevor Key, her then partner.

Sue's life in London was always north of the river, mostly in what were then cool places to live like Camden and Bayswater. She lived with Trevor on a houseboat at Datchet for a while, until it sank taking much of their book and record collection with it. Later, with her long-term partner Greg, she lived in Notting Hill, on the Carnival route, where each year they would host friends for the Carnival weekend.

I first met Sue at a lunch given by a couple of our colleagues. I was environment correspondent at the Sunday Telegraph, she had just started as the Arts picture editor for the daily paper.

We soon discovered we had much in common. A love for Liverpool, where Sue went to university and embraced the Mersey scene; for the

idiosyncratic music of Captain Beefheart, and for “alternative” and “world” music generally; for the environment and art and new politics and books... Soon we were “partners” – a euphemism Sue hated – and spent more than a decade together. And though it is more than ten years since that relationship ended – and for any hurt in that parting, I am so sorry, Sue -- we remained friends.

So what can I say about Sue to add to what we hear today? Or to the obituaries and tributes already published?

Passion, and curiosity defined her. I think it was her passion for new worlds, ideas and expression that led her first to Liverpool, then to London, to work not just for the embryonic Virgin Records, with some of the most inventive musicians of the era, but also to alternative media – the London Musicians Collective; Collusion magazine, which she co-founded with David Toop; Straight No Chaser magazine, pirate radio, television – and the burgeoning world music scene that she did so much, as a DJ, broadcaster and writer, to initiate and strengthen, in company – as she would always acknowledge – with some of those here today.

She made connections others missed. She championed those she felt deserved wider attention, whether musicians, “Outsider” artists or young photographers who benefitted from her enthusiasm and advice. Today, when suspicion of the “other” is increasing, where differences are too often a cause for distrust, Sue celebrated a world of variety.

She was also brave. She gave up well regarded jobs for the risky life of the freelance; for book projects such as the labour of love that was Salsa: Musical Heartbeat of Latin America; the work that would never make her fortune, but secured her reputation in her chosen field. To work alone, in such countries as Colombia and Mali, was also not without risk.

And unlike some in journalism, Sue was modest and always unstinting in her praise of others. She never lost touch with her roots. She had an enduring love for her family in Leicestershire, the Worcester and Herefordshire borders and in Scotland. Not having children herself, she adored those of her family and friends.

When Sue lay in hospital, after suffering the brain haemorrhage that took her from us, the nurses were surprised to learn her age – she looked so much younger, they said. And indeed, Sue remained young at heart. “It’s

like having a teenager around”, my house mate Helen would say. And like a teenager, she could at times be exasperating. Her finances were precarious. She never developed a professional slickness, agonising over her writing. Asked for 250 words, she would often write ten times that, unwilling to abandon the details she believed would illuminate her subject. Editors could sometimes despair. But as her friend, the writer Cherry Smyth said, “Yes Sue can be annoying, but she’s lovably annoying.” And the true recognition of Sue’s worth was reflected in the messages of shock, sorrow and love that greeted news of her illness and death. We’ve selected music from many cultures for this ceremony – which we hope reflects some of Sue’s life and passions. I played her some as she lay in hospital. One song recalled a concert she, our friend Susana and I went to at the Albert Hall some years ago. Leonard Cohen was singing that night, and in hospital, I played one of his songs to Sue: “Hey, That’s No Way to Say Goodbye”. That sentiment seems so true. We have lost someone far too special, far too soon. But we will cherish her memory for years to come.

Friendship was incredibly important to Sue. She made friends, and then she hung on to them. I experienced this myself – I met her on a train, our conversation moving swiftly from where had I got my jacket (she nearly ripped it off my back trying to see the label), to my role at the Arts Council, to my daughter’s ambitions in documentary photography. And from then on, I was part of her vast network, and she’d send me suggestions of things to do and see, and just occasionally we’d do them together. But I was only a johnny-come-lately to this vast and wonderful network – you only have to look at her Facebook page or the comments on her various obituaries to see how many people’s lives she touched and how many people called her friend.

Sheila Greene who knew her from her schooldays, will now talk to us about her friend Sue.

