

“I’m a restless person by nature”

From the role in *Godspell* that made him a star, to *Top Of The Pops*, *Evita* and *EastEnders*, David Essex has never been far from the limelight for more than 40 years. **Nicky Household** meets him.

DAVID ESSEX arrives for our rendezvous in the lounge of a Covent Garden hotel, wrapped up against the icy December wind in a cashmere overcoat and peaked leather cap. As we start to talk, it seems almost incredible that this modest, quietly-spoken, 65 year-old is the same David Essex who, back in the Seventies, had to be protected from his adoring fans by policemen wielding dustbin lids.

With his pop idol looks, his string of top ten hits and his phenomenally successful stage debut as Jesus in the 1971 musical *Godspell*, David remained a teenage heartthrob for more than a decade. But his career didn't end

there, of course, because his acting, singing and song-writing talents took him on to starring roles in the films *That'll Be The Day* (which contained his hit single *Rock On*) and *Silver Dream Racer* as well as the role of Che Guevara in the original stage version of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Evita*.

In the Eighties, he co-wrote and starred in the West End musical *Mutiny!* (based on *Mutiny On The Bounty*) and played the roguish cockney lock-keeper, Davey, in the BBC's romantic comedy series *The River* – for which he also wrote the music.

David has, in fact, never stopped writing music, doing rock tours and appearing in musicals, including Lloyd Webber's *Aspects of Love* and his own successful musical *All The Fun Of The Fair*. He has even done some straight acting – notably in Sir Peter Hall's 1993

production of *She Stoops to Conquer* for a year and a half. “That was interesting,” he says, “but I'm more comfortable with things that involve music.”

Yet he did agree to play the enigmatic Eddie Moon – yet another loveable rogue – in *EastEnders* for five months in 2011. But five months was enough. “Longer than that would have been too much of a commitment,” he explains. “I'm a fairly restless person by nature and I felt it was time to move on.” Will the character ever return? “I doubt it, but we'll see. I've shut the door but I haven't locked it!”

“I'm very lucky that I've been able to work in different mediums with a certain amount of success,” he continues, “and, at the moment, my

main focus is filmic music.” The film in question is *Traveller* (based on John F McDonald's book *Tribe*) in which David plays “an elder statesman gypsy” but which stars his 24 year-old son, Billy Cook, as a young half-gypsy caught between two worlds. “There's quite a buzz around Billy as an actor. He's got presence and charisma and I'm very proud of him,” says his dad.

The film's subject is close to David's heart because of his own half-gypsy roots. Although his father, Albert, was a real East-ender who worked in London's docklands, his mother, Dolly, came from a family of Irish gypsies.

“Her father, Tom Kemp, described himself on his marriage certificate as a ‘travelling tinker’. He died before I was born so I never knew him, but I've seen

“My dad was my best friend and my hero”



pictures and he was a strong, very handsome man. My mum said he put paraffin in his hair to make himself look dark and interesting. Presumably he didn't smoke!" Albert and Dolly were poor and forever having to move house, but David recalls an almost idyllic childhood in Canning Town where they eventually settled. "My dad was my best friend and my hero," he says. "He'd take me out and about on the crossbar of his bike or down to the docks to watch the cargoes being unloaded. Dad was a smart man and he probably would have gone to university if he hadn't come from such a poor family."

But, as he recounts in his recent autobiography, *Over the Moon*, David's world fell apart when his father contracted TB and had to spend some months in a convalescent hospital in Hertfordshire. When he eventually came home, he was

"I felt uncomfortable with all the adulation"

to too weak to go back to his old job on the docks and qualified to become a tally clerk instead. More children were out of the question, so David remained an only child.

Meanwhile, David's mother worked as a cleaner in a pub, and sometimes played the piano there in the evenings. So it was from 'gypsy' Dolly that David inherited his musical genes, although, as a boy, his only ambition was to play football for West Ham.

So passionate was this ambition that when the time came for him to take his 11-plus, David deliberately failed it by drawing pictures of Popeye all over his maths paper so he could go to the local secondary modern, where they played football, instead of the grammar school where they only played rugby.

