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News and Reviews

SWING ON BY

ALEXANDER STEWART is one of the new breed of retro jazz singers to emerge in recent years ... but what sets him apart is a willingness to take a risk on interpreting songs you'd never think of hearing in the idiom - from The Smiths to Sam Sparro. PETER QUINN talks to Stewart

A ski resort in Andorra is one of the more unusual places to launch a singing career. It's 2007, and the Salford-born Alexander Stewart has just decided to call time on his undergrad degree in European film and French language - the film element's not practical, the French element doesn't allow him to live abroad, it's just not working for him.

A winter season as a chalet host beckons and, having enjoyed several refreshing Andorran beverages at the après- ski one evening ("I was pretty drunk — I won't lie", he confesses), he's overheard singing by a local sax player. Asked to come back the next day for an audition, Alexander ends up doing three gigs a week for the rest of the season. Scanning the track list of his debut CD, *All Or Nothing At All*, confirms that this is someone who isn't afraid to take the path less travelled. As well as more obvious tributes to Sinatra (*'Too Marvellous For Words'*) and Ellington (*'Jump For Joy'*), the 23-year-old's 12-track set includes Blondie (*'Cal I Me'*), Paul Simon (*'Fifty Ways To Leave Your Lover'*), Sam Sparro (*'Black And Gold'*) and even a slightly obscure B-side from The Smiths (*'Please, Please, Please Let Me Get What I Want'*), which he couples with their final single, (*'Last Night I Dreamt That Somebody Loved Me'*).



"When I came back [from Andorra] I started taking it quite seriously," Alexander tells me. "I recorded some tracks and put them on Myspace, and within a month I started getting people messaging me saying I really like your stuff... and then I had a message from a guy called Alex Webb saying it would be cool to get together at some point. I was down in London that weekend anyway, so we arranged to hook

up. The first thing we went through was an arrangement of *'Call Me'*, and it just clicked. You could see that Alex liked my stuff and I was interested in his arrangements and songs."

Since this first meeting with Webb, now his pianist, arranger and MD, Stewart has worked hard to establish himself in a relatively short period, performing at Ronnie Scotts, Hideaway, the Boisdale, Forge and an appearance at last year's London Jazz Festival in a well-received concert celebrating Duke Ellington's arranger and co-composer, "Strayhorn the Songwriter". Other performances include the late night jazz series at the Royal Albert Hall's Elgar Room,

and a concert at last year's Cheltenham Jazz Festival celebrating the songs of Sinatra, when the singer performed with Buddy Greco and Curtis Stigers and was broadcast live as part of BBC Radio 2's 'Friday Night is Music Night' show.

"It's been an interesting trip," he says. "Alex will bring things to the table that I wouldn't have thought of, and I'll bring things, and together we'll mash stuff up and try and make things work, like The Smiths song. At first I pretty much hated it and we just put it off and put it off. .. and then we came round to thinking, well, maybe if we try it like this and build up to something, and that's how things developed.

Apart from contributing a rather fine original, *'The Hard Way'*, a duet featuring guest vocals by Blue Note recording artist China Moses, Webb was able to provide the singer with a first-call band for the debut. The line-up includes bassist Gary Crosby, saxophonists Nathaniel Facey and **Frank Griffith (the latter's horn charts add real gravitas to the session)**, trumpeter Freddie Gavita and drummer Andy Chapman. The singer is also keen to acknowledge the invaluable input of album producer, Andy Cleynert, who spent "hours trawling through tapes and listening to stuff. It was great to have someone like Andy on board. He's got a big amount of patience and a great ear for what he wanted it to sound like"

Of the debut, Alexander notes that he wanted to make "something that wasn't a crooner album, but that people who did listen to the crooners could pick and think, yeah, it's familiar but it's not so obvious ... and then I wanted to make something as well that would be acceptable to the pop listening audience; the kind of people who would pick up a Paloma Faith album or a Paolo Nutini album. But I wanted to make sure that it was honest, faithful to what I wanted to do, and credible," he continues. "It's much punchier than a crooner album, and it's perhaps a little bit more accessible than a hardcore jazz album. With crooners and Sinatra imitators it can be very romantic, a bit twee. There's a temptation to try to recreate a moment or a certain album that people have heard, to be too nostalgic. With this it's very much putting your own stamp and individuality on a song. "And that individuality includes reworking an electro-pop classic such as *'Black And Gold'*, one of the album's standout cuts which lends itself surprisingly well to some Coltrane-like modality. "I wanted to pick things that weren't too obvious and do them in a way that was a bit more relevant, a bit more contemporary. There are certain pop songs that have something pretty latent in them. You can hear things that would work as a jazz arrangement, like *'Black And Gold'*. There's something there that I really connect with, it's a great lyric. I suppose you can go quite deep with it in terms of its connotations, but there's something quite mystical about it. We set the theme and then go into a hard swing. It's a cool tune."

The singer has already started thinking about a second album, something "really lush", possibly with strings. What's certain is that it will contain some of his own songs, but there's the debut to think about first. The CD launch takes place on 12 September at Pizza Express Jazz Club. Andorra seems a long way away.