

# blues in britain

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A portrait of Sandi Thom, a woman with long dark hair, wearing a dark jacket, sitting against a wooden wall with some graffiti. The image is the central focus of the magazine cover.

Sandi Thom  
James Taylor  
Giles Robson Feed Me





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Multi instrumentalist, singer and song writer **Sandi Thom**, hails from Scotland. Her new album *Merchants And Thieves* is an independent production, which she co-produced with Jake Field and recorded with her regular band. Sandi came into *Blues In Britain* and, after lunch, sat down with **Fran Leslie** to talk about it. **Al Stuart** took the photo.

**Is the album, *Merchants And Thieves*, a new departure for you?**

I think it is more like coming home than a departure. For me it is not something I am unfamiliar with. It's not something I am not used to. It's the music that I grew up around; my dad was always playing guitar and singing.

The reason that the record sounds the way it does is because it's mine and it's my label, so I made the decisions. I like every aspect of it; what goes on the cover, what goes on the CD, how it's promoted, how I look, all those things. It's great! That's a really good feeling to have control over everything that's going on.

With the album, it's just me and the boys; the band. We went into a really modest studio in Brighton, where most of it was recorded, with the same producer of the first and second albums. We had the songs and there was no preconceived idea like, 'let's make the album sound like this or let's make a blues album'. It is just everybody's influences just came through. Randall, who co-writes all the songs plays in a certain style, everybody was given a chance to show case themselves and enjoy what they were doing and just be honest really. This was the record that we made. For us, when it is translated live, we have so much fun playing it because it is fun music to play. I think we all have a level of conviction that didn't exist before, because it belongs to us. That's the driving force behind the whole thing.

For me, releasing it independently, going up against the usual constraints of being an indie label of less money and that kind of stuff, I'll take the knock on effect and the chart positions and the record sales in order to do this, in order to build a reputation as a musician. I think something, we me, always went amiss; people never really realised that I could play the harmonica or play the guitar, all this kind of stuff, because it was overshadowed by other things. It's really important for me to get that across now because I am not in it for the short term.

**Who writes the material?**

Randall and Jake and I write most of the songs. Marcus Bonfanti wrote a couple but pretty much that is it.

Marcus just came out on the road and did our tour and supported us and he comes on every night and plays Joe's part on "This Old World". He plays a bit of harmonica on

"Runaway Train" and stuff. It's like we all belong to the same little ilk. We are all the same breed. We see ourselves as a little unit, or family or something. Because I have cultivated relationships with these people for a long time now, for about ten years we have all known each other, we've got to a point where writing songs together is a really great experience. We all know each other's ins and outs. We just have a really good rapport.

Marcus plays a bit of guitar; he and I play an acoustic, instrumental guitar song. Randall does his bits. There are definitely some pretty good guitar players on it, myself not included. They are all great musicians and I think I would be daft not to use them.

**Who do you have in the rhythm section?**

On the album, it's all Jake Field on piano, who produces as well. The only track that it isn't is Scott Wiber, who is my bass player, his dad, Ralph, who was visiting, is a piano player, so we said to Ralph when he was in the studio, 'Do you want to play on one of the songs?' He totally took pride in it. Just on the last four dates, Ralph was over and he wanted to come on the road and experience it with us but he didn't want to feel like he was a spare part, so I made him Merch Manager. So he sold the merchandise, which was great. Ralph plays on "The Sadness" but everything else is Jake. Craig, my drummer, he's the longest standing member of my band; he's been there for ten years now.

**Was Craig a graduate of LIPA [Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts] too?**

Yes he was.

**I was told that LIPA was set up just to provide the chorus lines for all the West End musicals. But, there you are, you have all come out of LIPA and you are all talented and individual, making fantastic music of your own. I am really happy to see excellent musicians with such talent coming from there.**

Yes, I think it is something that maybe LIPA should recognise a bit more. I'm a big supporter (of LIPA) and I go back a lot. I know the head I really well. I think what we have achieved and just how glued together we are, in the last decade, is pretty amazing. I think they should honour it a little bit more.

