

## SHAKIN' STEVENS BIOGRAPHY, JANUARY 2023

Reinvention is a much-used word in the music world. But after redefining his sound and style on 2016's hugely acclaimed *'Echoes Of Our Times'*, Shakin' Stevens wasn't content just to press repeat for his next studio project. Now, he's hit *Re-Set*.

That's the title, and indeed the attitude, of a new album that combines extraordinarily heartfelt and meaningful lyrics with the most impassioned vocal performances he has ever summoned from himself, well over 50 years since his first recordings. If that last album set the bar high, he really has *Re-Set* it once again, in every sense.

*'Echoes Of Our Times'* was praised far and wide as the best album of Shaky's remarkable life and times, for its surprising and adventurous combination of roots-rock Americana flavours and arresting, personal storylines, drawn from his own family chronicles.

It became his highest-charting studio album for more than 30 years, and set the scene for 2020's lavish *retrospective 'Fire In The Blood: The Definitive Collection'*, as well as the *'Singled Out'* set drawn from it. A UK top ten success in its own right, that was also warmly received by his international audiences. Shaky maintains the faithful following across Europe that has been with him since his early 1980s breakthrough as a solo star.

But *'Re-Set'* is another story, and one that Stevens can't wait to share with his hugely loyal fan base and new admirers alike. "It's a follow-up," as he puts it, "but it's different. People were surprised by *'Echoes Of Our Times'*, and," he smiles, "I guess the same is going to happen *with 'Re-Set.'*"

This latest songbook is informed, in places, by fresh depictions of his own kith and kin, but this time, the echoes from the past reverberate in the here and now. Those family tales weave into a powerful and interconnected narrative about our collective place in the modern world, both real and virtual, with its increasingly blurred lines between the two.

Of course, that's not to say that the much-loved hero of 33 Top 40 UK hits, four No. 1s and an impressive back story has been sidelined. Just ask the delighted fans who watched Shaky's return to live action shortly before Christmas 2022, as Very Special Guest on Status Quo's UK arena tour. Legions of devotees were treated to a set of old favourites ('Green Door,' 'Marie Marie') interwoven with new ones ('The Fire In Her Blood,' 'Last Man Alive') that provided the thread from his rock 'n' roll roots to the present day. From his ole house to his new one, you might say.

The groundwork for *'Re-Set'* was in pre-Covid 2018, after which came rehearsals and the *'Greatest Hits – And More!'* tour. That took Shaky around European hubs from Berlin to Vienna and from Prague to Warsaw, then on to an 18-date UK schedule. “He came, he shook, he conquered,” wrote the Daily Telegraph of the London show at Cadogan Hall.

In the spring of 2021, Stevens and his fellow songwriters reconvened at co-producer and longtime collaborator John David's Berry Hill Studio in Gloucestershire, on the very day that lockdown rules allowed. The record button was pressed that August, and *Re-Set* began to take shape. From its very opening chords, it's a sit-up-and-listen experience.

The first song, *'George'*, is one of those drawn from the family research that pervaded the last album. Accompanied only by piano, Shaky tells the sorrowful tale of his uncle, who spent much of his life in mental institutions. George died in 1919, nearly 30 years before Stevens was born Michael Barratt, the youngest of 13 children, in Ely, the poorest suburb of Cardiff. George's mother, Florence, with poignant continuity, was the 80-year member of the Salvation Army who was herself the subject of *'The Fire In Her Blood'* on *'Echoes Of Our Times'*.

To begin the album in such a stark and simple musical setting is a less-is-more masterstroke. “I certainly didn't hear drums on it,” says Shaky. “Piano just seemed to be the instrument. The backing vocalists, when they came down to record on other tracks, we played that song to them and they just fell apart. If you've got a heart, it'll do that. People think 'Let's get the loudest track first,' but it's not necessary. It was the right track to open the album.”

As the instrumentation assumes a more familiar rock framework, it's still redolent of the richly rootsy sound that Shaky inhabits with such style. Many of the lyrics describe a world of virtual disconnection (*'Not In Real Life'*) and deception (*'Hard Learned Lesson,'* which asks “Is this our room 101? Can we believe in anyone?”).

The potent opening single *'It All Comes Round'* is about karma, and how kindness to others will come back to you in reward, just as hatred also travels in both directions. *'All You Need Is Greed'* shakes you by the shoulders and minces no words at all on the subject of undiluted avarice (“Ain't no misdemeanours, so take 'em to the cleaners”). *'Dirty Water,'* meanwhile, addresses addiction, friendship, and the fact that self-destruction is a path few ever choose deliberately.

Shaky's own mother is centre stage on *'May'*, which has him looking back in full realisation of the selflessness with which she faced her difficult life, raising 13 children while holding down a job. “That was difficult to sing,” he

confesses. “You can hear it in the voice. My lovely Mum, I miss her a lot.” As he muses movingly in the song, not to grieve, but to appreciate the truth of his youth, and rejoice that such an amazing woman was his mother: “You kept us kids on an even keel. One in a million.”

Remembering that upbringing, he reflects: “It was a family of 13, so I came on the back end. It was only a small, terraced house, three bedrooms, one in the back with a double bed where you'd sleep top and tail, and another bedroom with a single bed and a hook on the door, that was it. But that's all we knew then.” Soon, in a household in which everybody sang, he was using his voice to make his name and his life.

The notion of old times revisiting themselves is especially relevant on *'Beyond The Illusion'*, inspired by Shaky's ancestors in the 18th and 19th centuries. As the Cornish copper mines – in which they toiled thanklessly for the benefit of monied owners – began to close, some men were induced to board ships for supposed promised lands. A better life eluded many, and when they returned, many found that their communities had dispersed, and they themselves were then bereft of their ancestral roots. The parallels with 21st-century displacement and disadvantage are all too obvious.

There are compelling observations about our beleaguered planet in *'Tick Tock'* and in the final call to arms of the closing *'Re-Set'* itself. “It's a serious thing, what's happening in the world,” says Shaky. “If people pick up on that, and it reminds them what's happening, then someone is listening, and we've done something good.”

“Nobody's pointing the finger. It's not judging, it's observing,” he concludes. “I believe lyrics are very important, but if you haven't got a tune to go with them, you've had it.” The man with the unflinching instinct for a great record is re-set and ready for the latest adventure of his unique career.