

# SCENE

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# Elastic band

A versatile jazz band fronted and conceived by a blues troubadour has released a new album and is reissuing two that are very close to home

**BILLY JENKINS** is infatuated with South East London. So much so in fact, that he has released a trilogy of records inspired by his favourite locations. His new album, *I'm A Man From Lewisham* name checks local landmarks, from Catford Broadway and Deptford Market to Francis Drake Bowls Club, while a Bromley-themed caper was first to air in the early 1980s, followed by a Greenwich album in the middle of the decade.

So far so straightforward, you might think – lyrics about singers' most treasured places are nothing new. Lennon and McCartney traded memories on double A-side Strawberry Fields/Penny Lane, while John Cooper Clark was less complimentary about a certain Beasley Street. And not forgetting documenter extraordinaire, Ray Davies, who conjured a perfect Waterloo Sunset among other rose-tinted locales. Jenkins' innovation is that there are no words to make his descriptive life any easier. The bandleader's freeform and transient jazz band, *The Voice Of God Collective*, had to evoke a sense of space and place with no verbal cues whatsoever – using only the front man's clever choice of instrumentation and direction as a guide.

So how did he make Greenwich sound like Greenwich, Bromley like Bromley and Lewisham like SE13? "Metal and wood and air," is his cryptic reply. "You've got different instrumentation for each, so for the Bromley album I used different sounds to Lewisham to try and conjure up an aural impression of the environment which I'm writing about. "There's a lot of rope around Greenwich – or was, with the Cutty Sark and the boats, so I used more stringed instruments on that album." SE10 was Jenkins' home and base for the best part of a decade, living and working at



**SINGING THE BLUES:** Billy at the hub of his musical world, somewhere in SE London...

Wood Wharf rehearsal studios by the old barge yard in West Greenwich. It was the 1980s, and a halcyon period for music in the area. "Wood Wharf was a regular hang out for Julian 'Jools' Holland and Squeeze, Dire Straits and Kate Bush. "We used to go go-cart racing – Jools was quite good at carrying the go-cart!" Billy joked. The studio got a glowing review from an even bigger name from the world of music. "Robert Plant said 'I couldn't have had my car radio stolen

from a nicer studio!'" Billy quipped. Jazz is, by its own admission, a tough genre to categorise, and the veteran producer was reluctant to pigeon hole his own output. "How would I describe the music? In Germany they call it Spass – which means 'entertainment'. "I wouldn't say it's jazz until it's recorded – then it becomes jazz. Jazz is perceived as a traditional art form now – it's like the classical music of the 20th century. It involves improvisation, but I would

never call myself a jazz musician." To the layman though, it is jazz – all wild trumpets and spiky pianos with madcap guitar solos held together by strands of virtuoso drumming. There are elements of ska too, but more important are the places that the albums reference. The first of the three released was *Sounds Like Bromley*, in 1982, then came *Greenwich* in 1985, and *I'm A Man From Lewisham* is brand new music. "I did two Bromleys, in fact," Billy added, "and the second Bromley – 11 years later – had more metal instruments, because a lot more buildings had gone up." The albums are resolutely uncommercial, and Billy admits that he may lose money in his latest *anti*-promotion drive. "I've always had a problem with selling music, because I don't see what selling has got to do with making music. As far as I'm concerned, advertising is just showing off!" he added. His love of music is lifelong, and the 53-year-old has released "About 40 albums – I've lost count!" he joked. "All my music is in the popular 20th century music style – unfortunately it all comes out played at the same time!"

Countless musicians have played second fiddle/trumpet/sax to Jenkins' twinkle-eyed ringleader, at one point there were 18 members in one line-up. Citing his love of recording unpredictable kids and irreverent musicians, Billy riled against today's commodified and mass produced music, saying: "There's no flaws in it, and flaws are one of the most enduring features of human nature – we're not robots."

Rod Kitson

*New album I'm A Man From Lewisham is out now on CD and download, and Greenwich and Bromley have been reissued as virgin vinyl re-mastered downloads. [www.billyjenkins.com](http://www.billyjenkins.com)*

**I wouldn't say it's jazz until it's recorded - then it becomes jazz**

## Puppet masters

### Wooden you like to know

**REMEMBER** the Woodentops? No, me neither. How about Woodenfingers? ...Still drawing a blank? Well let me rephrase it then – would you like to know about Woodenfingers? Yes, you say? OK then, here goes... As part of the Greenwich Children's Theatre Festival, the *Woodenfingers puppet show* is back in Woolwich by popular demand. Last time they were here they wowed in a big way – but this time it's going to be an altogether smaller – but bigger – affair... On Saturday, April 10 the 'Fingers' perform their new show, Panfilo Pipinto and his Arduous Adventure, at a free event in General Gordon Square. Greenwich Theatre commissioned the show, and with the BBC's help, the musical puppet show will transform from the festival's smallest event into the largest as it is beamed on to the huge screen. Woodenfingers take centre stage for four 25-minute shows at 3pm, 3.30pm, 4pm and 4.30pm, and the spectacle is followed by a theatre performance at the Tramshed, also in Woolwich, later in the evening. Other festival highlights include a dance cabaret for children at Greenwich Dance Agency, a musical theatre workshop programme at the Greenwich Heritage Centre, and a drama workshop programme at the Eltham Centre.

**Festival runs until April 17**  
 For full details and to book tickets, contact Greenwich Theatre Box Office on 020 8858 7755 or visit [www.greenwichtheatre.org.uk](http://www.greenwichtheatre.org.uk)

## Hire power...

### Cafes and treble clefs

A NEW season of jazz and showtime sessions begins at Firepower on Friday, April 9. The 'musical suppers' take place at the museum café in the Royal Arsenal, Woolwich. Continental Drift kick off the first night, fronted by Sarah Jane and featuring the pianistic skills of Roger Lewin. Both of the performers are well-known in the Medway area and South East London and will be joined on double bass by Dave Silk for an evening of musical nostalgia at the atmospheric riverside setting in the historic Royal Arsenal.

Show starts at 7.30pm. Entry £5.50  
 To book call 020 8312 7123 or visit [www.firepower.org.uk/events](http://www.firepower.org.uk/events)  
 Tickets do not include dining or drinks but bar snacks and evening menu are available.