

Friends and neighbors: Richard Thompson, a Celt in the garden (with guitar)



Richard Thompson at Van Vleck House and Gardens. KATE ALBRIGHT/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

By GWEN OREL

orel@montclairlocal.news

In “Friends and Neighbors” we spotlight interesting Montclairites doing interesting things. Some of them you might have heard of, others you might not. Answers have been edited for space. Got someone you think we should write about? Drop a line to culture@montclairlocal.news.

In 1967, at the age of 18, [Richard Thompson](#) debuted as a guitar player and songwriter with the English folk-rock group

Fairport Convention. After leaving the band in 1971, he continued a strong musical career. His song "1952 Vincent Black Lightning" is on Time's "100 Greatest Songs since 1923" list, and his work has been covered by Elvis Costello, Christy Moore, R.E.M., Don Henley, Robert Plant, Bonnie Raitt, David Gilmour, The Corrs, Nanci Griffith, and many others. Among recent projects is the score for the 2019 documentary "The Cold Blue," about World War II fighter pilots.

In 2006, Thompson earned a lifetime achievement award from BBC Radio. He was appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2011 for services to music. Thompson also won the Ivor Novello Award in 2017.

Thompson moved to Montclair 18 months ago. Van Vleck House & Gardens is one of his favorite places. Thompson will play City Winery on July 1, in the venue's last week of shows in its Varick Street location (it will reopen at Pier 57 in early 2020). Thompson spends about half of his time on the road. In July, he will teach guitar and songwriting for a week in the Catskills at ["Frets and Refrains,"](#) a guitar and songwriting camp, his eighth year there, and in September, he will play a big anniversary concert at the Albert Hall with other folk-rock musicians.

When did you start playing guitar?

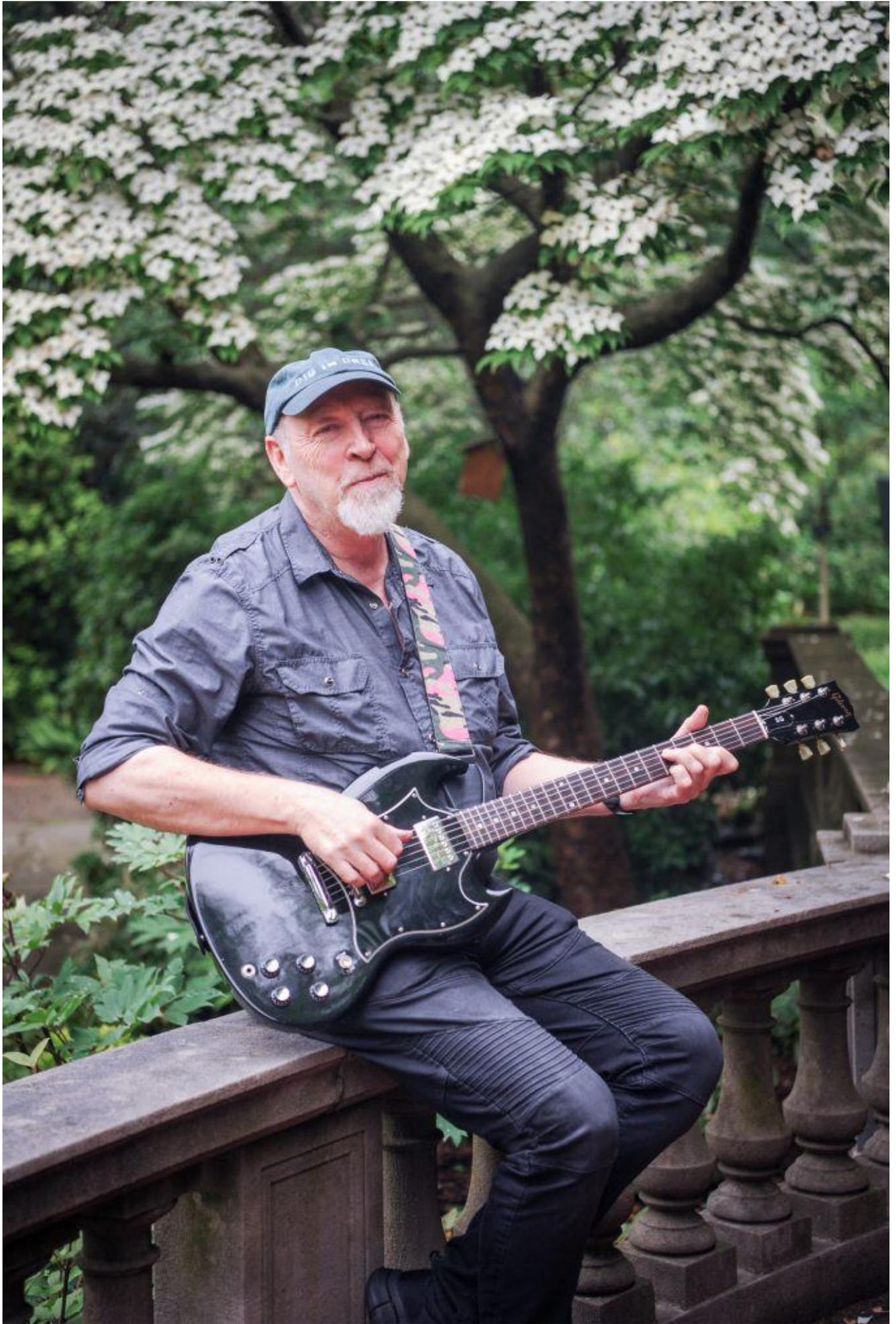
I started playing guitar when I was 10. I'd been asking for a guitar my whole life, since the age of 5. I'd get fobbed off with toys, plastic ukuleles and things. I always loved music. The guitar was a prominent part of the music I liked, or rock and roll, from my sister's records. She was buying Bill Haley and Elvis and all that stuff. I was hearing all that through her bedroom wall.

