

## Al Stewart just keeps on rolling

interview by Mike Spindloe

**A**l Stewart, the Scottish-born singer-songwriter best known for an unlikely 1976 smash hit called "Year of the Cat", is back on the road again, 25 years or so after coming to London to seek his fortune as a musician. His journey has been one of obscurity to fame and back again; it also landed him in the Napa Valley outside of Los Angeles, California, which he has called home for many years now.

Stewart's favourite three topics of discussion are lawyers, politics and history, not necessarily in that order; a rather unusual bent for someone who has made music his chief vocation. Actually, Stewart is also an aficionado of fine wines, having earned several diplomas as a wine expert, but those days are, he says, mostly in the past: "I don't tend to buy as much wine anymore. I peaked in the early '80s in terms of being madly interested in it. I don't know whether or not it's just old age. I've actually been selling things from my cellar and giving them away as Christmas presents."

Stewart's upcoming engagement at the Sidetrack Cafe will see him teamed up with a familiar supporting cast: multi-instrumentalist Peter White, manager/drummer Steve Chapman, bassist Robin Lambie and saxophonist Dave Camp. All have been with Stewart on one or more of his two visits to the Sidetrack in the last three years.

There is also a new album, *Last Days of the Century*, which Stewart professes to be pleased with, but is reticent to dwell on. When I comment on the up-to-date sound, he pauses, uncharacteristically, and then says "I'm always bamboozled by what people hear in my records. I don't hear the music as much as the lyrics. I can never



Al Stewart, the Scottish-born author of "Year of the Cat," is back in town again at the Sidetrack Cafe this Wednesday and Thursday.

find reviews which mention the words; they're always stuck on the production. The song is the kernel of the thing."

The new record is on Enigma, a U.S.-based independent label that has been growing by leaps and bounds. "Basically, they wanted a record so I said sure," says Stewart, who found himself label-less after *Russians and Americans* in 1984. He's happy with Enigma, who "have been

tireless in their efforts to promote the new album. We've been getting more airplay in Canada than anywhere else."

Stewart is mostly self-taught as a musician, having had only a few piano and saxophone lessons as a child. He came to London with the idea of being a rock star; however people like Bob Dylan and Paul Simon showed him that you could go a different route, writing meaningful lyrics and still reaching an audience. Stewart also once had a guitar lesson with Robert Fripp of King Crimson. "I couldn't understand anything he was saying," laughs Stewart, "and now he tells the same story to people and says I'm the only one of his students who ever had a hit."

Words have always been Stewart's forte. His literate lyrics have encompassed historical ballads, love songs and social commentary, among a host of other topics. His early songs, such as those on albums like *Love Chronicles*, were often directly autobiographical. This was followed by a "historical" phase; later albums show a balance.

One topic which has come up in at least a couple of songs is one of Stewart's personal pet peeves: lawyers. Although no one specific incident has triggered Stewart's stream of invective, he proves willing to

dwell at length on the subject: "Lawyers have to be seen as the vermin that they are. In general, their function in society is basically to steal, and they don't care whose money it is. We have far too many lawyers — about 700,000 in the U.S., soon to be a million, yet Japan can get by with only 13,000. Writing songs about them is great therapy at least."

I once asked Stewart (in an interview four years ago) what he would do were he not a musician. He replied that he would probably write books, something that is now closer to being a reality. "I've got one planned out," he says, "that is set in a parallel universe. It's actually like central Europe around 1900. The main country it involves is fictional; it's called Similia and its chief export is onions of a very fierce type. It's a dark farce."

Besides his keen interest in history, Stewart tries "to stay informed about what's going on in the world." He can rattle off a list of current world conflicts faster than an Amnesty International spokesman, and has definite opinions on the recent U.S. election: "I don't think Bush is our man at all. At least he's not the devil. Dukakis really lost the election; Bush didn't win. We went and elected a bunch of lawyers; they shouldn't be allowed to hold public office."



"A tiger of a tenorman." Lew Tabackin put on another set of first-class shows at the Yardbird Suite last weekend.

## Tabackin returns to Suite

Lew Tabackin  
Yardbird Suite  
Thursday, February 9

review by Mike Evans

**L**ew Tabackin, tenor saxophonist and flautist and a fixture of the New York jazz scene for the past twenty-five years, played Edmont's Yardbird Suite over the weekend and displayed his characteristic virtuosity and power. A master stylist, Tabackin demonstrated a daunting command of his chosen instruments, ranging from liquid mellifluous tones to aggressive and calculated rawness, exploring the full dynamic

range of true artistry.

Tabackin's first set, a teaser for the remainder of the evening, featured an original composition entitled "Morning" in which Tabackin exploited the full dynamic range of the flute in a manner probably unfamiliar to those who have heard only the instrument's lyrical properties in popular and classical music. He frequently used, to good effect, double-stop runs in a kind of frenetic cascade move closely associated with brass horns. That was followed by a virtuoso turn on the tenor sax in which Tabackin justified his reputation as a multi-instrumentalist, playing with a deliberate stiffness and then

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