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A LONG WAY *From Amarillo*

Still touring and wowing audiences
after a diagnosis of dementia
Tony Christie talks to Fergus Byrne



If you've got it, don't be ashamed of it says singer Tony Christie about his diagnosis of dementia. 'Get to the doctors and get on the tablets quickly' is his advice. Now 81 years old, the British singer who had three hits in a row in 1971 with *Las Vegas*, *I Did what I Did for Maria* and (*Is This the Way to*) *Amarillo* is determined not to hide from his diagnosis, which he received exactly 50 years later in 2021. Since the diagnosis, he has become an ambassador for the *Music for Dementia* charity and, alongside Sting, recorded Andrew Gold's *Thank You For Being A Friend* to support the charity's Thank You Day.

But what may surprise many is that at 81 whilst dealing with dementia, Tony is still touring and putting on memorable concerts for fans of all ages. 'It's constant, I never stop' he laughs when I speak to him and his son Sean about the current tour entitled *Tony Christie, A Life of Music Celebrating 80 Years*. He is also somewhat surprised that he's reaching a 'full audience of mixed ages' saying, 'It's fantastic, but a bit shocking at times. You see these young kids in the audience singing along, knowing all the words.'

Fronting a six-piece band along with backing singers, Tony says his singing is still strong. 'This thing hasn't affected my voice at all' he tells me. 'People are saying I'm singing better than ever.' One of the bonuses that fans have mentioned is the fact that since so many of his songs are stories, the fact that he doesn't try to reach certain high notes adds a new dimension to the performance. 'There's more emotion in what I'm doing now because I don't have to shout the high notes.'

Tony was surrounded by music from a young age. His Irish grandparents were in a ceilidh band 'My grandmother played the fiddle, and my grandfather played the Squeezebox, and then my father was a piano player. Also, on the English side of the family he says 'there were some good voices, good singers.'

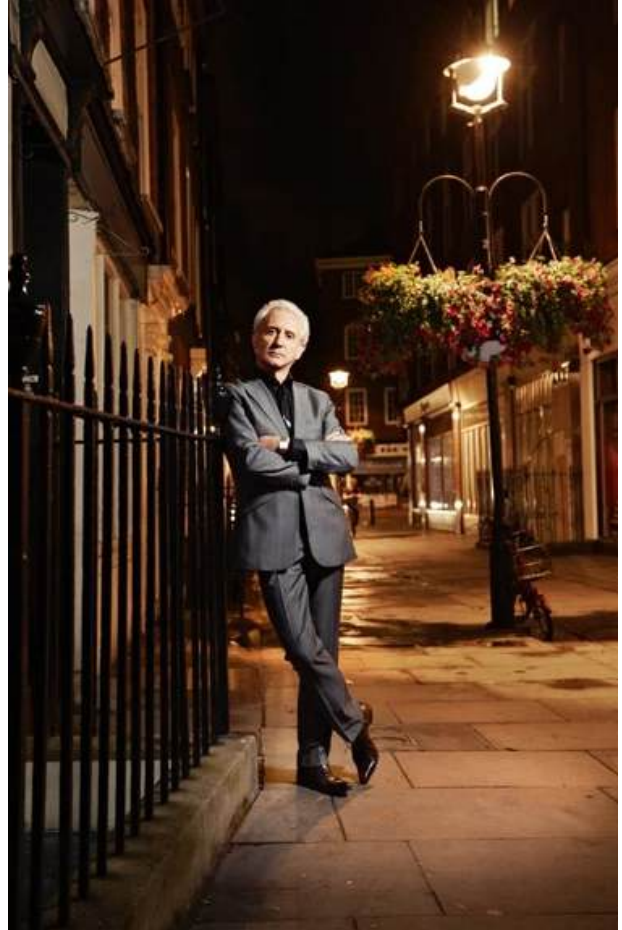
He started from an early age. 'I started singing when I was five or six years old' he says. When his grandparents would come over to visit, he remembers standing on a little stool to sing for them. In school the music teacher sent him to sit at the front of the class saying, "Go up to the front, because you can sing!"

The talent began to offer benefits early on. He remembers how he and his friend Dave would sing together while walking home from school. They graduated to becoming a club act singing Everley Brothers songs. He remembers how Dave's Mum went to a Glee Club and would invite them to come along and sing a few songs. 'We agreed to do it because we were about 16 years old at the time and they used to go all over the place, do these shows. And we went with them. And on the way back, they all stopped at a pub. So, we were in the pub drinking beer, my mate and I at 16 years old!'

As his own career took off, he signed with a manager called Harvey Lisberg who also managed Herman's Hermits and Neil Sedaka at the time. Lisberg brought a tape of Tony's singing to Neil Sedaka who played him the rough outline of (*Is This the Way to*) *Amarillo*. Lisberg liked it but Sedaka said it wasn't finished as he hadn't written lyrics for the part that went "Sha La La, La La, La La La". Which, as Tony laughingly remembers, 'was the bloody hit part!' The song followed *Las Vegas* and *I Did What I Did for Maria* and was a hit in the UK and Number 1 in Belgium and Germany, also reaching Number 2 in the New Zealand charts at the time.

Tony's career carried on throughout the 80s and 90s with a huge European following and (*Is This the Way to*) *Amarillo* hit the British charts again in 2005 when comedian Peter Kay mimed the song in a video to support Comic Relief and Children in Need. While Kay mimed, a backdrop featured Tony singing, as well as Brian May, Roger Taylor and Michael Parkinson amongst a vast supporting cast. He has also been recording a new album in Nashville which is due out in March 2025. The album covers many of his hits including what he describes as a 'gospel' sounding version of (*Is This the Way to*) *Amarillo*.

Tony Christie has collaborated and sung with a raft of different artists from Shirley Bassey to Nile Rodgers. It's more people than he can remember, and as he points out with a laugh, that's not just caused



Tony Christie will be in Yeovil in September

by dementia. 'I'm 81 you know!' With his cover of *Thank you for Being a Friend* with Sting now in the encores for his live shows, his support and openness about his condition are a credit to his resilience and determination to make something positive out of it. Talking about how he wants people to act now and not fear the condition he says, 'Nobody should be ashamed. I admitted it three years ago, but I wasn't ashamed of it. They put me straight away onto very strong tablets, which I'm on still which has kept it down. It hasn't gotten any worse.'

Talking about his support of Music for Dementia and the Thank you Day that he recorded the song for, he also highlights the 'unseen carers' who are supporting loved ones and friends: "I am living proof of the power of music on people living with dementia and I fully support the Music for Dementia campaign and its work with Thank You Day. It is so special that this country has been gifted a day that connects communities with this incredible celebration of people and music."

Whilst Tony is convinced that a cure is a matter of a few years away, he reserves his most poignant comment for the end of our conversation. With the astute timing and magical twinkle of the great Northern comedians he says: "Treat it like you've got a bit of flu. And it'll go away eventually."

Tony Christie will be performing at Westlands in Yeovil on the 5th September 2024 (7.30pm). For tickets and more information visit <https://www.westlandseyovil.co.uk/whats-on/#top>.