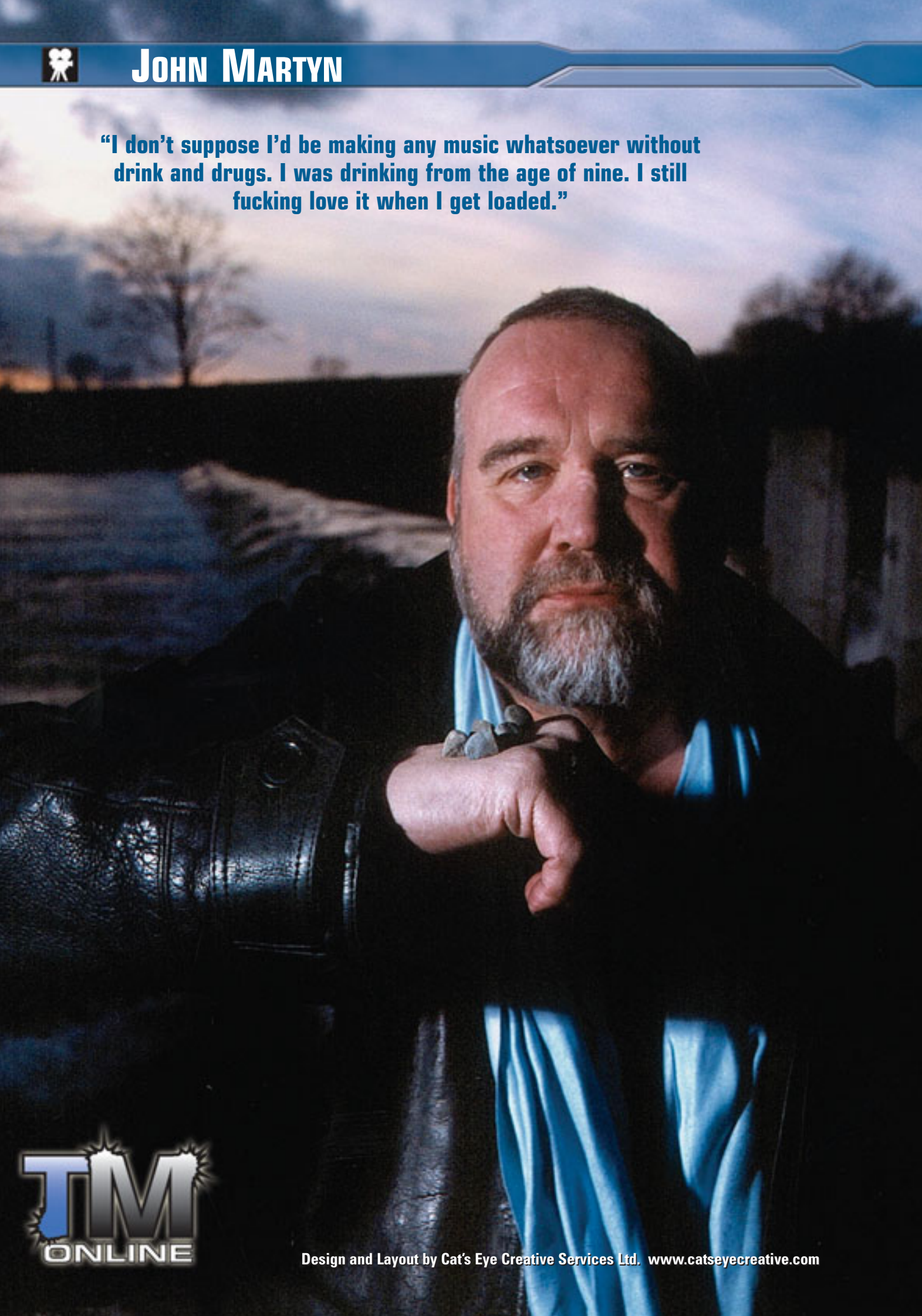




“I don’t suppose I’d be making any music whatsoever without drink and drugs. I was drinking from the age of nine. I still fucking love it when I get loaded.”



Grace & Danger

It has been a long, hard journey, but somehow – despite chronic health problems, a penchant for over-indulgence and the whims of the music industry – John Martyn has survived. Back with his first album for four years, the great man takes Jonathan Wingate through the past darkly, down the road to ruin and back again...

Although John Martyn started out as a folk singer, it wasn't long before he had outgrown the incestuous singer-songwriter scene and introduced a unique blend of blues, dub, jazz, rock and funk into his music. At 19, he recorded his debut album, *London Conversation* for £150 and became the first white solo singer to sign for Island Records.

