

# THE PROG

## INTERVIEW

# SALLY OLDFIELD

Every month we get inside the mind of one of the biggest names in music. This issue it's **Sally Oldfield**. The Irish-born singer-songwriter has enjoyed a lengthy career both as a solo artist and with folk duo The Sallyangie. She's not only contributed to albums by her brothers Mike and Terry, but also sung with Steve Hackett and The Moody Blues' Justin Hayward. Although her last official studio album was released in the late 90s, her back catalogue is currently being reissued and recent reworkings of her old material have brought her work to new audiences around the world. Here, she discusses being born into a talented family, her inspiration and collaborations, and whether she'll ever release another studio album.

**Words:** Chris Wheatley

**B**orn in 1947, in Dublin, Ireland, Sally Oldfield is the eldest of three gifted siblings, all of whom have contributed much to the world of progressive music. Alongside brothers Mike and Terry Oldfield, she grew up in a musical family, studied piano from a young age, and developed a passion for singing and playing. When the family relocated to England, Sally attended Bristol University to pursue an academic career in writing and poetry. Following an extraordinary spiritual epiphany, she abandoned her studies, hitchhiked to London and, within a very short space of time, secured a record contract as the folk duo The Sallyangie.

A deeply sensitive soul, perhaps not entirely suited to the brusqueness of the record industry, Sally has nevertheless been driven by a singular confidence and vision. Her music is fuelled by an intrinsic respect for nature and a deep sense of universal connection. Prized by collectors of English psych-folk, The Sallyangie's *Children Of The*

*Sun*, which also marked the first appearance on record of brother Mike, came in the final year of the 1960s, and served as a fitting coda to the ending of a singular period in music history.

Since then, Sally has released solo albums under her own name across five decades and has leant her considerable talents and distinctive voice to projects by siblings Mike (notably *Tubular Bells*, *Incantations* and *Ommadawn*)



BRIAN SHUELL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

Posed portrait of The Sallyangie, Mike and Sally Oldfield, for *Children Of The Sun*.

and Terry (*Star Of Heaven*), as well as Steve Hackett and others. Her solo debut, *Water Bearer* (1978), recently reissued via Magic Of Vinyl, and its hit single, *Mirrors*, cemented Sally's reputation as a purveyor of enduring folk prog, although the singer-songwriter has explored many different avenues across the years.

In 1983, Sally worked with the then up-and-coming producer and composer, Hans Zimmer, on her acclaimed record, *Strange Day In Berlin*. There followed another relocation, this time to Germany, where she enjoyed a long run of success, including a memorable duet with Justin Hayward. Now based in the Bahamas, Sally talks openly and with passion about her singular musical journey,

her experience of working with Mike on his groundbreaking 70s albums, the other incredible musicians she's collaborated with, and the theme of nature, which is indelibly linked to her music.

### Where does the Oldfield talent come from?

My paternal grandmother was a brilliant pianist. My father had a wonderful singing voice. My mother was tone deaf, but she did love music and, whenever she

“ I was visiting Mike and Steve Hackett was living nearby. He dropped in and he heard something that I was singing, and he gave me a copy of his track, *Shadow Of The Hierophant*. ”

could, would put *Madama Butterfly* or any kind of opera on the record player. So we grew up with a lot of music in the background. As children, neither Terry nor I really ever envisaged a career in music or ever thought about taking it up seriously. But that was in stark contrast to Mike, who was just born to play music and did so from early childhood.

### How did you make that transition from hobby to full-time career?

I went to school with Marianne Faithfull. We were in the same class, and we gravitated together because we both passionately loved literature and poetry. She and I used to go down to the River Thames and sing folk songs. By that time I'd learned to play the guitar, but it was still a hobby. When I went to Bristol University, the hobby continued. The Bristol Troubadour folk club was

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Sally Oldfield: nature lover  
and naturally gifted.

a hive of activity in the 60s, and you had these wonderful guest artists like Bert Jansch and John Renbourn. Quite a wonderful place. Bert Jansch, particularly, was a favourite of mine, and also of Mike's; Mike used to copy Jansch's guitar pieces, which are pretty complex. Jansch had this particular piece called *Angie*, and that was the inspiration for the name for The Sallyangie.

But you're asking how I made the transition? I had a quite a powerful, what I can only call a spiritual experience. I went for a walk one afternoon, when the sun was setting down by the sea

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near Bristol on the west coast, I think it was near Portishead, and it just came out of the blue. I wasn't into any kind of religion, but I've always had a strong spiritual sense, and this just really exploded into being on that afternoon. It was February 1968. I remember it vividly. It was like being absorbed into this infinite golden light. There was nothing but this golden light and it was just so overwhelming. When I got back to my flat, I picked up my guitar, and the songs just poured out. It was incredible. Ever since then, I've been in kind of reverse engineering, studying all kinds of

BRIAN SHUELL/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES



different spiritual paths in order to understand that experience.

