

PEOPLE

# Sentimental Journey

Ten years ago, English singer-songwriter Allan Taylor (65) purchased a red Porsche and drove from Leeds to Brighton with the ashes of his father, who had just passed away. He wrote a song about this extraordinary excursion. Now he retraces the steps of that journey.

By Reiner Schloz Photos by Markus Leser



Where it all started: Departure from Harewood House, Leeds



Moment of reflection: Allan Taylor pauses in London on his journey into the past

It is raining in Leeds. Not that this matters at Harewood House. Lord Harewood, a cousin of the Queen, has transformed his vast park into a public meeting place. Just now, preparations are underway for the Porsche gathering in the shadow of the stately home. Allan Taylor gestures toward the verdant meadows and says, "That will be an impressive sight." Exactly as it was ten years ago—Taylor recalls every detail. Throughout the park, one Porsche was lined up after the other. Every year was represented, every model, each car at its most radiant. And then he saw this fantastic red car. A Porsche 944. It had ample space for the guitar. And it cost exactly what his father had bequeathed to him. "I bought the Porsche on the spot," says Taylor. "I could do no more for my father."

The red 944, Allan Taylor, and Harry Albert Taylor—this is an idiosyncratic, melancholy father-and-son story, seasoned with gentle humor and great feeling. Just as with so many of the life stories that Allan has heard over the past forty years from conversations with strangers in bars all over the world—stories that are woven into his songs. But this story above all moves toward a strong conclusion: Allan took the urn containing the ashes of his just-deceased father, buckled it into the Porsche's front passenger seat, and stepped on the gas. The journey took them from Leeds to London, past a few bars, and then on to Brighton, where Allan had grown up.

They passed by the boardwalk and traveled onward to the Sussex Downs, the hills just beyond Brighton. There, in the suburb of Sompting, Harry Albert Taylor had spent his days, enjoying the strolls with his dog through the hills. And it is there Allan scattered the ashes in the wind.

Allan Taylor later turned this experience into a song: "A Promise and a Porsche." But what kind of promise was it? A suspenseful journey awaits us. A journey through an entire life.

We are seated in a new 911. An indisputably red one. Allan Taylor is looking forward to this trip through time. He has long wished to drive a 911. The red 944 is now but a memory. Our starting point is Harewood House, heading straight for London. And Allan talks about the Brighton of the 1960s—the curious teenager hears guitarists playing along the boardwalk. He observes them closely, sees the effect they have on girls, and knows that this is the life for him. He learns his way around the strings, follows the songs of Woody Guthrie and Tom Paxton, reads Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, devours Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs, performs in the folk clubs of his homeland, enjoys life, and dreams of adventure. But he is also the son of Harry Albert Taylor, a telephone technician, a working-class man who must work hard to support his family. So Allan does his duty. Just as his father before him,



Traffic control: Taylor navigates the streets of London

Club scene in London: Allan Taylor outside the "Troubadour," where he performed in the 1970s





Back in Brighton: The seaside resort welcomes its lost son with lobster, mussels, and prawns

“We couldn’t have cared less about money,” says Taylor, “we wanted to make music and enjoy life.”

he trains as a telephone technician, gets a good job—and then throws it all away in 1966 at the age of 21 to go “on the road.”

America beckons. New York, Greenwich Village: the heart of the folk scene in the late 1960s. Bob Dylan, Tom Paxton, and Randy Newman are his influences. He lives on Long Island, because it is less expensive than Greenwich Village. But what does money matter? “We didn’t worry about it; we couldn’t have cared less,” says Allan Taylor. “We just wanted to make music and enjoy life.” United Artists offers him a recording contract; he records an album in Nashville and Los Angeles and travels through America playing concerts in clubs and festivals. And yet, after a few years in America, he wants to return to Europe. The Old World, the culture; both fascinate him more. In the mid-1970s, he moves to Leeds. From there, he tours the Continent again and again: England, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Denmark, Italy, and into Slovenia and Croatia during the breakup of Yugoslavia. He plays in clubs and cultural centers because he “likes the intimate ambience.” In the same way that he likes bars, the “microcosm of life,” the inexhaustible source of a steady flow of new songs.

