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## The 'Street Kid' from Gibraltar Who Dared to Dream



**"I was washing dishes at the Chelsea Drugstore on the King's Road. Every time my first hit "Little Arrows" came on the radio, which was my first hit as a songwriter, I'd tell the guys with me; "that's my song!" and they would just laugh. They didn't believe me."**

Almost every minute of every day, somewhere in the world someone is listening to or playing one of Albert Hammond's chart-topping songs. The Gibraltarian has, over the past 55 years, has been the creative genius of hits for internationally recognised singers such as Celine Dion, Whitney Houston, Diana Ross, Tina Turner, Bonnie Tyler, Westlife, Ace of Bass and is a renowned singer in his own right.

It was in mid-1960's that the 'mischievous street kid' left the Rock to follow his dream - in the steps of his idol Buddy Holly on a path started a few years earlier - by his father's barber who taught him three chords on a guitar - an instrument he chose over the piano because he used to think was 'feo'.

Albert Hammond has topped 30 charts and had a stunning 360 million record sales - the 'kid from the Rock' who dared to dream... and made it.

Asked what it felt like to be home, he told me: "It's like being a kid again! It's changed a bit. I was a street kid who wasn't very good at school. I wasn't a bad guy, but I was mischievous. And it's always

felt great to come back to Gibraltar - firstly because I grew up here, and, of course, because I have family here!"

An almost entirely self-taught musician, Hammond made a deal with his father's barber.

"The barber was a flamenco player, I didn't want to learn flamenco, but I loved Buddy Holly, that's who my idol was," he explains.

**"I told him 'I'll come and sweep the hair off your floor if you teach me just three chords on the guitar'. I knew if I could learn three chords then I could play Buddy Holly songs."**

And he took the first steps on his long path to success. By turning his back on the accepted formulae of song writing he could explore and convey his unique style through music that he can truly call his own. In fact, instead of 'song writing', Hammond prefers to refer to his process as 'discovery'.

"I discover chords that any musician would just say 'Oh that's a G major 7 over 9th', and I think that I've just discovered the world!" he smiles. "When you 'discover' you think



Albert Hammond & local broadcast celebrity and musician Richard Cartwright reminiscing their first ever gig as the Diamond Boys at the old Radio Gibraltar Studio

'nobody's ever done this'- so all these melodies emerge that wouldn't if you actually knew what the chord was."

Such irregular patterns gave birth to hit songs such as 'I'm a Train'.

"Not knowing music was a great asset for me... Knowing music is an asset if you want to be an arranger, but it's not going to make you any better as a song writer. In fact, for me it would have made me worse."

Initially his producers dismissed 'I'm a Train' as unacceptable, he tells me. "I went in and sang it to the guy, with my arrangement and he stopped me in the middle and

said 'No! You can't have a two-four bar in the middle of a four-four bar song!' and I said 'What do you mean?! It sounds great! It totally works for me... and I'm still discovering chords today.'

**"The beginning was a struggle, well actually, my whole life has been a bit of a struggle; even today! But you have to persevere, that's the whole point!"**

His path to success was not straight forward, and he has overcome hardships that would have sent most people home. Hammond worked as a dishwasher in London,

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couch hopped, played to disgruntled audiences in men's clubs - even cleaning houses to fund his journey.

**"Many tears, many heart aches, but then that's part of what makes you stronger. I always believed in one thing that is very important, but which most people don't understand, success is not about being number one. Success is every time you fall down, you get back up."**

Nor is Hammond negative about the 'bad times' seeing them as an integral to his star-studded peak. He believes he has been 'guided' by some form of 'spirit' or 'energy' that has been watching over him since his birth.

"It's a positive spirit that is full of love, no negativity, no ego, just a positive spirit... Sometimes when I'm down or having a cold period, I get this feeling inside me that I am going to write some really great stuff, months before I actually do."

It was this spirit which guided him to the Emmy Award-winning "One Moment in Time", which he wrote for the 1988 Summer Olympics, and which became a worldwide hit - a No1 in the UK singles charts and fifth on the US Billboard 500.

"They called me up and said, 'we need a song to represent in America in the Summer Olympics, would you write it?'. I said 'Yes', hung up the phone, and thou-

ght they've probably asked a thousand other writers... But I told myself, I'm going to write the one I think it should be..."

"My immediate thoughts were about Elvis. So, I imagined his voice, and what kind of song he would sing, I even sang it in his voice. Elvis was the inspiration behind that song. When finished, I sent the demo out to Clyde Davis, and two weeks later the cassette arrives - recorded by Whitney Houston. When I heard it, I played it ten times and cried."

Last year, Albert opened a new chapter in his journey. His 22nd album 'In Symphony' has a €500,000 budget, and - in collaboration with another Emmy Award winner, Rob Mather - has given a stunning classical spin to his greatest hits.

"This was something I've

been thinking about for the past 15 years or so - how would Beethoven arrange 'When I Need You', or how would Tchaikovsky do 'Nothings Gonna Stop Us Now?'"

"I was in the Abbey Road studio, surrounded by this huge symphonic orchestra... the feeling was so good, the image when I closed my eyes was of a huge bird wrapping its wings around me." He sees the album as his 'rebirth' after a 30-year withdrawal from the spotlight.

"I think it's a little masterpiece," he tells me.

"At the age of 69 I started performing again, and I am more successful now than previously. I played last week to 15,000 people. And that's what I'm trying to say. It's about your tenacity, your belief in yourself! It doesn't matter if people say 'es un hijo

de p\*\*\*, I don't listen to them. I follow people like Gandhi, who teaches that everything should come from a place of love."

Hammond plans to follow Gandhi's path - to sell all his worldly possessions and follow a traveller's way of life. He currently heads Helping Hands, a charity for which he will travel next year funding and building houses for South Africa's poor -

freed of the responsibilities that come with 'owning too many things' - which he refers to as 'headaches'.

**"All these things I have, I don't really want. I'm going to get rid of all of it and live from my suitcase and a hotel until I die, because then I'm free. I have too much to give to life for all these headaches. I'd rather be free and help people all over the world."** he says.

Hammond the dreamer has come a long way since those early days of struggle, but believes that he still hasn't written his greatest song yet. And, with the young guitarist's first dream fulfilled, it is an older and wiser Albert who has embraced another.

You can find out more about Albert Hammond's tour dates at [www.alberthammond.com](http://www.alberthammond.com)

- Chris Gomez