**You formed The Sallyangie that same year, with Mike, and released *Children Of The Sun*?**

Yes. My father wasn't too pleased, because I left university before completing my finals. I was in such a clear-headed state of mind that I felt that there was nothing I couldn't do. I packed up my stuff and told my friends, "I'm going to London, I'm going to get a record deal." I hitched a lift into London. A short time later I got a deal with Transatlantic. I introduced them to Mike, because he was such a wonderful guitar player. That's how the duo was born.

Some of the songs we wrote together, some of them were my songs, some of them were Mike's guitar pieces. We did all the preparation very quickly, in our family home in Harold Wood. And then we recorded it over just two days. We had just two days in the studio, at Sound Techniques, in Chelsea. When we got the contract, because Mike was still only 15, it had to be signed by our parents. We got a whopping advance of £25 each. At that time, that was a lot of money.

**The Sallyangie didn't last very long, did it?**

Only about a year, before Mike went his own way. I didn't quite know what to do after that, except that I knew I was going to carry on writing songs and music was going to be my life. I spent the next few years developing my own style and my songwriting. I entered a sort of dark period in a way. I was working in bars and occasional folk clubs, just wondering what on earth to do, and exploring spiritual paths as well.

**During that time you worked on many of Mike's records...**

The first time I heard the demo of *Tubular Bells*, I was visiting him at our family home. I was wandering round the garden and heard this cascade of extraordinary music coming from Mike's bedroom window – beautiful, rippling music such as I had never heard before. I rushed upstairs to ask him who the music was by and was astonished when he told me it was his own. Up until that moment, I had only ever heard him play his guitar pieces. I was totally gobsmacked when he told me it was all played by himself –

keyboards, synthesisers, bass guitar, all kinds of acoustic and electric guitars.

I was overwhelmed by the sudden recognition that I had an enormously talented brother, who moreover had never had a music lesson in his life!

**What are your memories of working on that album?**

Mike told me he'd presented his demo to most of the major record labels and had been turned down by all of them. Then, on a spring morning in 1973, I received a call

do. Mike always knew exactly what he wanted, so Mundy and I followed his direction as closely as we could.

**And then came your solo debut, *Water Bearer*?**

Yes. I'd had five years of writing and experimenting with my own music. It was a wonderful kind of incubation time for the album, which I've never been able to have since, unfortunately.

I had a lot of song ideas. I was visiting Mike at the time. He was taking a break, and he offered me the use of his beautiful studio.



The Sallyangie's sole release, *Children Of The Sun*.

Sally: the eldest of three incredibly talented siblings.



from him asking me to come and sing on the album he was recording at The Manor Studio.

It was a magical experience. All the staff were fascinated and very supportive of Mike's music; they sat huddled around the mixing desk, night after night, on hippie floor cushions as Mike worked with Tom Newman on the recording. I sang the part at the end of side one with Mundy Ellis, a friend of Tom's, and we worked together to create a cross between an "angelic choir" and a "girlie chorus", which was great fun to

I had a week, and I managed to put down a demo of the song *Water Bearer*. I spent from New Year 1978, right up until November, traipsing around all these record labels. They all said no. At that time, the whole magical spiritual era of the 60s and 70s was really coming to an end. It was the dawn of the Sex Pistols, glam rock, and I was a bit late for the news with my ethereal Tolkienesque demo, so I didn't get any interest.

Then, in November, I had an appointment with Island Records. I said to myself, "Right, if they

Is new music afoot? With The Sallyangie in the studio in the late 60s.

say no, I'm going to give up music and get a proper job, because this is too stressful." I was sitting in the waiting room, and out came this record executive called Howard Thompson. I'll never forget him. He looked like a punk rocker, with safety pins all over him, and I thought: "He'll never like *Water Bearer*, forget it." But we put the cassette on, and he said, "Oh, this is amazing, I'd really like to sign you, but I'm about to move to Bronze Records. So I can either sign you to Island before I leave, or you can come with me to Bronze." I just said, "Wherever you're going, I'll go with you."

**How much creative control did you have?**

I was very much in control. The engineer [Ashley Howe] got co-producing credits on it, but that was really from a technical point of view. I played a lot of the synthesisers and tuned percussion. I had a few really

great musicians, like Frank Ricotti, who played vibraphone, marimba and all kinds of percussion. And I had Herbie Flowers, who used to play with Sky [and T.Rex] on bass. He was a wonderful, very eccentric, lovely guy. They would take what I'd written and then play it much better than I could. So it was a great team effort.

An important influence in the making of *Water Bearer* was Tolkien's *The Lord Of The Rings*. I loved to read all the Tolkien books over and over; I particularly loved the elven lore and the beautiful elven language – all of this deeply resonated with my soul. I was inspired to write lyrics as if they were written by the elves themselves – the song cycle *Songs Of The Quendi* is the best example of this. *Water Bearer* is the only album I ever created that is seamless in its composition, with linking musical bridges that thematically

connect each standalone song. My one regret is that I never made more of these!

