

essence **interview**

Sir Tom Jones



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The voice that is

Sir Tom Jones

Sir Tom Jones returns to Sandown Live for the third time in four years and talked exclusively to essence magazine.

With your shows and appearances on The Voice, it's been quite a year for you; would you agree?

Sir Tom: Yes. Doing the Voice for the BBC is planned early, and we have to fit in recording and touring in the year as well. I've just finished ten shows in the States that went really well, with my band from Nashville. We played a lot of songs from my two recent albums 'Praise and Blame' and 'Spirit in the Room', and tried out new arrangements on some favourite tracks like 'Delilah', 'Kiss' and 'It's Not Unusual'. It's important for me to keep reinventing songs with the band. It's good to come up with different arrangements to keep the hit tunes fresh and to keep us all on our toes.

Does it surprise you that you're popular across the generations? The Voice has introduced you to a new audience.

Sir Tom: It happens with every generation. Whenever I put out new work I'm introduced to a new audience. If new material gets a good reaction they'll rerelease some back catalogue and often people like what they hear. Now, with The Voice, I go to restaurants in London and get kids shouting at me in the street. Even when I disguise myself in a hoodie and dark glasses, I get shout outs from kids.

Why was this season of The Voice such a success?

Sir Tom: In the television world, the first series is always breaking new ground which is a difficult process, particularly with such a big production. We all learned a lot from the first year, and applied some good changes to year two. So by series three people knew what to expect, the production had settled in and the addition of Kylie and Ricky Wilson as coaches worked well.

Kylie's great. She's been in the business a long time, is genuinely a nice person and that came across on the show.

I've done a few shows with the Kaiser Chiefs and had drinks with Ricky, so I knew him before we started. We are friends. will.i.am is a producer so he fits the bill and then there I am, the old godfather. We're in and out of each other's dressing rooms all the time.

The hardest part of The Voice is saying no and shattering contestants' dreams. I'm always pleased when it's up to the viewers to decide and it's out of my hands. I still ponder, weeks later, whether I made the right choice or not.

I take DVD recordings of the show back to LA for my wife to watch – and she tells me off for not picking certain singers! The Voice does take me back to the early part of my career when I'd go on talent shows. We used to do these things called 'Go As You Please' and I remember losing to a ventriloquist one week. She wasn't even that good! But she looked pretty good and I think they were looking at her rather than the dummy.

Will you return for series four?

Sir Tom: We'll see. I still have to find out about a few things. I know Kylie isn't returning as she's touring – I'm disappointed she's not coming back. I've always got on with Kylie, she's a good sort. She's part Welsh you see – her grandma is Welsh.

And you're in the best form playing live than you've ever been?

Sir Tom: Yes, I've surprised myself how good the shows are. My singing voice is still as strong as ever, though as you get older, your voice gets lower and so my tone and range has gone from a tenor to a baritone. My lower tones are much richer than they →

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were. What you lose on the swings, you gain on the roundabouts.

I know my voice pretty well and if people like it they will like what I record. 'Praise and Blame' was number one in the midweek charts, but got pipped at the post by Eminem. I love to tour and I love to sing.

It's been two years since you released your album 'Spirit In The Room'. Can we expect another album soon?

Sir Tom: Yes, hopefully. My producer Ethan Johns and I have continued working together. Whenever we get a chance, we gather the musicians and get to work. We've recorded 29 songs over last year and now we're in the process of putting together a selection that will form a body of work. Singing to me is like acting. You take on a role and a song to me is a role. It's like Mel Gibson doing Hamlet, whose interpretation would be completely different than a performance by Laurence Olivier.

Your last number one album was in 1999 with 'Reload', but you're more popular than ever. Is getting another number one important to you?

Sir Tom: It's great to know my records are selling and people love them, but I enjoy singing the songs I like and it's a bonus when they do well in the charts. Both my last albums were Top 10 hits which is great – and I wasn't expecting 'Praise & Blame' to be number two! It's good that my music is out there. I had will.i.am come up to me and say he'd heard 'What's New Pussycat?'. He said: "Hey man, that record's sick – I've got to sample it!" It's gratifying knowing my music means something – and it can be anything, and for different reasons, to anyone who gets a chance to listen.

You're soon to embark on a mammoth tour across the UK and Europe. Excited?

Sir Tom: Yes! I'm playing over 40 shows. I have a few days rehearsing with my British band and then off we go. I'm performing at places I've never been to before – like Colwyn Bay in Wales. It's always good to visit new places. And I'm doing some festivals,

which I always like. It's so nice to see kids' faces when they've never seen me play live before. At festivals, there are a lot of people who see you for the very first time, which is always great.

You were 74 last month. Does it surprise you that you're still performing at your age?

Sir Tom: Yes, when I'm on a line-up with bands at rock festivals. Who'd have thought it? It's also great fun and a privilege to share the bill with some fantastic acts – there's some very talented artists working out there! I'm just thankful my voice is still powerful and my vibrato hasn't slowed down. With singers, the vibrato can get slower with age and you start to sound like an engine turning over. But thank God that hasn't happened to

and sit with me." And I thought: "Who's calling me Thomas? Oh it's Frank Sinatra." So I sat with him at the bar, and then when I got up to see Sammy's show Frank said: "Stay, he can wait." If anyone can say that it's Frank Sinatra. Some people said that Sinatra was difficult, but he never was with me, he was always a gentleman.

You've lived in Los Angeles for many years now. Do you miss Wales?

Sir Tom: I moved to LA in 1976 and I've been there since. My Welsh accent is not as strong as it used to be – I had to slow it down when I went to London as no-one could understand me! But coming to America wasn't so bad; if you can get a cockney to understand you then so can an American.

"I don't get back to Wales as much as I would like. Sadly, my family is dwindling as a lot of them have passed away, as have some close friends who I grew up with."

me. I'm still singing naturally and I don't have to put a spike into it. I look after myself too; I drink plenty of water, I don't get dehydrated and I make sure I get eight hours sleep.

You were friends with Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley in the day, what were they like?

Sir Tom: Elvis had a great sense of humour and he used to clown about a lot, but he loved music. He loved singing as much as I do. After his shows in Las Vegas, we'd go to his hotel suite and sing gospel songs around an electric piano for most of the night. I used to say to him: "Elvis, you've finished your shows and you're still singing." We'd be singing until the sun came up and that's when I knew I had to leave.

As for Frank, the thing that sticks in my mind about him was that he called me 'Thomas'. I remember going to see Sammy Davis in Las Vegas once and Frank was sitting at the bar in Caesars Palace. He said: "Thomas, come

I don't get back to Wales as much as I would like. Sadly, my family is dwindling as a lot of them have passed away, as have some close friends who I grew up with. Parts of the towns have changed and look different, which is a natural thing, and a lot of the buildings are different – many of the pubs I used to go to have gone, as has my school. But I love to play shows there and when I play Cardiff, Pontypridd (where I was born) is only 12 miles away, so sometimes I drive up there to have a look around and reminisce. ●

Text: Louise Alexander-O'Loughlin/

Source: Jacqui Swift

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Sir Tom Jones will appear at Sandown Live, Sandown Park Racecourse, Esher after racing on Wednesday 30 July.

To book tickets, visit www.sandown.co.uk or telephone 0844 5793012.