

## Southern Tenant Folk Union - Biography

Southern Tenant Folk Union are the Edinburgh based six-piece string band that over a series of albums have produced a thought provoking and arresting take on roots & folk music. Past winners of the 'Americana Artist Of The Year' award the band have taken their music onto BBC One TV's prime political show 'The Andrew Marr Show' plus Irish TV's world famous chat show 'The Late Late Show' as well as onto stages at prestigious festivals (Celtic Connections, Belfast Open House Festival, Orkney Folk Festival, Belladrum Festival, Electric Picnic & many more). They run their own record label and work completely independently releasing their own music.

Live reviews of their concert performances have picked up on their *'tight delivery and soaring, gorgeous harmonies'* saying that *'STFU are a must see live band combining a rich blend of musical talent with a high octane Appalachian style'* and they perform their own brand of *'thrilling traditional musicianship'*. Through extensive touring they have seen audiences grow year on year and now consistently sell-out concert venues all over the UK and Ireland. Artistically successful their albums have been reviewed and praised in The Guardian, The Independent, The Sunday Times and The Irish Times with their latest album awarded 4 stars in Q Magazine with the band described as *'A folk band for the Occupy era – passionate, political and mischievous'*.

Started in 2006 by Belfast born and Liverpool/London raised musician Pat McGarvey, he has, through various different line-ups of the collective, driven ever increasingly forward in taking genre clichés and subverting them into more interesting shapes and patterns, attempting to create roots music that has depth both lyrically and musically. The name itself comes from a desire to find a union based name for the group and one that also suited the style of music. Unions thematically suiting a musical collective such as STFU (with small songwriters banding together) and also acting as intent for the band to counteract some of the media's union bashing (and the excuses used to curtail worker's rights in recent decades) by talking about the positive things unions have done for society. In trying to find a name they came upon and appropriated the ground breaking multi-racial tenant farmers collective from the new deal/dustbowl era the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

The first two albums released when the band was based in London got them started on the Americana circuit in the UK and the success of the debut meant they had national distribution for the second. These albums both took a sometimes 'straight bluegrass' form (influenced mainly by The Stanley Brothers) as well as a nod towards Gene Clark, The Grateful Dead and Don Reno. A marked progression and the better distribution of the second cd saw them touring widely, being booked for a BBC Radio 2 session at Maida Vale (for the now sadly missed Mark Lamarr show 'God's Jukebox') and establishing themselves in UK, Ireland and mainland Europe.

With McGarvey moving to Edinburgh around the second album's release the next year would see the original line-up all move on leading to McGarvey reforming the collective in Scotland and mostly working on songwriting by himself for the third album. Free to do what he liked McGarvey began to incorporate some other more unexpected yet appropriate lyrical ideas into the new material. Realising that even as folk music's tales of human suffering, brutality, love, empowerment and death are usually set in the past they also serve as a warning for the future. That plus the reasoning that the sound of the future in any post technological society is more likely to be folk/acoustic based gave McGarvey the licence to experiment with more dark folk musical tones and 'science fiction' lyrics. Though not of course laser guns and silver jump suits, more descriptions & stories of a return to the hard agrarian, feudal landscape of just a few centuries ago in one possible future.

Recording the third album with a new line up in Nov 2009, including Adam Bulley on mandolin and Chris Purcell on guitar, went well despite the lead singer John Langan saying mid sessions he probably wouldn't be able to tour (before going awol for several months forcing the band to recruit Ewan Macintyre to replace him). When 'The New Farming Scene' album was finally released on the band's own label in June 2010 it received the best press of any album so far including a 4 star review in The Independent (and in an article criticising Mercury Music Prize 2010 the same reviewer, Andy Gill, named the album as one that should be considered for that award) and many other national reviews in The Sunday Times, Irish Times and Scotsman. The band appeared on live TV (The View on RTE 1)

### Album Discography

**2007** - Southern Tenant Folk Union

**2008** - Revivals, Rituals & Union Songs

**2010** - The New Farming Scene

**2011** - Pencaitland

**2013** - Hello Cold Goodbye Sun

**2015** - The Chuck Norris Project

**2016** - Join Forces

for the first time and also played the song 'No Work Today' on the legendary 'Loose Ends' show on BBC Radio 4. The year ended on a high with the band winning 'Americana Artist Of The Year' at the British Country Music Awards.

