

music

'You don't get miserable listening to a miserable song,' says rock 'n' roll doctor turned Brit country legend Hank Wangford to Gemma Peplow

The Week is on the phone to Hank Wangford, who could well be naked at the other end of the line. We're not sure. Because, among many, many other things, Hank is president of the Nude Mountaineering Society. "But I don't go to the shops with no clothes on," he assures us.

"It's usually when there's no one around. When I'm up mountains I'll take my clothes off as I'm looking out at the world.

"The first time I did it was in South America, and it was fantastic and exhilarating and mad. Now I've done it up mountains in Scotland, Romania, the Appalachians, all over. It's wonderful. And swimming with nothing on is brilliant. But I'm not really a nudist."

Hank has written about his passion for high-altitude nudity in The Guardian, along with many other travel articles that have nothing to do with getting your kit off. Just travel for travel's sake.

Writing is another string to his bow (he's also a doctor, who still runs regular sexual health clinics – "although not this week because I'm on tour" – but today we're here to talk about music. Specifically, country music.

"Hank Wangford is the twisted Godfather of the British alternative country music scene," says the blurb. "If Daniel O'Donnell is the brightly scrubbed face of British country music, then Hank is its guilty conscience."

ADVANTAGES

Through his own music, as well as books and TV shows released over the past 20-odd years, Hank has been doing his best to show country music is not all about rhinestone cowboys.

"I like playing to people who don't like country," he says. "I like to convert."

It was Gram Parsons who converted Hank, he says. "He turned me on to country. I was his doctor. When I met Gram I was kind of a rock 'n' roll doctor in the early 70s. I was looking after Keith Richard's son at the time. They have some great stories.

"You know, one of the advantages of living for a long time is you have a long time to do things. I saw James Brown in 1963 when he was really in his pomp. There are advantages to being old."

Hank is in his 70s and says he has no plans to slow down just yet.

"I am one of those lucky people in that I do things I enjoy," he said. "I love medicine, I really like travelling and I like writing about it, and I love country music. I've not got the kind of job where I think about retiring."

Returning to his love of country, Hank says it's the sad songs, the stories, that he gets the most out of.

He said: "I want people to know that you don't get miserable listening to a miserable song – I don't get miserable singing a sad song. They're therapeutic, they make you feel better. There is a bit of a smile round the corner of the mouth as well."

Sad songs are good for you



You can see Hank Wangford and the Lost Cowboys for yourself at O2 Academy Leicester tomorrow. Hank has played hundreds of gigs over the years, but says he has an affinity for Leicester.

"There have been two small gigs which I've done a few times," he said. "The Musician, first of all, which is a lovely little gig. It's really done with care by Darren Knockles, who runs the place. I like it when people go that far to make somewhere nice.

"Then there's The Donkey. We packed it there. There's always a great atmosphere. I like both places. Both of them have a good audience and people who like to listen. Plus, The Donkey is next to a Chinese called Big Wang, which attracts me, obviously."

Hank Wangford, in case you hadn't guessed, is not the name he was born with. His partner, the "woman of his dreams," he tells us, would know him by the name Sam Hutt, "although she does sometimes call me Hanky".

The alter-ego was born after a girlfriend left him for his flatmate when he was younger.

"It came from a village called Wangford," he said. "I was in Wangford in a pub and feeling sorry for myself. And I just thought 'Hank Wangford, what a great name'.

"A month later, I went on stage as Hank Wangford and that was it. I'm pretty much Hank myself anyway but Hank does things... I don't know. Does David Furnish call Elton Reg? I would guess he probably calls him Elton."

FULL BAND

Hank it is, then. It will be Hank the performer you see if you go to the show tomorrow.

He said: "I do small tours and I do notice as time goes by, it's like, 'Oh, he's still playing.' For the past eight or nine years I've been doing something called the Rural Arts Touring Scheme, playing in village halls all over the country. Fantastic. I've been to every single county in this country and I've been having a great time. I've been all around Leicestershire, to Quorn and a few villages round Melton and Market Harborough, as well.

"It's funny, you play villages a few miles apart and they don't speak to each other. It's like, 'don't mention the neighbouring villages'.

"Anyway, I'm touring all the time but in a less noticeable way. These shows will be different. This is the full band and the band is really good. We've got Martin Belmont on lead guitar. He's a classic rock guitarist. On pedal steel we've got BJ Cole, the king of the pedal steel players in this country. We've got a singer called Anna Robinson playing bass and she does beautiful harmonies. It's a good show."

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HANK WANGFORD AND THE LOST COWBOYS play Waltzing with Wangford at O2 Academy Leicester tomorrow.

www.o2academyleicester.co.uk