**The single from that album, *Mirrors*, was a big hit...**

In July, Bronze Records said, "We're releasing *Water Bearer* in September, but we need a single. Could you go and write a single, preferably a hit?" So I got into my car and I drove down to where I was living in Hereford. It's a long drive. Just as I was approaching Membury service station, on the M4, I got the hook of the song in my mind. I pulled into the service station and wrote down the lyrics, and when I got back, I went into my demo studio to put it down. When I played it to the record company, they thought it was great. So I called Herbie Flowers and Frank Ricotti and said, "Can you come in and record a single?" They were the only two other musicians on *Mirrors*. It became Dave Lee Travis' Record Of The

Week [on Radio 1]. I was in my garden and I got a phone call with the news. I couldn't believe it. That sort of launched my singing career really, as a solo artist.

**How did your relocation to Germany come about?**

Bronze Records went bankrupt in the mid-80s, just after I'd released my final album for them,

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[Bert] Jansch had this particular piece called *Angie*, and that was the inspiration for the name for *The Sallyangie*.

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which was *Strange Day In Berlin*. I was selling a lot of records in Germany and I got a really good offer from Ariola in Munich. I thought, well, why not? I had family connections in Germany, so I relocated, and I think it was the most enjoyable part of my career. The sad thing is that the relationship between the German record industry and the British record industry didn't seem that great, because if you recorded in Germany, you didn't get released in England. So the albums that I made with my new German record label never got released in England.

**You worked with Hans Zimmer on *Strange Day In Berlin*, didn't you?**

Yes, that was lovely. That was quite a long time before he went to Hollywood. He was wonderfully eccentric, and he was passionate about music: very charming and very... un-neurotic is the only way I can describe him. He went bananas on *Strange Day In Berlin*. I'm not completely sure that it was the right arrangement for that particular song, but we had a great time doing it.



Sally in 1972, a few months before she sang on *Tubular Bells*.

ANU/SHUTTERS TOCK

Waxing lyrical: from the shoot for *Secret Songs*.



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**Can you tell us about your songwriting process?**

It's very much a mood; I get this sort of feeling that a song wants to be written. What I normally do is, I'll switch on the mic, I'll be sitting there with my keyboard, and I'll just let loose with wherever the mood takes me. There's always a phrase or a piece of a melody or a chord change that forms the basis of the song. Sometimes if I'm stuck with a lyric, a kind of strange, unknown language comes through. It feels to me as if that's the only way I can express what I want to say – in this strange, made-up language. I don't know if it's Celtic or some other ancient language, but it always seems to fit the song, rather than trying to do proper English lyrics. So that's the modus operandi of how I write songs – they're very much based on mood or theme.

**You collaborated with Steve Hackett on *Voyage Of The Acolyte*. How was that?**

Yes. That was quite a while before *Water Bearer*. I was visiting Mike

at the time and Steve Hackett was living nearby. He dropped in and he heard something that I was singing, and he gave me a copy of his track, *Shadow Of The Hierophant*. I thought it had a lovely mood, a little bit *Dark Side Of The Moon*. There's a kind of ethereal, almost classical, singing voice and it's fascinating. So I tried to draw on my classical training to get that sound. We went down to his studio. It was great fun recording that and I'm very heartened that it's become very popular.



1983's *Strange Day In Berlin*.

**How did your recording with Justin Hayward come about?**

That was during my time in Germany. I was working with the songwriting team of Gunther Mende and Candy DeRouge, the writers of the big

Jennifer Rush hit, *The Power Of Love*. I was sent a demo of a really nice song called *Let It Begin*. Somebody suggested, "Oh, you'd sound really good with Justin Hayward." Justin was up for it, and so we got together. He wasn't free to be in the studio when

I recorded the vocals, so I didn't meet him at that time, but then we met on the set of a TV show when we did a promotional performance. He was really nice. He told me all about his horses and I told him about my meditation process. And I think I spent some time teaching him how to meditate. The single got a lot of radio play. It was a real honour to work with somebody like him.

**Has the theme of nature always been central to your music?**

Oh, absolutely. My first experience of the power of nature was my first heartbreak. I was about 14 years old, I had a crush on this boy and it all went horribly wrong. I remember going for a walk in the woods, and there was this beautiful stream. I could literally hear music in the bubbling of that stream. It was immensely consoling, and I felt that there were voices in nature. Hearing the voices of nature is something which has gradually grown and grown throughout my life. One

song in particular, on an album I did in 1996 called *Secret Songs*, the title track is very much about my love for nature, hearing the voice of nature. It's about finding the divine, if you like, or spirit or God. It's just everywhere in nature.

**Is music still involved in your day-to-day life?**

My last real mainstream album was *Secret Songs* and it was around that time that, unfortunately, I became quite ill with chronic fatigue syndrome. So that was a wake-up call. And I think I realised that I wasn't really cut out for the music business. To be successful, you've got

to get out there and promote yourself. I kind of made the decision that it wasn't really for me, but I still love to sing. I'm not saying I will never ever release another album. ☺



1996's *Secret Songs*.

*The vinyl reissue of *Water Bearer* is out now via *Magic Of Vinyl*. See [www.sallyoldfield.com](http://www.sallyoldfield.com) for more information.*