“My father thought I was crazy to leave my steady job and become a traveling singer-songwriter,” says Allan Taylor. “After the

war, his generation wanted nothing more than peace and security. If you had a good job, you stayed with it. He simply could not comprehend what I did. And yet it was men such as my father who made it possible for us to live as we wanted—as wandering troubadours.”

The 911 turns onto Old Brompton Road. We have arrived in West London. Stepping into the “Troubadour” is like stepping into a fairytale book of the Beat Generation. An old Chris Barber LP cover embellishes the facade. In the 1970s, Bob Dylan stood on stage here, as did Jimi Hendrix, Joni Mitchell, Paul Simon, Elvis Costello—and Allan Taylor. Susie Thornhill, the owner, takes us down to the cellar, where the stage still stands, and where Samantha Gibb, the daughter of the late Bee Gee Maurice Gibb, will be performing this evening. Allan Taylor spontaneously reaches for his guitar and plays his song “Back Home to You.” Memories resonate through the darkened hall. “Strange,” says Allan Taylor, “I don’t really know if that is what I want.”

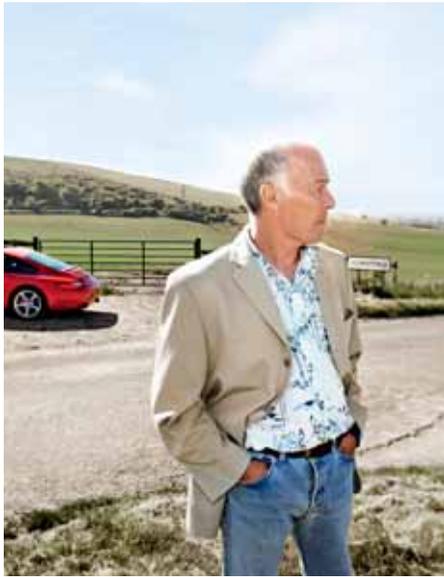
En route to Brighton, Allan spurs the 911 as though he wishes to leave all the memories behind: such a musician’s life is indeed idiosyncratic. In 1978, his album *The Traveller* won the Grand Prix du Disque de Montreux. *Hotels and Dreamers* was honored as the “CD of the Year” in 2004 by

#### 911 CARRERA S

Engine: Six-cylinder boxer  
 Displacement: 3,800 cc  
 Power: 385 hp (283 kW)  
 Maximum torque:  
 420 Nm (4,400 rpm)  
 Top track speed:\*  
 300 km/h (186 mph)  
 CO<sub>2</sub> emissions:\* 240 g/km  
 Fuel consumption (EU 5):\*  
 – City: 15.3 l/100 km  
 – Highway: 7.2 l/100 km  
 – Combined: 10.2 l/100 km  
 \* with PDK



Sun in southern England: Along the boardwalk



Final destination Sompting: Taylor looks back

the German trade magazine *Folker*. In Italy, he once shared the stage with David Crosby. He has composed countless songs, which have been sung by numerous performers in ten different languages. But from the start, Allan Taylor has himself always stood on stage and sung. He considers himself part of the subculture of the scene. "We aren't really famous, but we have a plan and can live from our music." His wife Wendy is more familiar with his lyrics than he is; his son Barnaby Taylor is a successful film composer and last year won an Emmy for his music for the BBC series *Wild China*. Allan Taylor, 65, has seen his dream come true. Not quite the same can be said for Harry Albert Taylor.

