

Striking a chord with the community

Harry Sword talks to musician **Dave Stewart** about the ground-breaking Church Keys tour, launched at All Saints', Langport, in June

Although best known as one half of iconic 1980s hitmakers Eurythmics, Dave Stewart has recently been swapping the stadium stages, bright lights and vast crowds for the more humble environs of some of England's most beautiful churches. Partnering with CCT, Stewart has recently spearheaded Church Keys: a project aimed at bringing music, community and shared performance back to the very heart of modern church life, with a series of special intimate performances at churches around the country.

Drawing on his enviable songbook and collaborating with a number of musical friends including Marty Longstaff (The Lake Poets), Chris Difford (Squeeze) and Nik Kershaw, the launch event took place on 16 June at All Saints' church at Langport, near Glastonbury. Rolling out across the UK over the next year, Church Keys will see a variety of other musicians, both local and internationally acclaimed, take to the stage in a selection of beautiful English churches, at once opening

out a new community-focused live music circuit and making good use of the fabulous acoustics these unique spaces offer. Stewart is no stranger to the acoustic potential offered by churches, however: in 1983 he and Annie Lennox converted a church in Crouch End into a world-class recording studio and it was there that many of their biggest hits – *Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)* and *There Must be an Angel (Playing With My Heart)* included – were put to tape.

Aside from touring the globe and selling over 75 million records in Eurythmics, Stewart has also had a highly successful career as a record producer and songwriter, having worked with artists like Tom Petty, Mick Jagger and Ringo Starr.

We caught up with Dave to talk acoustics, community and the beauty of intimate performance.

How did you first get involved with CCT?

I made a record with a guy called Marty Longstaff who has a band called The Lake Poets. I heard



Above
Dave Stewart and Holly
Quin-Ankrah performing
at All Saints, Langport
(Simon Godsave)

some footage of him singing and I thought they were great songs, so I invited him to Nashville and we made a record.

We released the album, it got great reviews and Marty suggested doing a show at Holy Trinity, which is a fantastic church in Sunderland, and actually a church that CCT have done a huge amount of work with on the Canny Space community project.

We did two nights there, and it was a very special performance. Peter Gabriel sent somebody down to record it; we put it out as a double vinyl album and that started the ball rolling, really. While we were there we got introduced to

people from CCT and during the conversation it was mentioned that many churches are in need of restoration and regeneration. So I started to have a think about what else we might be able to do.

You and Annie Lennox had a recording studio in a converted church in Crouch End. Have you always held a musical affinity with churches?

That's right. We converted the church and made music there for many years. We recorded lots of our hit songs in there and we had many people come over and record there too. After the Sunderland shows we were looking



you feel the presence
of an ethereal space;
the sound swirls
around above you



at different churches that CCT were working with and we realised it could be the start of something incredible; a never-ending tour, if you like (*laughs*); an opportunity for both established and upcoming artists to do beautiful, special nights – either candlelit or with a little PA system and just playing to the community.

Can you tell us a little bit about your Sunderland roots? What are your memories of the music scene growing up?

One thing I recall saying to Bob Harris after the first show was that it seems like what we have here – with the churches – is the greatest collection of folk clubs on earth (*laughs*). That is an abiding memory of my early years. In folk clubs in Sunderland, people sat totally quiet during the performance – they wouldn't make a noise – and then afterwards they



would cheer and order a drink. But they were very respectful while the singer/songwriter was playing.

Performing in the church really reminded me of those days, because the song was front and centre and people really listened. At most gigs these days everybody is staring at an iPhone or tripping over trying to text (*laughs*). Here nobody lost concentration – and we said anyone could take pictures if they wanted to – but you saw



Above
Langport residents express their delight at the Church Keys launch (Simon Godsave)

Far left
The team enjoying a jamming session (Simon Godsave)

Left
Dave Stewart launches the Church Keys tour in Langport (Simon Godsave)

people's faces and they were completely gobsmacked. I think it's a real winner all round for CCT and musicians, because lots of these churches have bits and pieces that need doing up. Then, on the other hand, you have lots of artists nowadays – the up and comers – who find it impossible to make any money because people download music for free. And this will help them break onto a new circuit. It's a win-win situation and I'm so pleased to be involved.

The launch night for Church Keys took place at All Saints' church, Langport. You had Chris Difford, Nik Kershaw, Bob Harris and The Lake Poets. Can you tell us about the night?

It was great – Chris Difford runs a songwriters' retreat nearby and Bob Harris is involved in that too and they loved the idea of bringing some of the participants down and having them involved. We kicked off in Glastonbury and then The Lake Poets tour started a week later. Marty's voice sounds beautiful in a church; so resonant and pure. He sings about community and family and he literally has people in tears. There are also other artists in the pipeline who want to get involved. There are various folks in Nashville, for example, where Marty and I made The Lake Poets' album. A lot of country singers are well-versed in playing acoustically and love the idea of going into wonderful old churches in Britain – for them it's tremendously exciting.

Can you tell us about the acoustics? What makes these

spaces so special, from a musical standpoint?

It's interesting. Annie and I would often play acoustic – even at Wembley Stadium. But church acoustics are coveted by recording artists. It's that old word called 'reverb'. The reverb ratio – because of the high ceiling – is just fantastic, and the stone columns add a certain kind of sparkle around the sound.

It has so much more clarity than a full PA system in a big, box-shaped room. With that scenario – the typical rock scenario – you can make out some of the sound, but not all of it. You won't always be able to make out every word. But in a church, with the acoustic guitar and the piano and the singer, and just the tiniest amount of system added, you can balance the instruments acoustically and hear every single word. You feel the presence of an ethereal space; the sound swirls around above you and falls back down and it results in an experience that is very hard to repeat.

Was there a particular moment during that first show when you realised it was going to work?

For me, hearing Chris Difford singing *Cool for Cats* was very special. Then I ended the whole thing with *There Must Be an Angel (Playing With My Heart)* and the whole crowd joined in with *Sweet Dreams*, too. Everyone from the village was so excited. We talked to them afterwards in the grounds and even had a singsong in the vestry behind us. It was a proper happening! People were surprised and didn't expect it: but bringing people closer together is what this whole thing is about. ▲