



TUNING BACK IN  
Alex  
McEwan

## 7 QUESTIONS

...with singer-songwriter Alex McEwan

Twenty years ago Scottish musician Alex McEwan released debut album *Beautiful Lies*. Now he's back with the brilliant *A World We Know*, mixing Americana, country and folk. Here, Alex discusses the inspiration behind it...

### Where did the idea for your new album come from?

I wanted to capture the spirit of the times. I had a song already which had this title and so I thought it was really relevant to what was happening whilst recording in lockdown. So there is the nostalgic view of looking back and yearning for better times, in a world where we don't know what's coming next. However, I also like to be optimistic and there is the positive side also. The album cover reflects this with a beautiful image looking down from a mountain into countryside. **You suffered a difficult time after the death of your mother and grandmother – how did this experience shape your writing?**

I grew up in Glasgow and the death of my mum and gran, a few months apart, was a real shock, particularly since my mother wasn't that old. I turned to writing to comfort me, my guitar became my 'friend', then I was drawn to the bright lights of London. So busking was a great way to work on my singing and practise my songs. Busking on the Underground, I met Puff Daddy's personal assistant. He invited me to a showcase, which helped me to get an independent deal.

### Your music crosses Americana, folk and country – where did your love for these genres come from?

Growing up in Glasgow, my mother was a huge country fan, always playing Johnny Cash, Dolly Parton, Kenny Rogers and Glen Campbell. It influenced my own love of

contemporary country music, leading to me visiting Nashville.

### You've had multiple careers – engineer, teacher, banker. Which did you enjoy most?

There were elements of all of these jobs I enjoyed. As a teacher, there was good 'crack' with pupils, particularly when they found out I was a musician. As an engineer, there were some interesting times. And I got to travel to New York and Hong Kong business-class with my banking job. But they have never fulfilled me in the same way as writing and performing my own songs.

### Which song on the new album means the most?

Hold Your Hands Out To Me. It was written in lockdown. I hadn't been home for a few years and was sitting down at the kitchen table in my little cottage with my guitar, reflecting on growing up on the west coast of Scotland. I had a real palpable sense of longing, fond memories, sadness over the loss of my parents and some regret for mistakes I'd made as a younger guy. The fictional Glasgow woman in the song is telling me to go easy on myself. So I guess this song triggers strong emotions.

### You recently played with The Shires at Kelvingrove Park. What's it like to play to a home crowd?

It was great – the audience was so positive and supporting a class act like the Shires was a privilege.

### What would you like to achieve by the end of 2023 and beyond?

I'd like to have some tangible success with album sales, which translates to decent-sized live audiences. Longer term, I want to build on this with another album, play festivals and enjoy creating music I love, which hopefully leads to more fans and a long-term career, ultimately filling 1000+ venues and, dare I say it, some album chart success.



FRIENDSHIP  
Ebla Mari and  
Dave Turner  
play refugee  
Yara and pub  
landlord TJ

# It's a message of hope.. a message of humanity

**Ken Loach's final film, *The Old Oak*, has all the definitive qualities the filmmaker is known for.**

He has never skirted thorny issues. His films ask questions and question assumptions, the lens unwaveringly trained on inequality and injustice. Homelessness, poverty and labour rights also feature.

The *Old Oak* is the culmination of his latest body of work made in partnership with screenwriter Paul Laverty. I, Daniel Blake examined the crippling effects of austerity in Britain; *Sorry We Missed You* is an indictment of the precarious gig economy.

"We had made two films in the north-east," the 87-year-old said. "Stories of people trapped in this fractured society. Inevitably both ended badly. Yet we had met so many strong, generous people there who respond to dark times with courage and determination. We felt we had to make a third film that reflected that but did not minimise the difficulties people face and what has befallen this area in the past decades."

Set in a former mining town in England's north-east – forgotten and impoverished in the decades following the enforced closure of the pits – the story pivots around *The Old Oak* pub. It is the last public space standing in the village. When Syrian refugees arrive and face hostility, the pub becomes contested territory.

Struggling landlord and former miner TJ Ballantyne finds himself at the centre of the turmoil.

Can a budding friendship between TJ and Yara, a young

## Director Ken Loach and the stars of his film *The Old Oak*, set in an impoverished former mining town, chat to Jessica Rawnsley

Syrian refugee, bring the two communities together?

Before they began filming, Loach and Laverty went to visit former mining towns. Among the people they spoke to was a lady in her 90s who, as a nurse, attended to men injured in the 1951 Durham mining explosion.

"When I spoke to people like that, there was a real sense of vitality about them and a real sense of community," said 66-year-old Laverty.

"But then when I wandered the rest of the village, you see young people – and she was in better shape than many of them. Many lost souls. The place had fallen to wrack and ruin. All the shops had gone, the housing property had dropped.

"So the people who live there, their one asset was undermined, their houses going for five or six thousand pounds. You could see they were angry. They felt dumped upon. Then when the asylum refugees arrived, many felt like, 'Why us? We've got nothing.'

"We felt it was a remarkable combination of world events, all playing out in these little villages."

The story is told through the friendship between Yara and TJ, played by Ebla Mari and Dave Turner. As in other films, Loach brought real people to the screen. Mari grew up in Golan Heights, in

the village of Majdal Shams, an area to Syria's south-west and Israel's north-east. With a background in theatre, the 26-year-old makes her film debut in *The Old Oak*. Her on-screen family are not actors but Syrian refugees.

She said: "It's always important to talk about subjects like this, especially underprivileged communities that escaped war. To make films about it so people can understand it more and hopefully have less judgement towards the communities... so people ask questions and change perspectives. I think cinema and art can change things."

She was excited when Loach approached her. She said: "The subject is so close to my heart, I felt an extra motivation to do it."

The plight of mining communities is one Turner, who plays TJ, knows well. He worked in a pub in Durham County, an old mining town.

"TJ was somebody I identified with," Turner, 59, said. "He was beaten down by life. I know a lot of people like TJ and there were parts of TJ that were me."

"I hope people come to watch it with an open mind and it changes a few minds or attitudes. It's a message of hope. It's a message of humanity. That's what I hope people take away from it."

■ *The Old Oak* is in cinemas now.