



Heart and soul

Amanda Griffiths talks to Preston soul singer Stephen Bayliss about work, life and the future

THERE are not many singers who have a street named after them, but Preston's Stephen Bayliss was given the accolade some years ago. In fact, he even beat England cricket hero Andrew Flintoff to the honour. Both are local boys made good from the Ribbleson area of Preston and went to the same school, albeit a decade apart. But at the time the naming ceremony took place Stephen was somewhat better known in the locality than the young Flintoff and so the address became Bayliss Close rather than Flintoff Close.

'I think they chose to use Bayliss 'because I've been around longer,' he smiles. Whatever the reason, it's an incredible achievement for a man who is still chasing that all important record deal.

Stephen is, of course, well known

in Lancashire and sings at charity events, school balls and at venues across the county. He has also toured Britain, and has a large fan base in Southampton, as well as the North West, and has just started performing on cruise ships.

He describes himself as an 'all round entertainer – in the sense that I perform a variety of music'. He is currently in talks to get his new album (of original tracks he's written and available on his website this month) on shop shelves, but in the meantime he is happy with the level of success he is enjoying. He seems laid back about the whole process but he's out there writing, singing and putting a new band together. There's a fine line between confidence and arrogance and Stephen does not cross it.

'I am privileged to be in the

position I'm in and constantly feel lucky,' he says. 'Of course, sometimes I get a bit down that I've been trying to get there for so long (he's been singing for 21 years and trying to get a deal for 15) and still haven't got "worldwide recognition". But in a sense I'm happy I'm still trying and it will happen when the time is right.'

He's critical of manufactured 'reality talent shows' where people become stars overnight. He is no stranger to them however. He appeared in *Star for a Night*, presented by Jane McDonald, and got through to the second round in ITV's *X-Factor*. 'Creators of that kind of show are more interested in ratings and characters that they can take the mick out of,' he says. 'In *X-Factor* for example I was in a group of about five acts and all of them, even a bald headed man with a walking stick got through, but for some reason I didn't. I've been told



I'm too polished but as a performer you know how good you are and whether you're better than so-and-so or not as good as someone else, and it hurts when you don't get picked.

'The whole TV thing did hurt me badly,' he says and so it's a route he doesn't think he'll go down again. And after all, many of the performers who win such shows, have a short shelf life, so perhaps it's better to build a reputation slowly and steadily like Stephen is doing.

Stephen is a Preston lad born and bred, with three brothers and a sister. He grew up in Ribbleton and now lives with girlfriend Jenny, and her daughter Paige, in Whittle-le-Woods. And even though his work takes him all over the country that old saying 'home is where the heart is' seems especially true for this performer who says: 'I love my town – and Preston will always be a town to me, not a city. In fact sometimes I

Stephen sings at charity events, school balls and at venues across the county

think it's more like a big village!

He has been singing since the age of 15. 'I need to sing,' he says, 'and if I could I'd do it for nothing.'

He began by singing backing vocals with his uncle's band Eye to Eye. 'My first "gig" was in "Manhattan's" in Barrow-in-Furness,' he says. 'I had no equipment and sellotaped a microphone to a symbol stand,' he explains. 'That was the first time I'd experienced real nerves and I still get that nervous feeling whenever I perform today. It doesn't matter how big or small the audience is.'

Working with other bands and numerous gigs followed including one where 'I performed about eight songs where I was making the lyrics up as I went along.'

During these early days he also had a 'day job' in local shops, but his first big break came when he was offered the chance to be Cliff Richard's backing singer. 'A producer called Martin Abbott rang me to ask me if I fancied a few gigs. I said, "of course, where?" He said "Wembley, the NEC etc". That was the first time I really saw some money from

Below:
Bayliss Close,
Ribbleton



Left: At one of many social engagements

performing.

I suddenly thought "I'm being paid for doing something I love."

Back in Preston after his tour with Cliff he formed the band Hothead, who developed a big following at universities and had some radio coverage. A cabaret duo then followed until after about a year Stephen decided to go solo, and he hasn't looked back since. 'I'm still as busy now as I was then.'

Known by many as a soul singer, Stephen actually performs a wide variety of songs including work by Bobby Darren, Nat King Cole and Van Morrison as well as his own compositions. His all time hero, and inspiration was Luther Vandross

who died recently.

'He had a beautiful natural voice, he moved me many times but I never got to see him live before he died. There are so many of his songs that I loved, including 'Searching' and 'The Night I Fell In Love'.

But what would he have done if singing for a living had not been a viable option? 'Just before I started I was asked what I wanted to do and I said I wanted to be either a singer or a salesman. In some respects I guess I'm both as every time I'm performing I'm selling my voice.'

For more information, performance diary or to buy Stephen's new album see www.stephenbayliss.co.uk. ■