Touring with the new Scottish line-up the band began to play bigger venues and start to work collectively on the follow-up which came out in June 2011. 'Pencaitland' also got some great reviews (including first reviews in The Guardian and The Sun) though disappointed a few critics that had loved the previous album. Highlights included the John Carpenter influenced lead track 'I Dream Of Burning Buildings' (based on a synthesiser instrumental McGarvey had recorded in 1996) and the title track 'Pencaitland' - both songs making use of the bowed double bass on one of their records for the first time, a sound that continues to feature heavily live and in the studio. One track 'The Rights & Interests Of The Laboring Man', a song about union busting in early 20<sup>th</sup> century USA, was also donated to the Morning Star anniversary compilation cd "We're All In This Together".

So after deciding a more focused album might alleviate any of the perceived problems surrounding 'Pencaitland' another themed album like the third was proposed that would this time take 'modern horror' as the lyrical background and use some of the arpeggiated and almost atonal musical ideas from 70's and 80's cult soundtrack composers (such as the aforementioned John Carpenter as well as Fabio Frizzi, Goblin and Tangerine Dream) to set the scene for the subject matter. These series of notes actually fitted very well on the 5 String Banjo (when it was muted with a tea towel) and mimicked the sound of 1970's sequencing keyboards like the Moog. Key to the sound too was Jed Milroy's clarinet playing and Marty Camino's expert and powerful double bass tone with plenty of the aforementioned bowing.

Modern horror was the overarching theme then that would give the songwriters something to start from but also allow complete freedom as it could include ideas as diverse as problems with capitalism to a personal horror of socially awkward situations or a fear of crime or of redundancy or a loss of self-confidence; anything that could be adapted into an interesting and, crucially, well written song or piece of music.

This began to be a hard sell to the collective and, despite some good songs emerging initially, tension began to develop as the themed nature of the album's direction couldn't be agreed upon. Personalities began to push and be pushed as songs that didn't fit everyone's own ideas were proposed. Compromise was eventually reached ahead of the recording session and though some members didn't get the straight bluegrass album they wanted and others didn't get the darker more extreme album they wanted the end result was an album that in its making became something else. Highlights included the Donald Ker poetic adaptation (by Carrie Thomas) 'Days By The Seaside With Ice Cream', the post-apocalyptic stomper 'Chest Freezer' (filmed for Balcony TV in Dublin) and the horror-arpeggiated 'Crash' inspired by the JG Ballard novel. Also coming to the fore was the song writing ability of Chris Purcell with three excellent songs full of atmosphere and beauty, namely the title track 'Goodbye Sun', 'Relic Of A Reasonable Mind' (with its daring use of eBow by Adam Bulley) and the co-write with McGarvey of 'Conscience Falls'.

Released in January 2013 'Hello Cold Goodbye Sun' was almost universally awarded 4 star reviews (in The Independent, Q Magazine, Scotland On Sunday, The Scotsman, Mail On Sunday & many more), became number one in the Americana UK Chart by March and appeared in The Herald's Top 50 Scottish Albums of 2013 list. Amongst the sold out album release tour the band were asked to play at the Celtic Connections Festival in Glasgow and to appear on live national TV twice. Firstly in Ireland for 'The Late Late Show on RTE 1' (the world's longest running chat show) and later in the year on BBC One TV's 'The Andrew Marr Show' where political song 'Men In Robes' was performed in front of the former Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg.

Since the release and the album tour, the band line-up had changed again and just as before as some people moved on then some new people joined each bringing different experience, interesting ideas and new influences to the collective. People like talented Scottish singer songwriter Rory Butler (winner of Danny Kyle Award at Celtic Connections in 2012), fiddle player Katherine Stewart and percussionist Steve Fivey. Their sixth album, **The Chuck Norris Project**, a fierce and beautiful political set of songs, was released in January 2015 and their seventh **Join Forces** in Autumn 2016. It heralded a return to a more folk, rootsy and bluegrass sound whilst still posing the question "what can we do with these acoustic instruments?". The band continue to tour in the manner of Willie Nelson, that is with an exciting live show that engages the audience, talks & tells stories, discusses issues, is informal and also one that displays the fully eclectic and interesting music from across the band's career to date. And like Willie they play the hits.