The plan worked, and after only a short time at the school – which David admits was educationally 'lousy' – he was spotted by a scout and invited to become a West Ham United schoolboy player. For a year or so this was a dream come true, especially as he was being coached by his childhood heroes.

But, as he turned 13, the wilder side of life started to beckon – girls, rock 'n' roll



and, especially, motorbikes, which became a lifelong passion. Older boys, who should have known better, offered him rides through the Blackwall tunnel at 100 miles an hour. He got involved in gang fights and, for a while, worked on the dodgems at a travelling fair. When the fair moved on, he wanted to go with them, but was persuaded by his dad to go back to school.

However, the teenager's focus changed dramatically when, on an illicit trip to Soho, he and some mates found themselves in an all-night rhythm and blues club, the Flamingo, where Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames were on stage. "I was completely transfixed, just blown away," he says, "and I made up my mind there and then that I was going to be a rock 'n' roll drummer."

His loving parents agreed to pay for drumming lessons and a few months later, aged just 15, David answered a 'Drummer Wanted' ad in the local paper. His new band mates turned out to be two middle-aged musicians, and for a while he found himself playing cha-cha-chas and pasa dobles in local Conservative and working men's clubs. But then he joined a blues band, the Everons, whose music was more to his liking.

The Everons had some modest success, changed their name to the China Plates and even recorded a couple of songs that David had written. They also found a manager, Derek Bowman, a showbusiness writer and critic with connections in the theatre.

When the China Plates were clearly going nowhere, it was Derek who persuaded the 17 year-old David to give up his day job (he'd been working as a trainee electrical engineer since leaving school at 15), take acting and singing lessons, and embark on a solo career.

"Derek was my guide and mentor and, without him, I doubt whether any of it would have happened," David says. "I'd have gone on playing the drums and that would have been the end of it. Derek actually admitted, later on, that he only agreed to manage the band because he saw some kind of charisma in me."

There was already a David Cook (David's real name) on Equity's books, so Derek suggested he change his name to

Essex, simply because he lived there. While David toured with a new band, Moody Indigo, Derek got him a string of auditions, which led to small roles in various films and pantomimes. Then, in 1971, he landed the leading role in *Godspell* and became a star overnight.

By now David had married his first wife, Maureen, and the couple were expecting their first child, Verity, now David's PA and a mother herself. A son, Dan, followed in 1978 but David and Maureen's marriage did not survive the years of Essexmania.

No one could get enough of David Essex during that era. His albums and singles topped the charts, he was in demand all over the world and his name linked to countless glamorous women.

"Looking back, I felt quite uncomfortable with all the adulation. It came as a shock