**Do they encourage creative writing there?**



Yes, in the music course you take one of three subjects; you either concentrate on being a) a songwriter or composer, b) a performer or c) the recording side of things, sound technology. My path was performance but I did take song writing in the first year.

We were taught by Mark Pearman, who used to be in Sisters of Mercy. He was a great writer, great teacher.

I think I learnt some things from there and I think in a lot of ways it was an introduction to what it might be like more than anything else. There still exists that competitiveness; it's full of people who are going into the entertainment business so everyone is uber confident. I was never like that; I was always the dark, quiet one. (laughing)

**What were you doing before you went to LIPA?**

I joined a band when I was fourteen, a band of older guys. My mum knew the landlord of this pub, down the road from where we lived (in Aberdeen). The band used to rehearse in the back, in the function room. We went in one day, I was in my school uniform, I used to wear a kilt to school, and Derek, the landlord, said, 'You should go through and see the band!' He knew I was a singer. So I went through and they were like, 'What can you do?' I ended up singing "Love Hurts" by Cher (composed by Felice and Boudleaux Bryant) and they were saying, 'Great, when can you start?', so I ended up in this band, The Residents. I was in it for three years. Basically, we played music from their generation not mine. They were all in their forties and fifties. We did a lot of Fleetwood Mac stuff, Roy Orbison, Elvis songs, Van Morrison, The Pretenders, that kind of stuff and it was great.

I played with them every weekend. I got fifteen pounds a night and I got to drink cider when I was fifteen. (laughs) They're still going. In the pub we used to play, it's called The Harbour Bar, there's a whole picture of me, like a dedicated plaque. It's great. The funny thing is it's not like I don't go back there; I go back all the time. People just sit in the bar and go 'Hi Sandi!'

That was where I cut my teeth, if you like. I played keyboards in that band and I played harmonica as well. We did a lot of Fleetwood Mac songs, the later stuff, so there were lots of three part harmonies going on. I think that

influenced my music because a lot of what is on this album and in the live shows there is a lot of harmony going on. That definitely had an influence on me.

**That sounds quite sophisticated for a pub band.**

Yeah! They're good and Nigel the guitar player, he's a Strat man, I always remember his elongated solos; he's great! He's from Oldham and has a great accent. It was really good fun.

I had no illusions about that life because I sat in the back of fish vans and drove to Montrose. We used to gig all around there, places like Sharkey's and all those gigs down there. I lived that life for three years before I went to LIPA; by the time I got there I wasn't under any illusions about touring and being a working musician.

**Did you still go to school?**

I went to school. I did proper subjects as well. I did Math, English, Chemistry, Biology and Physics in my five Highers. I never took Music. To be honest, the music course in my school was crap. It was really frustrating, so I never took it. I said to myself, There's Plan B, which was I would go and do Medicine.

I got a place at St Andrews to do medicine. I am really clumsy as a person and I'm quite glad I didn't become a doctor. I'd be a terrible doctor. I'm really emotional as well. To be honest, they are not very good traits to have on stage either, but I am better on stage.

**To have emotions, is quite important in music, especially blues.**

Exactly! Sometimes it's a blessing and a curse. It's great to be able to tap into that, every night, and be able to put that across. At the same time, you end up by being driven by your emotions and led by your heart, which I very much am and sometimes it gets me into trouble.

**Does that get into your writing as well?**

My intentions are always to be honest because I write better and sing better when I am honest. The second album (*The Pink & The Lily* 2008) was a real shame because there were songs on that album that started up one way and ended up pretty different. It wasn't my doing. That's the unfortunate thing about having so many people involved. One person wanted this and one person wanted that. You're compromised to keep everybody happy. Songs, lyrics, rhythms and beats got changed and vibes; re-mixes by the dozen. So some of the songs in the past haven't been as intended, but this album is

definitely the most honest record.

