

SCOTTISH MUSIC'S GRANDE DAME

Barbara Dickson's remarkable singing and acting career spans more than 40 years. Now she only does what she enjoys – and that includes performing live in Dumfries. She talks to **Mary Smith** about folk songs, hit shows – and a special shirt box

Barbara Dickson, the biggest-selling Scottish female recording artist of all time, is performing at DGOne in Dumfries on March 14 – one of only four dates in Scotland on her 25-gig national tour.

In a career spanning more than 40 years, she has recorded over 20 albums, moved seamlessly back and forth between her career as a professional musician and actress on stage and on television, collecting along the way two Olivier Awards and an OBE for Services to Music and Drama. The singer's versatility does not stop there, for Barbara has now written her autobiography with the intriguing title, *A Shirt Box Full of Songs*.

She was at first reluctant to write her story but, after the third person in a year asked her, she decided to go ahead. "I thought I could let people see how an ordinary girl, brought up in a council house in Dunfermline, became Barbara Dickson," she says. "The title was the publisher's idea. When I was young, my father had a shirt box which I took. It was rectangular with a transparent lid. It was about four inches deep and a useful receptacle for foolscap paper.

"I was interested in folk songs and collected them from everywhere. It was usual for people to exchange songs and if you sang one somewhere, you always acknowledged the person who gave it to you. Now, the lid of the box has gone and the pile is 18 inches high. There are songs handwritten by me and by others like Archie Fisher and it's very precious."

If there was a fire in the house Barbara says she would first rescue the shirt box and one of her guitars.

In the book, Barbara goes back to her childhood and follows the course of her career. Her life has been a series of what she calls "happy accidents and collisions of ideas".

"There was no grand design," she says. "Things happened. I was by no means confident about what I could achieve, though I was always confident in my musical talent."

After performing the music in Willy Russell's award-winning musical *John, Paul, George, Ringo... and Bert*, Barbara was signed by the show's co-producer Robert Stigwood. Her first album, *Answer Me*, reached the top 10 in 1976 and a weekly guest spot on the *Two Ronnies* brought her to the attention of millions of viewers each week.

Her acting career began when Willy Russell asked her to take the pivotal role of the mother in his musical *Blood Brothers*. She had never acted.

"I was asked to read a speech for Willy and the writer and director Chris Bond then sat down with them and listened to what they said and then I read it again. They wanted to see if I could take on board a director's instructions and after 10 minutes they decided I could do it. Then followed three weeks of rehearsals and it did work. People responded to *Blood Brothers*. They



Barbara performing at the Scots Trad Awards in Dumfries in November

still do. It speaks to people."

Barbara has appeared in Taggart and *Band of Gold* and Chris Bond created a show for her called *The Seven Ages of Woman*, for which she won the Liverpool Echo Actress of the Year award. She also starred in the musical *Spend, Spend, Spend* about pools winner Viv Nicholson, picking up an Olivier award for best actress in a musical.

A multi platinum-selling artist, Barbara still continues to record albums and perform sell-out concerts throughout the UK.

"I want people to see what someone in her 60s can do, and do something interesting. I don't do old stuff. When you are a pop star you are part of what Joni Mitchell called 'the star-making machinery' and not a free agent. You do what the producers think will sell," she says. "Now, I'm grateful I can do things I want to do on my own terms. I'm a professional musician and a very passionate artist."

Barbara knows DGOne, the flagship Dumfries venue, from November, when she was invited to sing at the Scots Trad Music Awards as part of the Homecoming Scotland Finale Celebrations.

"Live performance is terribly important. I think, too, it's perhaps as a reaction to reality television – it's becoming increasingly important for people to see someone perform live."

After her tour, Barbara will be doing a radio series on Scottish songs and has three festivals lined up in the summer. She will also be recording her next album – maybe with some of those songs from the shirt box.

■ *Barbara Dickson's concert at DGOne in Dumfries is on March 14 at 7.30pm. Tickets are £22.50. Tel: 01387 243 550 or see www.dgone.co.uk.*

For more information about Barbara, see www.barbaradickson.net.