

Peter is all about love

London-based singer Peter French returns to Scotland next weekend to play an exclusive concert in Dundee. He tells Jennifer Cosgrove why this homecoming is so important . . .

PETER FRENCH is nervous and excited about his impending visit to Broughty Ferry in Dundee, because it isn't just any social trip: he will be performing his first ever Scottish solo concert in his home city.

He is bringing his sell-out London show About Love to Dundee's Rep Theatre, using classic songs to follow the course of love and relationships, from innocence to maturity, through the various ups and downs of life.

The programme includes songs by Burt Bacharach, Cole Porter, John Lennon, Jacques Brel, Joni Mitchell, Irving Berlin and Rogers and Hammerstein.

Peter, 53, was a member of a choir in his local church St Margaret's, Barnhill, as well as schools Eastern Primary and Grove Academy. He says: "Many of my friends – who I have not seen for 30 years – are coming to see my show in Dundee."

"I am hoping my choirmaster Alison Fraser will be at the concert. She still lives in Broughty Ferry and was my music teacher at Eastern and Grove. She was the best teacher I have ever known: enthusiastic and passionate. Her passion for her music was astounding and it is still in my memory today."

Peter's parents Jean and John will be in attendance, of course. The couple lived in Barnhill for years but have now relocated to the Scottish Highlands. Peter's older brother Stuart is still in Broughty Ferry and he also has extended family in and around the city.

Despite his love of music and performance, Peter originally studied accountancy in Dundee and completed an HNC but soon realised his heart was set on another path. Aged 21, he applied for a three-year course at The Rose Bruford College of Speech and Drama in London and theatre work followed.

He goes on: "I remember somebody asking me: 'Why don't you do some modelling?' and I sort of laughed it off. But I went to an agency in London and they said yes. It is a different lifestyle from acting – I enjoyed it and it opened doors and allowed

me to travel to places in the world I would otherwise never have gone."

While he never considered modelling as a long-term career option, when Peter was taken on in 2000 by a top New York agency, he saw it as a new chapter and adventure.

"I was all set up to do it and then 9/11 happened in 2001 and everything changed. Afterwards, the agency called me to say the situation in New York was terrible: they were letting people go and other people were deciding to leave the city. They said I could still come over but it would be tough."

Rather than dwelling on what could have been, Peter saw it as an opportunity to pursue another path: "It had happened, so what was I going to do about it?"

After leaving drama school, Peter had taken singing lessons with world-famous teacher Ian Adam and was suddenly gripped with a desire to return to it.

"I decided I had to give this a shot now, so I went back to Ian and it was very strange – something took over. I wouldn't say I became obsessed but I became so utterly focused on my training with him that something took over inside of me and I abandoned everything I was doing in my life. I just focused on working with him for the next seven years."

During this time, Peter practised for four hours a day, seven days a week. He describes Ian as an "extraordinary person", likening his enthusiasm to that of his childhood singing teacher Alison Fraser. Originally from the Black Isle in the Scottish Highlands, Ian's clients included Michael Crawford, Sarah Brightman, Elaine Paige and Jason Donovan.

"He helped me enormously and that was the launching pad for what I wanted to do," Peter goes on. "He lived behind Harrods in Knightsbridge, London, and treated everyone like they were family. His philosophy was when you walked through the door and became a student you were part of the family."

"No matter who you were, or how big you were, you were treated the same as any newcomer. You'd end up having a coffee

next to Michael Crawford waiting for your lesson to start. It was extraordinary."

During his training, Peter realised he had to make a conscious effort to forge a career as a singer: "Around 2004, I saw all these famous actors coming and going and a lot of them were out of work and waiting for auditions. I turned to Ian one day and said: 'I can't do this – I can't spend my life waiting for something else to happen. I am going to have to create this myself'."

Solo concerts were not easy to come by for new performers but Peter took a chance and pitched to a famous London cabaret club called Pizza on the Park, then located at Hyde Park Corner.

"Some of the biggest stars have played there – Liza Minnelli, Tony Bennett – I went to the door at 11 o'clock in the morning and said: 'I'd like to sing here'. The question that followed was: 'Who are you?' and my response: 'Well, nobody'."

Peter had an idea for a show where all the songs related to a theme. He had heard a song called Here's To Life, which has been covered by Barbara Streisand, and so he thought about a concept show that looked back on life.

