

David Cousins, songwriter and singer for the Strawbs, dead at 85

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David Joseph Cousins, the visionary singer, songwriter and leader of the British folk and progressive rock band the Strawbs, passed away peacefully at the age of 85 on July 13 at Pilgrims Hospice in Canterbury.

Cousins' death was announced by family and band representatives, as well as through music news outlets and forums dedicated to the Strawbs' enduring legacy. While the specific cause of death was not disclosed, it was known that Cousins had been diagnosed with a serious illness earlier in the year that had forced him to withdraw from a planned tour and spend his final months in hospice care.

His passing marks the end of an extraordinary era in folk and rock music internationally and of a career that spanned more than six decades. David Cousins was widely recognized for his emotionally dynamic and expressive voice. He could shift from fragile vulnerability to commanding or angry theatricality within a single phrase.

Cousins' singing was never about technical perfection; instead, it was about conveying the meaning of a song. This quality lent an unmistakable dramatic element to the Strawbs' music, particularly in the ballads and narrative-driven pieces for which Cousins was best known. His performances were marked by intense and expressive storytelling.

Whether singing about personal loss, social upheaval or mystical visions, Cousins' vocal delivery, often described as idiosyncratic and haunting, provided the Strawbs' songs with a depth that set them apart from contemporaries.

The Strawbs began in 1964 as the Strawberry Hill Boys (in tribute to the location in London of the teachers college at which the founder members were studying), an acoustic bluegrass trio founded by Cousins with Tony Hooper and Ron Chesterman. Their early years were spent exploring American roots music, but they soon evolved into a group that drew upon a much wider range of influences including English folk, progressive rock and touches of jazz and classical music.

By 1967, they had adopted the name Strawbs and started to develop the unique sound that would define their career. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Strawbs distinguished themselves from other British progressive rock bands by maintaining a strong connection to English folk traditions, even as they incorporated electric instruments, symphonic sounds

and more complex song structures.

Albums like *Strawbs* (1969), *Dragonfly* (1970) and *From the Witchwood* (1971) showcased their ability to blend elements with innovative arrangements. The arrival of keyboard virtuoso Rick Wakeman—who joined initially as a session musician and then became a member of the Strawbs from April 1970 to August 1971—propelled the band further into the progressive rock realm, but as their sound expanded, Cousins' songwriting remained focused on narrative and melody.

Over the course of their career, the Strawbs released more than 30 studio and live albums, with their most recent, *The Magic of It All*, arriving in 2023. Their audience was global, with dedicated fan communities in South Africa, Japan, the US and throughout Europe.

Among the Strawbs' extensive discography, several albums stand out as milestones in Cousins' career: *Grave New World* (1972) marked the band's commercial breakthrough, featuring the UK hit "Benedictus" and the haunting "New World." Cousins' lyrics explored themes of spiritual searching, social change and personal reflection.

Bursting at the Seams (1973) was home to the anthemic "Lay Down" and the somewhat satirical view of English working class life in "Part of the Union," written or co-written by Cousins. The album reached number 2 in the UK charts and solidified the Strawbs' status as one of the era's most adventurous bands.

Hero and Heroine (1974) is often cited as a progressive rock classic, showcasing Cousins' penchant for mythic storytelling and emotional delivery, with tracks like the title song and "Shine on Silver Sun." *Ghosts* (1975) continued the band's exploration of dark, introspective themes, with Cousins' songwriting at its most evocative and literary.

The 1960s in Britain were marked by social and political turmoil and a blossoming of new musical forms. The folk revival and the rise of protest music, along with the fusion of traditional and contemporary sounds, provided fertile ground for experimentation. The Strawbs developed within this ferment and, like many musicians of their generation in Britain and the US, were influenced by American folk music, which encouraged a return to acoustic traditions. The band's recordings became intertwined with the social, cultural, and

musical upheavals of the era.

The Strawbs became regulars on the London folk circuit, performing alongside artists like Sandy Denny, who briefly joined the band before moving to Fairport Convention. This scene was a hub for political songwriting and a blending of old and new ideas.

Under the creative leadership of David Cousins, the Strawbs' work often reflected the era's spirit of questioning authority and advocating for social justice. This trend continued right up to the present. For example, the Strawbs' song "Settlement," the title track of their 2021 album, expanded band's tradition of commentary on contemporary events dating back to their roots. Written during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dave Cousins described it as a song reflecting his anger about government responses to the health crisis.

With lyrics like "What the autocrats are selling you is Sturm und Drang" and imagery of "towers that once sheltered us crumble in ruin," the song critiques the government narrative and broken promises during lockdowns.

Speaking to the entertainment media website We Are Cult in September 2021, Cousins said of "Settlement,"

It's a savage song, quite a lot of the songs have been written reflecting what's going on politically. This is something I've always written about, *Grave New World* for instance reflected what was going on in the early 70's and again it's a protest song about disenfranchised people.

David Cousins worked with a wide array of musicians throughout his career. Within the Strawbs, he collaborated with talents such as Hooper, Dave Lambert, Chas Cronk, Blue Weaver, John Ford, Richard Hudson, Brian Willoughby and John Hawken, among many others. His openness to musical partnership extended beyond the band, leading to notable projects such as his duo work with Willoughby and collaborations with artists like Denny and Wakeman.

A particular highlight was the album *Hummingbird* (2002), created with Wakeman. This record blended original compositions, reworkings of Strawbs songs, and instrumental pieces, showcasing Cousins' versatility and the extraordinary range of musical influences he embraced. The album's emotional breadth—from the wistful "So Shall Our Love Die" to the epic "The Young Pretender"—demonstrated his gift of musical exploration.

Cousins was born David Joseph Hindson on January 7, 1940, in Hounslow, Middlesex, and grew up in Chiswick, West London. Raised in a working-class family, Cousins developed an early interest in music and literature. He attended the University of Leicester, earning a degree in Statistics and Pure Mathematics, but his true passion was always music.

In the early 1960s, Cousins began performing in local clubs and pubs, first as a solo act and then as part of the Strawberry Hill Boys. His early exposure to American folk and bluegrass, combined with a deep appreciation for English traditional music, laid the foundation for the Strawbs' distinctive sound.

Beyond music, Cousins also had a distinguished career in radio, working as a producer for Denmark's Radio, program controller for Radio Tees, and managing director of Devon Air. He was instrumental in the development of several independent local radio stations in the UK, demonstrating the same entrepreneurial spirit that characterized his musical career.

The news of Cousins' passing prompted an outpouring of tributes from musicians, fans, and colleagues around the world. Dave Lambert, long-time Strawbs guitarist who joined the band in 1972, reflected:

David's songs were the heart of the Strawbs. He could make you laugh, cry, and think deeply about the world—all in the space of a single concert. His voice was unique, his vision uncompromising. I am honored to have shared the stage and the journey with him for so many years.

Simon Nicol of Fairport Convention, a peer and fellow pioneer of British folk-rock, added:

David was a true original—a songwriter and performer who never took the easy path, but always followed his own muse. His songs will live on, not just as part of the Strawbs' legacy, but as part of the fabric of British music. I will miss his wit, his wisdom, and his friendship.

Cousins' influence extended beyond the Strawbs. He inspired countless musicians with his commitment to storytelling, willingness to experiment and refusal to be confined by genre. Perhaps most importantly, David Cousins echoed the hopes, fears, and dreams of his audience during a critical period of change in popular music. Through his music over many decades, he encouraged listeners to see the world as it really is with fresh eyes and an open heart.

The Strawbs in 1974 and 1975.



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