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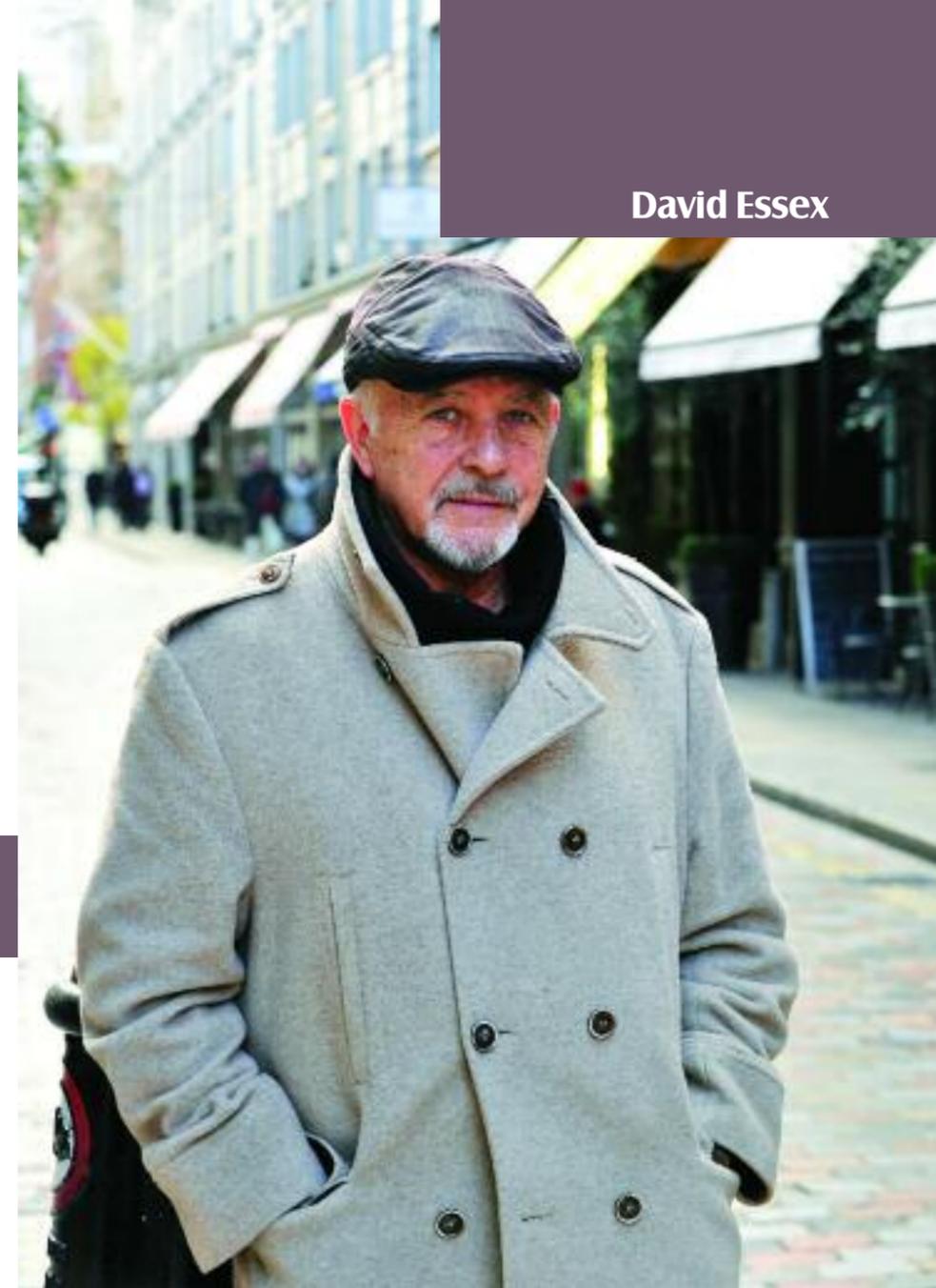
to me and I tried to protect my family from the madness," he says.

"It's a long time ago now and you do forget, but I'm reminded whenever I go out on the road. I've just done a 34-date rock tour and the reaction was amazing. The fans may be older but they still scream and shout – it's fantastic! I suppose the difference is that at least I can hear myself now, whereas I couldn't in the Seventies and Eighties."

His parents, though very proud, were bewildered by his success. "Immense fame has a strange effect on families," he says. "My mum and dad found that distant relatives who'd never bothered to keep in touch were suddenly ringing up and wanting to be part of the action. That can be tricky for close family and it tends to make them a bit reclusive."

In 1984 David fell in love with the American singer, Carlotta Christy and spent the next few years commuting between London and New York. Their twin sons, Billy and Kit, were born in 1988 and they married some nine years later. But by 2008 that marriage, too, had ended.

Then, in September 2010, David married the actress Susan Hallam



David Essex

Wright, whom he met when she was playing his son's wife in a tour of his musical *All The Fun of The Fair*. David describes Susan, who is 26 years his junior, as "lovely outside and lovely inside". The couple live in a central London flat with their terrier pup, Levi, named after David's character in the musical.

Could more children be on the cards? "You never know," David smiles.

Meanwhile, he has five grandchildren and the offers of work keep rolling in. "I don't really think of what I do as work because I move between so many different areas and find all of them stimulating." The

next project may possibly be a stage play, but he is still "thinking about it".

When he was awarded an OBE in 1999, in recognition of his six years as a VSO ambassador as well as his amazing career, David took along his two oldest children and his mum, Dolly, who bought a hat specially for the occasion.

"Life at the moment is fabulous," he declares. "I'm really, really happy. Not because of my success or anything but just because, well, the sun is shining."

■ *Over The Moon*, by David Essex, is published by Virgin Books at £18.99.