**Tell us about the songs on *Merchants and Thieves*.**

There are several themes in this album. It's very much autobiographical. I was with Jake for five years and the demise of that relationship, through making this, comes through in a lot of the songs, like "Gold Dust". That is my favourite song on the album because I play lead guitar, which I am really pleased with. That's a song about loss of love and regret, wrong decisions made, mistakes made, broken hearts, people get hurt. You never intend to but somebody ends up with a broken heart. It's saying the older you get, the more you live life, the more you learn how precious things are. You don't know what you've got until it's gone kind of thing. The theme continues in "Ghost Town" that's a song about the idea that every time your heart gets broken, a little piece of it gets left behind and dwells somewhere in this little forgotten place. There's a lot of that going on, that came from the demise of my relationship with Jake.

"Maggie McCall" and "Runaway Train" run under a similar theme. "Maggie McCall" is a made up story about a girl who kills her father and goes on the run. Essentially she is a stowaway and she's a rebel, a convict; she's trying to find something in life. "Runaway Train" is basically, you feel trapped and you want to get out. I think all of these things come back to me in the end you know.

**How do you approach writing a song?**

There is no real formula. The songs that end up more lyrically based, like "Maggie McCall" and "Runaway Train", start with lyrics. The songs that are sparser lyrically and more musically driven or rhythmically driven, like "Runaway Train", they all come from a musical idea. With "Runaway Train", I said, 'I want to write a song that starts off slow and ends up fast!' That was the original impetus but, it didn't work out; it just sounded awful. In the end, we wrote a song that has a half-time section, which really works. That was more about the energy; the line 'runaway train' is not the most inspiring lyric ever written, I'm sure it's been written many times before but it made sense to the music, whereas the songs, which are more lyrical are the ones that start off with stories. "Maggie McCall" is like a campfire song. "Gold Dust" is lot of words. "Ghost Town" was something I started three years ago. It



started off about a relationship I had a long time ago. I finished it and put it on this album. That originally came from a bluegrass song

There's two ways of working with me and I am really lucky finding people who will work like that too, who have that ability. A lot of people like one way or the other. I think it's good because, when you listen to the record, everything does seem to have a little bit of different character and it's because we don't write each song in the same fashion.

**Do you also call the shots when you play live?**

For the first time in five years, we've rehearsed more than we ever have done because I put the emphasis on the time. For six days we sit rehearsing this stuff. That's never happened in the past. I don't think I can say there is any one person in charge of my band. I'm more like the whip cracker. If everybody goes out and has a bit of a drink and come in the next day, or people go, 'I have a fantastic morning, I went to the gym!' so when it comes to doing the gig everyone's so relaxed, everything turns into jazz; I'm like, 'OK boys! I'm the whip cracker.'

When it comes to musical direction, everybody has an equal say. Randall is very vocal. Randall, as a person, likes form; as a guitar player he is like that as well. He's a really good studio player because he is good at parts; everything is very formulaic in his head. He's quite vocal in the group. Scott, my bass player, if anybody is labelled a MD it is him.

I trust everybody's opinions. We just re-mixed a track today and I haven't heard it and it's going to get mastered. Scott's heard it and I'm like, 'He thinks it's good and I'm fine,' because that's what we do and we trust each other.

**Are you working on another album?**

We are actually. I started writing some stuff last week.

**I am impressed that you can tour and write at the same time. I saw the tour schedule!**

It was pretty manic but it was great. It seemed like everybody was really interested and that was a big thing. We didn't have any national TV ads and that kind of stuff, so people taking interest in this album has meant a great deal to me. I was very tired but, at the same time, not only does it matter to me as an artist, it matters to me as a business woman. It has to come back. It's just, 'lets fire on through this and fall across the finish line'.

