

Brass Eye

Misfit brilliance celebrated. *By David Quantick*

Peter Skellern

The Complete Decca Recordings



Mint Audio CDMT 0016 (3CD)

Best known for unusual chart songs like *You're A Lady* and a string of immaculate Fred Astaire covers, Peter Skellern never quite fitted in, even during a 70s stuffed with oddball singers performing nostalgia-fuelled songs.

Perhaps that's why his back catalogue has been so criminally neglected, a situation this new collection – compiled, remastered and reissued by producer Richard Moore thanks to a Kickstarter campaign – has begun to rectify.

Here are all of Peter Skellern's recordings for Decca; albums, singles and B-sides (and one unreleased track, *Revolution*). Covering the period before Skellern's career sidestepped into covers collections, shows with Richard Stilgoe, and his unexpected collaboration with Mary Hopkin and Julian Lloyd-Webber to form the original Oasis, *The Complete Decca Recordings* is the first chance in years to hear his work as it was originally intended.

And it's glorious. Right from the start, the listener is aware that an original talent is at work. *You're A Lady* – the opening track on Skellern's 1972 debut of the same name – has it all: Cole Porter class, brass band Northernism, and a quirky wit all of its own. The album is full of inventiveness and Skellern's many voices, from the seaside postcard melancholy of *A Sad Affair* to the ragtime fun of *Now I've Seen It All*. But there's also the aching beauty of *Ain't Life Something* (where Skellern seems to be marvelling at his own abilities as he sings, "If I'd known all along I could sing this song/If I'd got what to takes to get the breaks") and the strangeness of *Every Home Should Have One*, where he seems to be channeling both Randy Newman and Peter Tinniswood (Skellern played Carter Brandon in the radio version of Tinniswood's *I Didn't Know You Cared*). With hits for others (the beautiful *In My Lonely Room*, recorded by Andy Williams) and B-sides like the extraordinary, defiantly sad *I Don't Know*, this is a debut overflowing with ideas and talent. It sounds like nothing else released in a decade where anything was possible.

1973's *Not Without A Friend* is a consolidation of Skellern's sound with a newfound cockiness ("I don't care about the Unknown Soldier", he declares on *Misguided Youth*) and a broadening

of sound (*Big Time Indian Chief* is a daft song with a jaw-droppingly good band arrangement). And it ends with one of the best songs of Peter Skellern's – or anyone's – career, the spiritual and gorgeous *Hymn Song*, a meditation on mortality which would have added poignancy after Skellern's early death in 2017 (before which he was ordained as a priest in the Church of England). It's passionate and beautiful.

The third and final album here, the cheekily-titled *Holding My Own* – complete with Donald McGill-esque cover, saw Skellern veer ecstatically into the world of music hall. He has the talent and panache to pull it off, as it were, tackling *She Had To Go And Lose It At The Astor* as well as Percy French's classic *Abdul Abulbul Amir*. It's a labour of love, and a joy to listen to; and is now augmented by one of Skellern's best singles,

Hold On To Love which, with its B-side, *Too Much I'm In Love*, perfectly rides a mid-70s lounge groove: Skellern as ever displaying a canny ability to move between nostalgic crooning, Northern comedy, and a pop sensibility entirely in keeping with the times.

In later years, Peter Skellern would emphasise the golden oldies aspect of his repertoire, releasing covers albums and becoming something of a cabaret artist, but all that was far in the future. The next stage of his career would see him enjoying more hits, expanding his range, starring in his own TV shows, working with two Beatles and – most bizarrely of all – contributing a song to Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. That phase of his career will, with luck, be covered by the next phase of this reissue campaign; but for now, we have this unique (and great-sounding) collection to explore.



Peter Skellern:
"Criminally neglected"

