

ACOUSTIC ALBUMS THAT CHANGED THE WORLD



ALBUM No.1

Title: *Year Of The Cat*
Artist: Al Stewart
Release Date: 1976

Track listing:

Lord Grenville
 On The Border
 Midas Shadow
 Sand In Your Shoes
 If It Doesn't Come Naturally
 Leave It
 Flying Sorcery
 Broadway Hotel
 One Stage Before
 Year Of The Cat

YEAR OF THE CAT

This cat definitely got the cream

For Scottish-born singer-songwriter Al Stewart, 1976 proved to be his commercial-breakthrough year. When his seventh album *Year Of The Cat* was released in July of that year, its stylish elegance and melding of pop and folk idioms instantly connected with the record-buying public and quickly elevated Stewart from cultish folkish singer-songwriter to pop stardom. The album peaked at #5 in the US chart, while in the UK it only managed to climb to #31.

The sessions for the album were first undertaken in the summer of 1975 when Stewart entered Abbey Road Studios in London – additional recording would later be done at Davlen Sound Studios in LA – to lay down the bulk of the backing tracks under the watchful eye of producer Alan Parsons. 'I went into Abbey Road and recorded all the music – all the backing tracks with no lead guitar overdubs,' explains Stewart today. 'And then I took them with me and listened to them for about six months so I could see what they made me think of lyrically. Then, once I had all the words we went back into the studio in the early part of 1976 and put the vocals

on and did all the overdubs.'

'I heard the songs for the very first time in the studio,' adds Parsons 'along with the musicians that turned up. The album was very much all assembled on the spur of the moment.'

During the time Stewart meditated on the lyrical content, he wound up writing anywhere up to four different sets of lyrics for each song. While Stewart concentrated on the lyrical aspect, Parsons crafted the album's acoustic sonic fanfare into polished ear candy. 'Alan was interested in the sound and the music,' says Stewart. 'For all the acoustic guitars on the tracks, there were mostly four of them recorded in unison, as Alan doubled or even sometimes quadrupled everything, which gave it a fatter sound.'

For Parsons, recording the acoustic guitars was an integral part of capturing the essence of the songs' heart and soul. 'I miked all the acoustic guitars,' reveals Parsons, 'as I'm not into plugging in an acoustic guitar, as you tend to get a rubbery sound from the acoustic's pickup. My mic of choice was a Neumann KM84.'

While Stewart mainly strummed an Epiphone Texan acoustic, the

bulk of the acoustic guitar playing was handled by Peter White and Tim Renwick. 'Tim played both the acoustic and electric guitar solos on the title track,' explains Stewart, 'while Peter played the brilliant Spanish guitar solo on 'On The Border'. The aforementioned title track, with its haunting melody, is what has etched Stewart's name into the public psyche. Initially conceived during a soundcheck on Stewart's 1975 American tour, the idea eventually evolved into a six-minute-plus musical tour de force. From the opening Cmaj7 – D – Em chordal sequence, 'Year Of The Cat' morphs into a lush evocative masterpiece, its beauty further underscored by its lilting strummed acoustics, dynamic acoustic-cum-electric guitar solo, and evocative improvised sax free fall.

'The guitar used on the track was this cheap guitar I owned at the time,' says Stewart today. 'It had an unusually low action, so it was much more topky and twangy-sounding instead of a deep, rich tone that an acoustic normally would have, which was exactly what we wanted for the record. When Tim takes the first half of the guitar solo he played a Guild acoustic, and when it goes into the electric second part, he switched to a Strat.'

The addition of the sax was first wrought with much debate, but Alan Parsons insisted its inclusion would take the song elsewhere. 'Al was quite reluctant to put a sax on,' says Parsons, 'and especially on an Al Stewart record, but I pushed for inclusion, and at the end of the day he was absolutely delighted with the result – so much so that the guy who played the sax solo, Phil Kenzie, ended up playing in his live band.'

The album opened up many avenues for the next generation of folk-rockers that followed, and left many owing much debt to Stewart's songwriting mastery of marrying the historical and the personal in an ocean of rich evocative imagery. Stewart continues to record and tour today, but *Year Of The Cat* will always be his defining moment. As Stewart affirms, 'The song has become my calling card and has pretty much paid the bills over the years.'

Joe Matera