

From Bard to Bastard: Tracey Rimell



I was born into a family of songwriters and music producers, with a published poet for a grandma to boot. It's not a huge surprise then that I ventured down the same path.

My love of music started aged seven, when I learned the classic childhood joy that is primary school recorder. I'm not sure why I enjoyed it so much when my school had a somewhat rigid approach to learning.

In fact, if you forgot to bring your recorder to class, you were made to 'play' a ruler to get the practise in.

And practise was needed; there's nothing like the resounding squawk of a choir of plastic recorders in dissonance with each other. Delightful.

My passion really took off when I joined the school assembly recorder players. An elite group of six who were permitted to sit on a PE bench instead of the floor and play along during morning hymns. A true honour indeed, extended even further when I was promoted to alto recorder. Though I was never able to span a tenor and still cannot comfortably do so to this day, even with a key..

Having discovered the true fun of music, I was desperate to take things further.

I longed to play piano like my best friend and begged my parents to let me. They finally caved in after I resorted to making myself a life-sized imitation keyboard out of an old cardboard box and a magic-marker, and spent at least an hour a day pretending to play this makeshift monstrosity. By the time I reached my teenage years, I had taken piano lessons and started messing about putting pop songs together. My uncle taught me some basic recording skills on an old analogue 8-track. Needless to say the quality was ropey as hell, but it was great fun!

It wasn't until my mid-teens that I decided I wanted to be a professional singer-songwriter. I started doing the audition rounds circa the time that Pop Idol landed on our screens and the industry started shifting toward highly commercial TV music competitions. Audition after audition I was judged, rejected, asked to leave based solely on my appearance, and spent hundreds if not thousands of pounds on travel and accommodation, only to stand in rainy audition queues on the grey heaving streets of London. Slowly but surely my dream turned into a minor nightmare and all the love I had for music drained out of me like old bathwater.

In an attempt to redirect myself, I did an internship with a recording studio in Swansea which did serve to reignite some of my passion. The people there were brilliant and talented and I started to find my joy again. I went on to do a BSc in Music Technology and ended up working in theatre tech as a result. There were many rewarding aspects to this but it was also a huge amount of work. Juggling operational backstage work at one venue while writing and producing music for another, ended up wiping me out to the point that I got totally exhausted. I knew it was too much and something had to give. Sadly it was the music.

For years, music remained a forgotten hobby abandoned in a neglected corner of my subconscious like a distant and dusty memory. My career moved in another direction with theatre becoming the main focus. Years later, that direction would take me to drama school where I met the man who later became my fiancé. After graduation and a stint living in London, the expense and fast pace of the city got the better of us and we wanted a change. We occasionally ventured north to Oxford to visit my partner's family, and I began to fall in love with its architectural and cultural charms. After a couple of years we decided to relocate there.

Moving to a new city where you don't know anybody and your career schedule keeps you from joining any classes or groups, is suffocatingly lonely. I remember days where I sat on benches in town so I could watch passers-by, phoning my mother crying telling her how deeply I needed people and a community.

By that time, my partner had made more social headway thanks to his roots in the area. He started to play at local folk sessions and had joined a madcap folk collective called the Half Moon All Stars (HMAS). I went to watch them play at Cowley's Catweasle Club and I was completely blown away. Not because it was the most polished or rehearsed set, but because the sheer energy and camaraderie was completely intoxicating. I wanted in.

As soon as my schedule allowed, I tagged along to a monthly folk night called The Bastard English Session, where HMAS were notably present and my other half liked to play and make merry. And from that moment on my Oxford existence was changed forever. The room pulsed with music, dancing, singing and even shouting. Players and singers of all levels and abilities. Some sung beautiful tunes, while others played delicate instruments, and some even rapped. Then the room would unite in a sea of raw voices that butchered classic hits and medleyed pop, rock, and sea shanties galore. It didn't matter if you had a beautiful voice. It didn't matter if you were the most talented player. In fact, it didn't even really matter if you could hold a tune. All that counted was that you felt welcome and you had fun. It was the most gleeful and energising atmosphere I'd ever experienced at a music event.

It was this feeling of inclusivity that I didn't know I had been missing. Before long I was hooked and went to every single session, cunningly persuading HMAS to take me under their wing and give me a shot as a harmony singer on the side. I even broke out my recorder once again and found that forgotten thrill of being sat on the PE bench back in assembly.

The raucousness of The Bastard English Session is not everyone's cup of tea, but for me it was where I found my folk family and finally felt part of the community that I had so longed for. It is there that I fell in love with Oxford, met some of my best friends, and reconnected with the pure enjoyment of music for music's sake. I will be forever grateful to that motley gang for their warmth, and hold those early Bastard and HMAS years as some of the most precious in my life to date.

[Find out more about Tracey's music and theatre career at www.traceyrimell.com](http://www.traceyrimell.com)