I met Sue when we were 14 years-old. We were the country girls in our group of friends at Melton Mowbray Grammar and spent much of our time together meeting up to go on bike rides and having picnics. Innocent times! Sue’s love of the natural world was so evident, even then. She was

an awkward girl at that age, not at ease in her own skin, but she turned into a woman with a unique sense of style. She was young for her age and always remained so. She had a bright, curious outlook and an open smile and all that too remained.

We were friends for 57 years. At times in our busy lives there were gaps in our contact but never for too long. I was always aware of and enjoyed hearing about her apparently free-wheeling existence and her many achievements.

Sue was a person of paradoxes. Adventurous but anxious. Successful but lacking in confidence. Courageous but vulnerable. Outgoing but shy. She could be exasperatingly scatty and sometimes careless, about dates, names, locations. And yet she was also careful, in the basic meaning of that word. She cared, she noticed and found beauty and interest in unexpected situations and seemingly small things. She curated impressive exhibitions but she also curated - in her home and often in the room where she was visiting - little displays of stones, coloured glass, bits of pottery; she arranged food on the plate; she found and sent charming and unanticipated postcards; fussed over and nurtured her plants and flowers. She cared for and cared about her family and friends.

All of us who loved Sue will miss her company and presence in this world greatly. I want to carry with me the memories of the times we spent together but also borrow from her capacity to find delight and joy in small everyday encounters and things as much as in fine art and music. I would like to be able to take on some of her goodness, because she was good, and kind, and loyal.

My daughter and I were clothes shopping the other day and she tried on what was, for her, a very bright, patterned blouse. "Sue would approve", she said and bought it.

Sue made friends in Dublin, as she did everywhere, and my children and nephews were among them. They all mourn her. When they were teenagers my kids used to joke that 'Sue thinks she is a teenager'. Indeed Sue never wanted to grow old and, in the great well of sadness I feel in losing my dear, dear friend, the only consoling thought is that she never will be really old and infirm. She will live in our memories as she was - vivid, smiling and forever young.

As you all know, Sue became a legend in what became known as “World Music”, someone who both defined it, and pushed its boundaries, through her writing, her DJ-ing, and the passion with which she advocated it to her vast network and beyond. In one of her obituaries, Peter Culshaw reminds us that it was not an easy thing to promote a new genre or new way of thinking when she started: “Back then, pre-internet, music had to be sought out, and Sue would be among the keenest hunters, finding gems in bargain bins or Stern’s African music shop”

But gradually, the balance of her interests shifted, and she became as passionate about outsider arts, women artists, and above all photography.

And whatever she did, she fostered talent and supported young people, whether doing portfolio critiques for Format in Derby, or supporting her young nieces, nephews and cousins. She was always engaged, curious and constructive. It’s a measure of this that so many people who she reviewed over the years wanted to be her friends – that doesn’t happen to many critics.

It seems that Sue had had some instinct that all was not well, and she had had a CT scan just a month before she collapsed, which had shown nothing wrong. She had also – incredibly and perhaps improbably – decided to slow down a bit – she was going to give up most of her journalism, and concentrate on books she was planning, including an autobiography. If only she’d managed to complete that, it would have been quite a read.

Meanwhile, she was enjoying her new house in St Leonards. She had been attracted here from Brighton by the fact she could afford a bigger house, and by the proximity of her aunt and cousins, and of course, the sea. Her house is an astonishing reflection of the person, full of art, photography, books, mementos, found objects and beautiful things. Every surface is curated, and her tiny garden crammed with pots of plants. And she loved the local community, knowing everyone in the area as if she had been here a lifetime.

To conclude this part of the ceremony, her friend Cherry Smyth will read us an extract from *Dates and Fields* by Jennifer Firestone

*A faraway whistle, lightning at the edge of dirt
And where to the footsteps take you what place might you rest*

*She's working her way through
The fields admonish her labor*

Oh why must there be expanse so beckoningly at my disposal?

*The moon is another
field or is it the sun reflecting none*

She's working her way through the field

Is that a star in my eye or the sky, is that a you from whom I have known?

She's sleeping in the field

*Signs and symbols where the bird fell yes it did
before the feet of many
And the black air beneath her eyes came to her as writing
as a text to read
And she repeated with the echoes of scripting
She timed two tones:*

*Love please bringeith the peace that resides
Love please watch with thine eyes to this day.*