“Making *London Conversation* meant absolutely sweet fuck all to me,” Martyn mumbles between mouthfuls of red wine, slouched in a large leather armchair at his house in Thomastown, Kilkenny. “I think it took about two days to record. It didn't get any reaction whatsoever, so I went in to see Blackwell and said: Why is it not selling? And he replied: ‘I don't want to record you anymore, but I'd like your publishing.’ I said don't be silly, ‘cos nobody gives a toss, and nobody will hear from me again.”

“The folk scene was very incestuous,” he continues. “Everyone was kind to each other. No matter how bad you were. ‘Can you sing? No? Never mind.’ You'd buy ‘em a drink anyway. The scene was stifling, because we all placed C, F and G with E minor or A minor. That was cool, but eventually, you have to move away from there.”

DAVEY GRAHAM

John Martyn was actually born Iain David McGeachy on 11th September 1948 in New Malden, Surrey. He was the only son of two light opera singers who separated when Martyn was still a young child. He stayed with family and grew up in Glasgow within earshot of the Hampden roar.

“My family didn't listen to much music, because we all played,” he recalls. “When I was 14, I copped Joan Baez singing *The Silver Dagger*. Then I copped Davey Graham, which just blew me straight away. I begged my daddy to buy me a guitar, although he actually made me pay for it, ‘cos we weren't too rich. I had a paper round and a milk round, so I saved up the money. I was so keen, it was silly. I used to run all the way home from school at lunch and just tootle about on my guitar.”

In the summer of 1969 John Martyn was hired to play for an up and coming singer from Coventry called Beverley Kutner. Within a matter of months, they were married. The duo travelled to America to record two albums together, *Stormbringer* and *Road To Ruin*.

“Suddenly, we were in Woodstock, surrounded by all these Americans, swinging like bitches,” he beams. “We were playing with The Band – Levon Helm... I've forgotten the rest. *Stormbringer* was a step forward, but I'm not so sure about *Road To Ruin*, although it was cool because I got to

“I was very sore making this record, up to my arsehole in painkillers. I can't actually remember it much. I could have done it better if my leg hadn't been dropping off.”

play with my friends like Danny Thompson.

“Danny and I were like brothers. He plays very cool bass, man. When we were playing right, it was beautiful. But we were both a bit vicious. Danny used to give hotel managers 50 quid and go: ‘There, that's for the damage.’ What damage? ‘There fucking will be,’” John Martyn laughs like a blocked drain. “Of all the people I've met, Danny was probably the sweetest.”

Would you say your hedonistic lifestyle has helped you creatively? “It's self-evident, is it not,” he says. “I don't suppose I'd be making any music whatsoever without drink and drugs. I was drinking from the age of nine. I still fucking love it when I get loaded.”

ECHOPLEX

Between 1971 – 1981, John Martyn recorded an astonishing run of pioneering albums including *Bless The Weather*, *Solid Air*, *Sunday's Child*, *One World*, *Grace and Danger* and *Solid Air*, which most Martyn aficionados consider to be Martyn at the peak of his considerable powers. “*Solid Air* didn't change anything, because by then, I was there,” he insists. “It sold more, though. You're talking about 30 years ago, mate. In hindsight, it don't make no fucking difference whether it's true or it ain't true.

It's all water under the bridge. Gone – not forgotten, but gone.”

Although he had first used the Echoplex effects unit on his guitar back in 1969, it didn't really become a feature of Martyn's music until 1971's *Bless The Weather*.

“The Echoplex definitely changed my career, and was very important in developing my sound. It really did take a jump. People hadn't heard it before. I couldn't find a way to get that sustain and make myself sound like a saxophonist. It put the back beat on it, which I invented... thank you very much.”

Were you trying to sing like John

Coltrane or Charlie Parker played?

“Nah,” he chuckles, chugging back his glass of wine, “I'm good enough, but I ain't that cool. I never really made any cool moves or conscious career decisions.”

ESSENTIAL POWER

Martyn has just made his twenty-second studio album, *On The Cobbles*, which features a guest list including Paul Weller, Mavis Staples and ex-Verve guitarist Nick McCabe. It's a fine album, although Martyn seems distinctly unenthusiastic about it, perhaps because he recorded it just before he had his right leg amputated below the knee.

“I was very sore making this record, up to my arsehole in painkillers. I can't actually remember it much. I could have done it better if my leg hadn't been dropping off. Seriously, if you've got septicaemia going through your body, you do not feel too fucking cool.”

What does music mean to John Martyn? “If you love music, then the music will come through you. It's nothing to do with physical chemistry between people. The music will overpower you, and must do. That's the thing,” he screams, downing another glass of red and slamming it on the table. “The music is the driving force. That's more important than any personality or any thought. It really is just the power of the fucking music, man. I don't give a damn what anyone else says. Essential power – that's what music is.”

On The Cobbles is out now on Independent

