





# Cat Stevens

BY JIM FARBER

The singer-songwriter's classic compositions  
all center around seeking.

USE THE FEWEST WORDS, SING IN THE QUIETEST VOICE, place fingers on strings with the lightest touch. Such are the apparent strategies of Cat Stevens. In his classic songs, there's a hush at the core, a whisper willed by a singer in search of focus. ♪ Take "The Wind." The vocal that sits at the song's center doesn't seem so much performed as channeled, as if it's emanating not from the singer, but from the inner mind of the listener. The only accompaniment: two acoustic guitars that stroke and trace the vocals, forming chords that curl into rounds. Listen closely and you'll hear a third element – uncredited, but palpable. Around Stevens' soft voice and the feathered guitars lies a specific kind of silence, an audible absence, creating an ambience unlike anything heard on any other recording. ♪ The words and music of "The Wind" speak of eternity, yet they last just one minute and forty seconds. It's an ideally ironic opening song for an album – *Teaser and the Firecat* – that both warms the listener and pushes the singer into a fervent search. Could anyone who heard such songs back in 1971 have been truly surprised when, six years later, Stevens had a religious conversion – one so compelling, it inspired him to turn his back on the pop world for the next thirty years? Stevens' snub of the music business – one of the most bracing and misunderstood rebukes in pop history – has its roots in the very material that first made him a star. His classic cuts, like "On the Road to Find Out," "Wild World," and "Into White," all center on seeking. They ache to pull back life's curtain, to find out what can and can't be seen. If so earnest a pursuit led Stevens to leave pop for a protracted time, it also accounted for his looming popularity in his commercial prime. The focus and introspection of his songs dovetailed perfectly





**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP**

Stevens, starting out in the mid-1960s; strolling near Island Records' offices, London, 1972; a pinup star during his early career.



with the rise of the singer-songwriter movement in the early seventies. That surge saw a broad range of artists moving away from amplification and theatricality to mine the inner life. Of all the stars buoyed by this march – from Joni Mitchell and Jackson Browne to Elton John and Carole King – Stevens rates as the most spiritually determined.

Yet that mission took nothing away from the beauty that made his songs into hits. Or the vocal range that made them widely varied. Or the mortal lusts and needs that made them relatable. Those skills owe a lot to an early start in music. From his youth, Stevens displayed a will to match formal melodies to fine words.

**B**ORN STEVEN DEMETRE GEORGIU IN 1948, in the Marylebone neighborhood of London, the singer had a Greek-Cypriot father (Stavros Georgiou) and a Swedish mother (Ingrid Wickman). They lived above the family's restaurant, Moulin Rouge, and everyone, including the children, helped out with the business. But by the time he was a young teen, the budding musician had started playing piano in earnest and, by 15, he added guitar to his skills, inspired by the Beatles. He was also influenced by *West Side Story* – intrigued by the musical's sweeping songs and knowing view of clashing cultures. Stevens' love of both show tunes and folk music would later show in his work – the former accounting for its rich perspectives, the latter evident in its sonic sparsity.

As a youth, Stevens also took up drawing, a skill later displayed in the purposely naive paintings that adorned the covers of his best-known albums. In 1965, at age 17, the aspiring musician got his first publishing deal, with Ardmores & Beechwood. For them, he recorded his "The First Cut Is the Deepest" as a demo. The song would later become a modern standard.

By 1966, he had chosen the stage name Cat Stevens because, as he has explained in interviews, his girlfriend said his eyes had a feline shape and allure. At 18, he met manager/producer Mike Hurst of the British vocal group the Springfields (which also included Dusty Springfield). Hurst helped Stevens land a record contract, leading to his first single, "I Love My Dog," which inched to Number 28 in the U.K. It was followed by "Matthew & Son," a formal orchestral-pop confection that made it all the way to Number Two. His first full LP – also titled *Matthew & Son* – featured "I'm Gonna Get Me a Gun," which went Top Ten in 1967, and "Here Comes My Baby" – a Top Five chartmaker when the Tremeloes covered it.

While Stevens' followup album, *New Masters*, fell short of the U.K. charts, it did include "The First Cut Is the Deepest," which became a smash when covered by P.P. Arnold. The song would be recorded by Rod Stewart, James Morrison, Sheryl Crow, and scores more. Crow's 2003 version of the song won her a Grammy nomination two years later, and landed Stevens back-to-back ASCAP Songwriter of the Year awards (in 2005 and 2006).

But as promising a pop career as Stevens enjoyed, he found his image – as a budding pinup and polished star – unsatisfying. Even so, he might not have made a major change in both his music and his philosophy if a medical emergency had not shaken his life to the core. In 1969, he contracted tuberculosis, and the disease nearly killed him. He spent months recuperating in King Edward VII Hospital in West Sussex, followed by a full year of rest and recovery. The long stretch gave him the time he needed to









Stevens live in 1976

imagine a different life, defined by a new point of view. It was here that Stevens began to study religion and philosophy. His creativity exploded. He wrote scores of songs: The albums they appeared on would rocket him to fame.

Stevens vowed to leave behind the heavy orchestrations and booming echo chambers that defined his first two albums. To do so, he got rid of his first manager, and wangled his way out of his initial contract with Derram Records. He hired agent Barry Krost, who landed him an audition with Chris Blackwell of Island Records. Blackwell gave him creative carte blanche, and Stevens set about honing his new sound with key help from producer Paul Samwell-Smith, formerly the bassist with the Yardbirds.