Pizza in the Park was intrigued enough to offer him one night at the club and he walked out terrified and exhilarated in equal measure because he had no money, no musicians and a chance to prove himself. And he did, it seems, as the concert sold out and more followed at Pizza On The Park until its closure in 2008.

Peter believes he has a strength for storytelling through song and draws inspiration from performers who sing with sincerity: "Barbara Cook and Tony Bennett really inspire me because when they sing, I believe every single word. Charles Aznavour and Jacques Brel also

● About Love by Peter French is at Dundee Rep Theatre on April 27 at 7.30pm. More information is available at peterfrenchlive.com



inspire me because they tell stories and I really like the idea of telling stories."

Peter's signing teacher Ian passed away in 2007, following a long illness. He produced a concert at London's Her Majesty's Theatre in tribute to his teacher, assembling a 50-strong cast led by Elaine Paige, Jonathan Pryce and Jeremy Irons – all of whom had been pupils. The show raised more than £48,000 for a new singing programme at Royal Brompton Hospital to help patients with respiratory problems.

At Christmas, Peter did a new concert at The Pheasantry in December called A Year to Christmas: "It was another concept show about a year in the life of somebody – from one Christmas to the next, going through the other seasons in between."

About Love concerns relationships and Peter says while there is a bit of himself in the show, it is no way candid or self-indulgent: "The way I see it is I am a vehicle on stage and my job is tell the story of a song and, hopefully, people will relate to that. I do talk about myself but I don't mention names. I'm not doing a psychotherapy session!"

"I try to make a journey for the show with a beginning, middle and an end and it follows the ups and downs of young love, heartbreak and then the mature stage of love, when we become more adult about it and are able to cope with the emotions."

Peter isn't sure what the future holds but he hopes this concert might open some more doors for him in Scotland. He also says there is no special person in his life at the moment: "Here I am doing a show about love but I'm OK about that because I love what I am doing!"

"Every journey should be scary – I really believe that – if everything was so comfortable then we wouldn't learn anything and we wouldn't grow."

MY PERFECT WEEKEND

Birds of a Feather star Linda Robson tells The Courier what makes her perfect weekend . . .

LINDA ROBSON grew up in Islington, London, and starred in hit BBC sitcom Birds of a Feather, which ran for 10 years from 1989, alongside her real-life best friend Pauline Quirke.

Q Where would your perfect weekend take place?

It sounds boring but being at home with my family, watching all our favourite programmes on the TV.

Q Who would it be spent with?

My family – my husband Mark, our older daughter Lauren and her one-year-old daughter Lili, our son Louis, 21, and younger daughter Bobbie who's 16.

Q Would you lie in or get up early?

I'm an early bird – I always get up around 7am, even if I don't have to be and if I'm on Loose Women, it's even earlier. I never trust alarm clocks!

Q What are your favourite outdoor activities?

Shopping! Seriously, though, I'm not really one

for outdoor pursuits but I do like looking round whichever town or city I'm in when I'm on tour. I love going to churches and lighting candles for people I've lost.

Q What food would you eat – and who would cook it?

Mark and I make a big roast lamb and slow cook it and then serve it with all the trimmings and sides. Lauren loves gnawing on the bone and we've got a great photo of Lili having a gnaw too!

Q Favourite music/TV show/film to pass the time?

Pauline (Quirke) and I were having lunch in a restaurant last year and the music playing was lovely – lots of old Dusty Springfield, Louis Armstrong, a real mix of relaxing music. Unknown to me, Pauline went back later and asked Sonia, the lady who ran the restaurant, what the CD was and it turned out it was her compilation. She made another one and Pauline gave it me for my birthday last year. But my kids are into everything from Queen and Aerosmith to Justin Bieber, so I've

been exposed to every kind of music under the sun!

I loved Mr Selfridge on the TV – it was like a history lesson. Films I enjoy include There Will Be Blood, starring Daniel Day-Lewis – he is one of the most amazing actors I've ever seen – and Skyfall. I'm not a James Bond fan but I loved it, especially Judi Dench. I'm depressed she won't be in any more James Bond films!

But mostly, we sit round Lili-watching these days!

Q Favourite Sunday meal and why?

Our roast lamb lunch and then, about an hour later, a lovely apple crumble. We sit round and have a great time chatting and eating.

Q Where would you go if time and money were no object?

I'd love to take Lili to Disneyland. I took my kids when they were young and they loved it. I'd also like to go back to Venice. Mark and I went a few years ago and I thought it was the most beautiful and romantic place ever.

Linda Robson loves to be surrounded by her family. Picture: Getty Images.

