



A report / a story / an audio montage

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Andy Barrett / August 2026

Friday July 3rd

I'm on the bus from Colyton, the town where I grew up, heading for Seaton. It's where I bought my first record, Showaddywaddy's Greatest Hits (1976), at what is now the Harbour Road Post Office. The town where I went to my first disco at the Youth Club which has now been taken over by the Tram depot. And where I went to my first Nightclub, the much missed (as I am to discover) The Grove. Back then music was all about buying records, joining tribes, and heading out on your moped to a barn disco in the middle of nowhere. The only band people associated with the South West were The Wurzels.

Now I'm heading to the East Devon Soul festival; a two-day celebration of live music, DJs and sound systems in venues across the town. It's not a soul festival, but a festival that has soul; that captures – or perhaps wants to animate, to amplify, to recalibrate – the soul of the town, of the bay, of the area. Or at least to begin to.

The bus pulls in on the seafront. It's ten in the morning and it's a beautiful day; blue sea, blue sky, everyone in shorts. There's an hour before the pre-festival team meeting so I have a wander. The holiday camp that used to bring in the grockles has long gone. The beach toilets are now locked and loomed over by a huge seafront development that looks as though it may have stalled, although at least the seagulls have moved in. I've always wondered, coming back here over the last forty years, why Seaton hasn't really changed? But maybe now it is.

Outside The Vault there's a sign for the Mo Rhythm sound system, a collective of DJ's from the North West, who will soon be taking over this small beachfront bar. I ask those who are having breakfast nearby if they know about what is happening. Some do and some don't, but everyone seems ready [to offer a view](#) on the idea of a music festival happening in their town; views that I will find myself hearing repeated many times.

*It's good for the town ... we got to do it more really ... bring people in.
Us youngsters have got nothing unless you go to Exeter ... we'll see how many of the old people will probably moan and that will put pay to that ... it's a retirement area this place.
Be something different ... something to look forward to.*

I arrive at the Gateway Theatre for the meeting. It's a big space, with a very large stage, one of the biggest in Devon. There was concern when it was closed for five months last year, needing costly upgrades as it's always been an important community space (I remember watching films there in the 1970s).

The new manager 'Sonny' (Ben Evans) is there, along with the two main organisers Simon Strange (fresh from a morning dip in the sea) and Andy Pilkington (Pilki). Friends and partners Kate, Emma, and Galatea, make up the rest of the small team that are wondering what two years of planning are going to bring over the next 48 hours.

Kate is in charge of spreadsheets and creating an organisational overview of what will unfold. 260 tickets have been sold, which means that financially the festival, thanks to other financial support, is afloat. Boxes of colour coded wristbands appear, along with the merchandise – festival t-shirts. There is some concern about numbers, particularly in the smaller venues, and whether people may need to be turned away. There is talk around decibel levels and safety. Please – please! – don't let people swim after dark. The riders and accommodation are all under control and The Vault are making a big curry for Mo Rhythm. All the hotels, camp sites, and air bnbs have sold out. Everyone is really excited about the quality of the bands who are on their way, slightly worried if Kaya Fayeh will arrive on time from an earlier gig on Brighton beach, and perplexed at why the chippie is refusing to stay open later than 9pm with so many people expecting to visit.



One of the venues – Feast - has cancelled as the business is in the process of changing owners, so there has had to be some rejigging of sound systems, which leaves six festival spaces. Live bands at The Gateway, the Old Picture House, The Tramway, and the Jurassic Soul Stage that has been set up just for the festival, where the music will be free and unticketed. The sound systems and DJs – also free – will be at The Vault and The Hideaway (or Cliff Corner for the weekend). Today it will just be The Vault and the Old Picture House that are operating; tomorrow all of the venues will be running and Seaton will have music coursing through its veins.

[I ask the organisers](#) what would define a successful festival, what they are most excited about, what they want to discover. For Simon it's about people coming to Seaton through music to form a community; of wanting bands to see how much the town has to offer; that there are no complaints and everyone is safe. For Andy it's already a success after *dreaming about this for years*. It's about seeing the town transformed, of showing off the venues and spaces and seeing how they will benefit from the festival, financially and otherwise.

Radio sets are handed out and everyone goes where the spread sheet sends them. As Kate rushes off to meet some of the volunteers who will help to run the event, she tells me that the whole message that has been communicated in the build-up is that *we're building stuff and we're creating stuff and we want you to be involved*. She thinks it has been very beautifully done.

[Melissa Sydenham](#), is the volunteer manager for the Seaton & District Hospital League of Friends, at the Kingfisher Centre: *it's great this is happening all around the town ... all this talent that normally wouldn't come here ...and the free events making it accessible for all. I can't think of anything that's happened across so many venues in Seaton before*.

[Penny Dovers](#) is one of the directors of Natural Works, a community wholefood and eco-living hub which has a painting on the window advertising the festival: *anything we can get happening in Seaton is good for all of us, to create a buzz and get us on the map. There is an appetite for this; the Seaton Chamber of Commerce is really trying to get people interested in the town and get things happening. We have a lot of cover bands but not so many original musicians, so that's what I'm really excited about. I've been here for about 30 years; there were more shops and things happening when we moved here. It feels like things are starting to happen again here, which would be amazing*.

[Peter, is a young staff member at the Hideaway](#): *It feels like Seaton has been missing something, that we've been left out. In the winter it can drag around here, especially as a young person. This is definitely something new for Seaton. I have family and friends coming down and have been speaking to people all week. We can do with the tourism*.