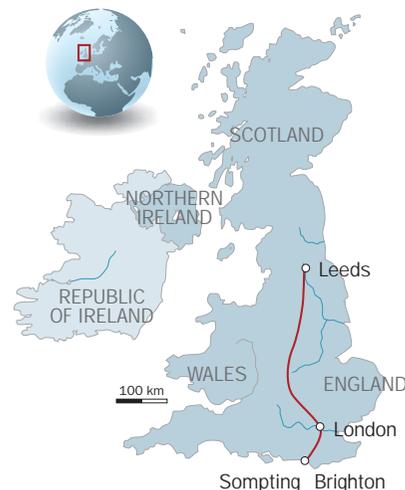
The memory of that last meeting with his father is painful. Allan sat at his father's bedside, holding his hand. Perhaps, Harry Albert Taylor now admitted, it might have been better if he had lived his life a bit more like his own son did. He spoke of things that he had missed out on, of the crazy things that he would loved to have done. To see the world, to race through the neighborhood in a fast car, to go to bars, to celebrate, to feel no responsibility whatso-

ever. "It was a difficult moment," says Allan Taylor, "my father had never spoken much, certainly not about feelings. I knew that he loved me, but I never actually knew what he thought. And why had he then bequeathed his money to me instead of simply spending it? I had to do something for him, even if it was somehow too late."

Allan Taylor kept his promise. He used his father's money to purchase the Porsche, then took the urn, raced through the vicinity, visited bars, and brought the ashes back to Brighton. Right to this place: we are standing on the hills just beyond Sompting, where the senior Taylor had so enjoyed walks with his dog. "As I scattered the ashes, that was the first time I showed him how much he meant to me," says Allan, "but the point of the story is really that one should fulfill one's hopes and dreams now, otherwise one day it will be too late."

The southern coast of England is awakening to a new day. The boardwalk is already bustling with people. We sit over a cup of coffee, and Allan says, "I'm glad we made the trip. At first, I had my doubts. I was through with this town and the old, sad memories. But now there is something cheerful as well. I think I'll come back here with my wife for a week." People are renting deck chairs. The ocean is warming up. And the sun is shining in Brighton. ●

#### THE ITINERARY



## *A Promise and a Porsche*

*As my father lay dying I was holding his hand  
He said "Son there's one thing you must understand  
When they dealt the cards I got the losing hand  
And that's the way it played out for me  
'Cause I never got to ride in a real fast car  
Or get crazy drunk in a downtown bar  
I never even got to go that far  
And there was so much I wanted to see"*

*When he died his ashes came home at last  
And I thought about what he would have wanted the most  
So I bought a real fast Porsche and I damned the cost  
I strapped him in and we hit the highway  
"Hey old man now you know how it feels  
Isn't she just the greatest set of wheels  
She's a bright red beauty and she shines like star  
And we're cruising like kings of the highway"*

*We drove like the wind down to London town  
And we got crazy drunk and started falling down  
And when a new day broke and we came around  
I took him down to look at the sea  
We stood on Brighton Beach where it all began  
Where my father's son became a man  
And I said to him "now you can understand  
What you have meant to me"*

*'Cause I got you that ride in a real fast car  
And we got crazy drunk in a downtown bar  
And we made it together and we've come this far  
And I did it all for you"  
Now when I drive that Porsche it means the world to me  
'Cause I can be the man he always wanted to be  
And if somehow he's looking down on me  
I know he'll smile and he'll say "You did it Al"  
If somehow he's looking down on me  
I know he'll smile and he'll say "You did it Al"*

#### SONGS FOR THE ROAD

All of Allan Taylor's CDs are available at Stockfisch Records. "A Promise and a Porsche" is on the maxi-CD "Songs for the Road" (order number SFR 357.9010.2 on the German and English website at [www.stockfisch-records.de](http://www.stockfisch-records.de)). For more information on Allan Taylor: [www.allantaylor.com](http://www.allantaylor.com). For more information on individual locations: [www.harewood.org](http://www.harewood.org) and [www.troubadour.co.uk](http://www.troubadour.co.uk).



Full sound:  
Scan your cell phone camera over this code to hear Allan Taylor's song "A Promise and a Porsche." See page 13 for more information and instructions.