



Silent film accompanist Stephen Horne. Photo Mike Coles

Silent films far from a quiet life

By David Gritten

It's highly specialised work, playing music to accompany screenings of silent films in cinemas or at film festivals. In Britain, only a handful of musicians make a living from it.

One of the few is East Finchley resident Stephen Horne, who first accompanied a silent film on piano in the late 1980s. "I wrote to the National Film Theatre (now BFI Southbank) and got an audition," he recalls. "I've been playing there ever since. Three decades!"

Building a reputation

For at least 20 years he was one of only three or four British musicians specialising in music to accompany silent films. As he recalls: "For years I was also playing accompaniment for ballet, simply as a bread-and-butter job. Five years ago, I took a gamble and gave that up. I wasn't finding time for working on my own compositions."

"Since then, I've lived off silent film entirely – primarily as performance with a bit of composition, but also recording scores for DVDs or streaming."

Stephen's world-class reputation in his chosen field means he is frequently asked to work abroad: "For the last six or seven years I've been averaging an overseas gig about once a month." He most often travels to Germany, France, the United States and to northern Italy, where there is an important annual silent film festival in the town of Pordenone.

Tonka of the Gallows

But Stephen's most recent gig in early August was far closer to home, at the Phoenix Cinema, where he accompanied a screening of a Czech silent film from 1930, *Tonka of the*

Gallows. He had done this just once before, in May, at the San Francisco Silent Film Festival.

During its 83 minutes Stephen played not only piano but also accordion, flute bells and a drum. Remarkably, given that *Tonka* is a virtually unknown film that was being screened on a Sunday afternoon, some 130 people flocked to the Phoenix to see it. "I'm really glad it had such a good turnout," Stephen says. The film was enthusiastically received, as was Stephen, who took a bow at the end.

He believes that having an accompanist present during a screening "helps bridge that gap between the film and the audience." And he admits: "It's rewarding to feel an audience has enjoyed an event, and you're part of it."

Stephen's career as an accompanist may be at a high, and he plans to continue, but he also concedes: "I'm not composing as much as I should. I've wanted to do a CD for 30 years now. So I've finally booked myself a studio – to make myself do it."

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Empty shops show how small traders are really struggling

By David Melsome

A nationwide report in July revealed that the number of empty shops in town centres is at its highest for four years. The British Retail Consortium and Springboard survey found that one in ten town centre shops was vacant in July, the highest level since January 2015. Footfall also fell by 1.9% in July, the worst July performance for seven years.

Our own High Road certainly seems to have had a difficult summer. Four long-standing traders have disappeared from East Finchley in the last couple of months, the most recent being PV News, which closed down suddenly in late July.

The former Big Chef café, the household goods store a few doors down, and Mulberry estate agents have also put up the shutters, adding to the former Pizza Express takeaway which shut down earlier in the year.

Their departures are sad for the local trading community and have left the High Road with a higher than normal number of empty premises.

Temporary two-way

There was some confusion when two-way traffic lights suddenly appeared on the usually one-way blind bridge over the railway in Church Lane, N2, for a few days in August.

The lights were there to give residents at the western end of Church Lane, and the roads off it, access to their homes while their part of the road was blocked off for maintenance works. The usual one-way system was restored as soon as the works finished.

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What can be done?

The Archer hasn't been able to establish the reasons for all the closures but it is known that small traders are continuously struggling against rising rents and business rates and dwindling foot-



Closed: PV News



Closed: The Big Chef café

fall, making it so important that we all shop locally whenever we can.

Nick Allan, chair of local small business network

He added that N2United was discussing a number of ideas to make temporary use of the empty premises and attract shoppers until new traders move in.

N2United, said: "Their closing serves to illustrate the importance of working together in bringing the businesses, local organisations and the community together to avoid the distress that more empty shops brings."

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