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You talked at the screening of “A Winding Road: A Ramble with Richard Thompson,” that screened at the Montclair Film Festival 2019, about your Scottish ancestry. How has it affected you?

I’m half English, half Scottish. My father was in a sense an exile, a Scotsman living in London. He was more Scottish than the average Scots person. He emphasized his tradition. So there was Scottish music in the house. The bookshelves had Border Ballads, and the works of Robert Burns, and Walter Scott. I’d read almost all of Walter Scott by the age of 11. Culturally I’m kind of imprinted that way, and musically I think I owe a lot to Scottish music. There’s a lot of drones in what I do. A lot of Scottish pentatonic scales. So that’s kind of in the mix with the rock music.



Richard Thompson strums his guitar at Van Vleck. KATE ALBRIGHT/FOR MONTCLAIR LOCAL

The folk rock explosion was around the same time as the Irish Trad revival. Did you all know each other?

Yeah, all those guys. When Fairport played in Dublin in 1969, The Chieftains opened for us. They'd just formed. Fairport in a sense were part of the third traditional music revival. One 1900-ish, one in the 1950s with Ewan McColl, and Fairport was like the next wave; playing traditional music electric was kind of the next revival. Scottish music, Irish music, needed less reviving. It was less separated from popular culture.

Even so, music like The Chieftains would have been considered old people's music, not what's happening now. It took a while for the idea that this reflects you, this is your roots, to filter through.

Were you aware of the American Laurel Canyon scene (depicted in the documentary "Echo in the Canyon")?

We were very aware of it. We were really into lyrics as a band. That was our biggest thing, really good lyrics. After Dylan went electric it gave everyone else permission to have serious lyrics in popular music. We responded to that. Before we started writing our own material we did songs by Dylan, Phil Ochs, Richard Farina, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell. We had Joni Mitchell's demos before she made her first record.

You're an OBE, Order of the British Empire. Are you a Sir?

No, that's two more levels up. You've got MBE, which is Member of the British Empire, which is the lowest, and then CBE, Companion of the British Empire, and then KBE, Knight of the British Empire. That's when you become a Sir. It's a very old honor system that goes back as long as there have been kings and queens. But in the last 30 or 40 years, it's been much more community based, so people nominate some nurse or teacher

from the community for these awards.

What is your favorite song to play?

Well, it's different every day. I'm very fond of a song called "Willow Day." It's definitely a corruption of "Welladay," which means "That's life, that's the way the cookie crumbles." It's probably 200 years old. To me it's kind of a distillation of all that's good about traditional music. It's about a thief, who's almost like a folk hero. He doesn't care that he's going to be hanged. He says "six bonny lasses to carry my pall."

Have you recorded it?

I'm not good enough to record it.

Why would you say that, Mr. OBE?

The song is the important thing. I'll sing it live, but I wouldn't record it. When you're dealing with the tradition you have to know your place in the firmament.

Are there songs you get tired of being asked for? I'm sure you get asked to play "Beeswing" at every concert.

I do, yes, "Vincent Black Lightning" is another one. Both of those songs are quite visual. I run a little movie in my head as I'm singing them, and the movie is different every night. So that keeps me on a slightly different path every time. You emphasize or de-emphasize depending on what the audience brings to it. In a sense you're just a component of, a mouthpiece for the audience.

MEET THE NEIGHBOR

Richard Thompson

Age: 70

Hometown London

Season Spring

First job: Stained glass window apprentice

Last job: Musician

Hobby: Naturalist

Beach, forest or mountains: Forest

Favorite drink, alcoholic or non: Pellegrino with a wedge of lime. That's how far I've come down the scale.

Favorite dessert: Tiramisu ice cream

Hero: Andy Goldsworthy [A British artist who makes site-specific installations using natural materials.]

Last TV show watched: TCM, "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice." I found it disturbingly dated, and close to home. I couldn't finish it.

Book reading: "The Discovery of Middle Earth" [by Graham Robb]. Nothing to do with "The Hobbit." It's about how the Celts/Druids were incredibly cultured and the Romans managed to wash out much of their culture.

Strangest concert ever: There's been a lot. There was the Krumlin festival in the UK. It was summer, July, but it was on top of the Yorkshire Moors. The weather was unseasonably cold. Lots of people came to this festival underequipped for the weather, in shorts and T-shirts. The rain was horizontal. Ambulance crews were coming down through the crowd taking people away because they were suffering from exposure.

Everyone who played was out of their minds drunk because it was running six hours late. Nobody got paid. There were forged tickets, and there was a hole in the fence so people could just walk in. There was no revenue, so nothing to pay the bands with.

I want to meet (alive or dead): Claude Debussy. I'm very influenced by piano players in my guitar style. I grew up listening to Jerry Lee Lewis, who was my hero.