In America, Stevens signed with a label just as artist-friendly as Island: A&M. Samwell-Smith then provided a crucial suggestion that helped Stevens complete the sound he sought. The producer introduced him to the former session guitarist Alun Davies, whose fine fingerings proved a perfect mirror for Stevens' crystalline new direction. Davies worked with Stevens throughout the rest of his commercial run, and even returned to perform with him when he re-emerged as Yusuf Islam nearly three decades later.

Their first album together, *Mona Bone Jakon*, released in June 1970, featured the hit "Lady D'Arbanville," about Stevens' girlfriend of the time, the actress Patti D'Arbanville. The song helped the album go gold on both sides of the Atlantic. It was an ideal setup for

the next album, the one that made Stevens a superstar and still endures in its popularity, and resonance, to this day. Released in November 1970, *Tea for the Tillerman* became a Top Ten smash, driven by the woodsy-sounding, acoustic guitar-driven single, "Wild World."

*Tillerman* encapsulated the trademark Stevens sound. Despite its seeming simplicity, its melodies retained a formality that showed marked sophistication. Moreover, Stevens' vocal range allowed him to express a broad spectrum of characters and situations. The finest

example, "Father and Son," found him singing both tenor and baritone parts with equal authority (delineating the title characters' differing points of view). It remains one of his most aching works.

Stevens equaled *Tillerman's* juggernaut less than a year later with *Teaser and the Firecat* (1971), which included hits ranging from the rousingly idealistic "Peace Train" to the fresh-faced "Morning Has Broken" (with its classical piano part), to "Moon Shadow," which mimicked the holy glow of "The Wind."

Many more hits followed, in an increasingly broad range of styles and arrangements. One U.S. Top Ten song, "Another Saturday Night," even integrated Caribbean inflections. By the 1977 album, *Izitso*, Stevens ventured far enough from his past to bring in synthesizers, the supposed opposite of his seminal acoustic pieces.

By that time, the singer had already started on his religious sojourn. In a revelatory incident in 1975, Stevens almost drowned off the coast of Malibu, California. The trauma sharpened his quest for a more

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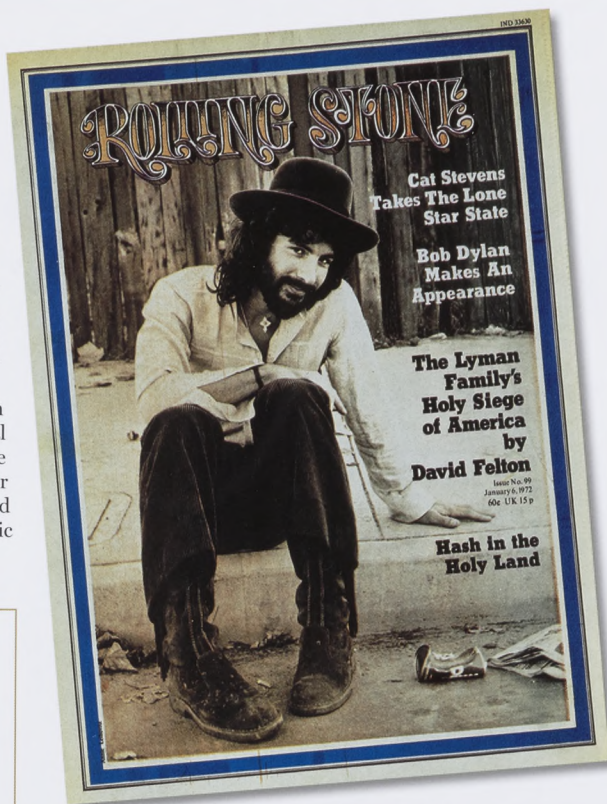
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spiritually focused life. He found his way into Islam, changing his name to Yusuf Islam in July 1978. The singer's next album, *Back to Earth* (1978), would be his last pop record for decades.

Stevens started to make music again in the nineties, though, at first, it was of an entirely religious nature. And Stevens endured media-fueled controversies over the years, fed by Islamophobia. He didn't start exploring secular music again until the new millennium, leading to the release of *An Other Cup* in 2006. Though the album reached no higher than Number 52 on the U.S. charts, the undimmed beauty of its songs charmed critics.

Despite the decades separating this music from his earliest, *An Other Cup* presented a philosophical through-line. It focused on the quest for solace, the journey to calm, as well as on the acceptance of their evanescence. Considered together, Stevens' early and late songs form a singular question: How can music of such quietude carry such force? ➔



Yusuf Islam in 2011

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



**MATTHEW & SON**  
Deram 1967



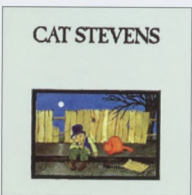
**NEW MASTERS**  
Deram 1967



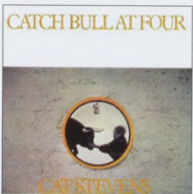
**MONA BONE JAKON**  
A&M 1970



**TEA FOR THE TILLERMAN**  
A&M 1970



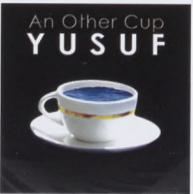
**TEASER AND THE FIRECAT**  
A&M 1971



**CATCH BULL AT FOUR**  
A&M 1972



**BUDDHA AND THE CHOCOLATE BOX**  
A&M 1974



**AN OTHER CUP**  
Ya Records/Atlantic 2006