**From a business point of view, having Joe (Bonmassa) on the album must be a unique selling point.**

Bless him; I don't see him as a selling point. Our collaboration musically was one thing but being a couple is another thing. It's all very surprising, all out of the blue! He and I really got together last year, when he lost his voice. He called me up because we have the same agent, which is handy as well, so he knew I was around. I was writing the record at about the same time. So I went out and replaced him, doing his vocal parts for about a week or so. We supported BB King and did this jazz festival and played with Steve Winwood, all these really awesome things.

I didn't do "Sloe Gin", because he wasn't doing it then, but we did "Further On Up the Road", one, a particular favourite that I sang, was "The Great Flood". That was one song that everybody really loved.

I didn't know "Sloe Gin" was a Tim Curry song\*. I didn't do it because it was a bit too much Joe's (song). It is really funny being Joe's stand-in singer because there's this great mass of long guitar solos. I'm not playing tambourine or anything so I'm just standing there, enjoying the vibe. It's great! That really sparked something and he said, 'I'll play on your record!' That was his way of saying thanks.

It's a great track. It's one of those songs I put everybody as a writer on that track on the album. I don't take full credit for it. It's one of those songs, which was written by a band; it's the feel of it more than anything else. It's not one of those jingle, jangle songwriter songs. I wrote the lyrics on the plane over and Joe and I recorded the vocal parts in LA and he put his guitar parts down there as well. We did it in a studio called Night Bird, which is pretty cool. They recorded Jeff Beck and Bruce Springsteen and stuff there.

That (song)'s very much about better the devil you know than you don't know, stepping into the unknown, into the dark, into the new, which is very relevant to me, both as a career woman and in my personal life as well. It's all very strangely tied up (with that) and it all makes a lot of sense to me.

For me, it's like I turned a corner; that's how I see it. I love this record and I'm really proud of it but I don't think it's the one I'm going to dwell

on. I think there're others, there is a lot more to come. That's why I'm really keen on moving forward and getting the next record out. This new found freedom that I have is great.

It's done two things for me. A lot of the people who have been there from the beginning, who have been Sandi Thom fans from the first record, they are still Sandi Thom fans, which is brilliant. The other thing is there are lots of people who never heard of me, especially doing support slots for Joe, tons of people come up and say they've never heard of me or they are like, 'I'm sure I've heard of you before!' In that respect, I feel like I am a new artist and that's brilliant.

The other thing it's done is I had to do something, which, for my own self-esteem in a lot of ways, I feel like I was wrongly portrayed for a while as a musician. The emphasis wasn't enough on the music, it was more on the person, the story and the hype and this and that. So I've kind of planted roots now, basically said, 'This is my choice in life. This is what I do!'

**Before you go, what dates have you got coming up?**

Well this is my downtime (June). Then we will be coming back to play Glastonbury June 27th, the blues and jazz stage, which I believe is to be called Bourbon Street. We are at Colne on 28th August. Our next UK tour is in September and October; we are at the Jazz Café on 2nd October.

**We will have to go to that!**

**Sandi Thom: Merchants and Thieves**

(Guardian Angel Records)

**Sandi Thom Tour Dates**

22nd July Le Colonnies, FR Pop Sur Bonne, 25th July Isle of Tiree, Tiree Festival; 8th August Pocklington, Pocklington Arts Centre; 21st August Aberdeen, Energy Ball, AECC; 28th August Colne, The Great British Rhythm & Blues Festival; 17th September Swindon, 12th Bar; 18th September Leicester, The Donkey; 19th September Tavistock, The Wharf; 21st September Cardiff, The Globe; 23rd September Poole, Mr. Kypis; 24th September Bury, The Met; 25th September Sheffield, The Boardwalk; 28th September Liverpool, O2 Academy; 1st October Birmingham, The Institute; 2nd October London, Jazz Cafe

\*Michael Kamen & Bob Ezrin wrote "Sloe Gin" for Tim Curry's 1970s album "Read My Lips".