Sonny, the Manager at the Gateway tells me about a recent Band Together event where 150 young people turned up to hear live music, many for the first time. The Gateway is a community space for half the week and the other half of the week is about finding a way to pay for that, to keep things running, through a programme of commercial events.

I think it was probably my third week when Simon came and said we've got this crazy idea, will you support us? Absolutely; it's the job. I don't think the Gateway will survive without the support of all of the venue operators within Seaton. It needs to be a destination town, and this is something that is going to start that ball rolling.

It's going to take a long time for us to get the hospitality sector going, the hotels and the B&Bs which have virtually gone. All of the shops are really struggling. If you promote your arts and culture, it becomes a place where people want to be. I believe this is going to be the start of something fantastic. I keep getting told that Seaton, by age, is the oldest town in England, but that's not all Seaton is. It's an eclectic mix of people from all ages.

He's clearly passionate about the life changing potential of the arts and the visceral thrill of the live experience. Of wanting to promote more live music, and to move beyond the roster of cover bands that the venue, like so many others across the country, rely on.

It is the gap between the artist on stage and the audience. It's that mix of the two energies. You do not get it from any other experience ... it's not like a rollercoaster, it's not like a fast car journey, it's not like a walk in the country. There's something there that is truly magical.

Tim owns and runs the Old Picture House, a building that over the years has also been a theatre, a pub, and a club: *We're the poor relation between Lyme Regis to the east and Sidmouth to the west. But Seaton has soul. We've got the best bay for miles and the people here are much more down to earth. Hospitality has taken the biggest kicking it's ever had in the last few years, it's really difficult. We've got to give reasons for people to come out; they don't want to pay unless it's something really special. But the venues can't just keep throwing things out for free. What I need is like what's happening this weekend, collaboration, where we've got an independent promotion and are supplying the venue free of charge. I'm looking forward to people having fun, the town being alive. And hopefully turn a coin or two.*

That word 'collaboration' will come up a lot; 'rowing together', as Sonny said. I'm beginning to see the festival in a new light; not just as a celebration of music, but as something that Seaton can build upon in other ways, that perhaps it needs to.

By 4pm the first band to play the festival have arrived at the Old Picture House, the Bristol based Rumble-O's. [Gaz Williams](#), the bass player and a proud musical journeyman, also plays with Charlotte Church and makes psychedelic improvised electronic music with Steve Davis (yes, the one who played snooker). *Not using laptops but modular synths. It's all about being really present with the other person.*

He is thrilled that his is the first band to play the first festival which he can sense is *really welcoming*. He loves the spread of acts. He loves the different ideas of pushing what soul means. And, like Sonny, he is passionate about the power of live music.



Music is, and has been, and should be this great unifying energy. In a time of such division music is vital. It's a brilliant tool to bring people together. The music belongs to the universe, a magical energy force, and as a musician you're helping to describe it. You're an agent that's helping to connect it to the audience who become part of it ...it's a totally reciprocal thing. Feelings and riffs come out of me that I don't recognise as coming from me but from the audience somehow. It's the epitome of human interaction. I think it will become more and more important. People will start seeking more authentic music. And this festival is about authentic music. It's important, more important than ever before.

Music has been playing at The Vault from midday, just round the corner from what used to be Woolworths where every Christmas I would buy a Top of the Pops record for my Mum, who now lives in a care home overlooking the sea at the western end of the beach. The music has been steadily livening up, with speakers sending it out to those who have gathered outside, the lap of the waves underscoring the afternoon tunes.

Dan, [AKA Way Too Hot from Mo Rhythm](#) has been coming down to the area for some years, through connections with Andy (Pilki). His Dad was a DJ, playing acid house during the early rave scene, so it was the last thing he was interested in. But over time he began to see *there's something about curating the music you're playing to make people move and feel what you want them to feel. To give them that energy to let loose*'.

He started to mix with his dad and they connected through *music more than anything else*. He loves music. *Loves having a mix. Loves seeing people party and making people happy through music. If anything is to be successful and appreciated it's about bringing the vibes*. He's confident that the festival is going to be a success, how can it not be with the sea so close? *There'll be some coin brought in, there'll be some good times had and some good tunes spun. It's going to be a banger*.

Thank you so much for coming to our first East Devon Soul Festival ... the aim is to make Seaton resonate with music. That is the aim and that's what's going to happen.

[And with that](#) Simon kicks off the live music to a packed audience of many ages; all of whom are utterly ready to dance and shuffle and move to 'the new sounds of Severn Delta Surf!'

People end up in a sweaty happy heap at the end; Gaz had told me. [He was right](#).

We've never had anything like that in Seaton before ... When they started off playing Pipeline it was wondrous ... They were fabulous, so unexpected ... We're coming to everything, we're really looking forward to tomorrow ... Really want to see something like this happening more often, original artists doing their thing ... I'm passionate about the town, so this is great ... It will build, it would be great to see it continuing ... We need to do this every year in Seaton ... Give it a few years, everyone will be pouring in ... Yes, we have tickets for the whole thing ... Oh it's a brilliant thing for Seaton ... Any music that comes to Seaton is wonderful and welcome ... I really hope this takes off ... We're back tomorrow and staying here tomorrow night ... It's on the cusp of 'up and coming', but they've been saying this for the last 20 years!

It's time to head back to Colyton. My taxi driver is wearing a Moroccan football shirt. Of course, there's a World Cup on.