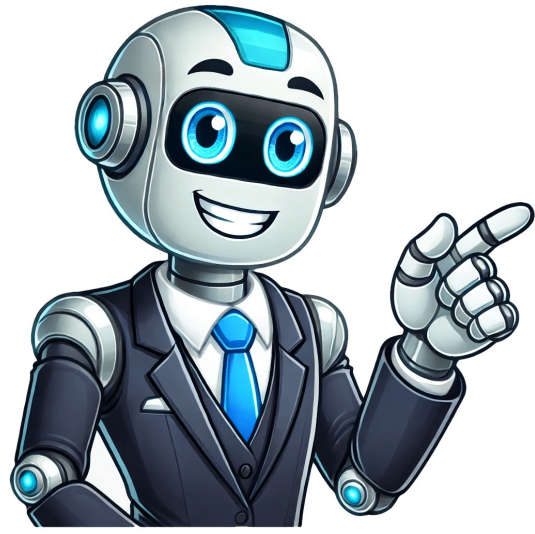


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Steps are sitting in a make-up room at the former BBC Television Centre in West London, reflecting on their three decades in showbiz. “Every time we’ve released an album, or put a tour on sale, there’s never an automatic expectation of success,” says Claire Richards. “We’re always a little bit tentative, like, do people still want us? Nothing was ever handed to us on a plate. We were never cool or relevant.”As if to emphasise the latter point, the quintet – which compromises Lee Latchford-Evans, Lisa Scott-Lee, Faye Tozer and Ian “H” Watkins, alongside Richards, have come hotfoot from the set of Lorraine – a show you would watch for a long time before the words “cool” or “relevant” sprang to mind.But, for Steps loyalists, their gloriously unironic presentation has always been the point. While their pop peers have imploded or fallen by the wayside, that devotion has seen Steps through thick and thin. Their homespun allure (anyone could copy the shonky arm-ography that accompanied their gluten-free version of the Bee Gees’ Tragedy without attending dance school) and artless camp (they’ve become LGBT icons and festival Mighty Hoopla mainstays) has seen them sell 22 million records and garnered them four No.1 albums in four different decades.Their attendant dramas have always played out like teatime soap-opera storylines. These range from the time Watkins came out prior to his appearance on Celebrity Big Brother in 2007 to the band’s initial split in 2001.Not to mention their so-so solo careers, and the very public airing of the band’s dirty laundry in a 2011 Sky documentary series – though, this being Steps, even Latchford-Evans’s assertion in the programme that there was an occasion when he wanted to pin Watkins against a wall and “deck him” comes over as winningly low-stakes. “Why the longevity?” ponders Richards. “There’s a reality to what we do. We don’t pretend to be anything we’re not.”Here & NowGiven this storied history and gentle, everyday appeal, it was perhaps only a matter of time before a Steps musical was mounted – and here it comes. Here & Now, a jukebox extravaganza featuring all the highlights of their oeuvre and on whose behalf the band are on promo duty today, will start touring the country this autumn following a try-out last year in Birmingham, where it became the Alexandra Theatre’s fastest-selling show.Musical Here & Now centres on four friends looking for love while working at seaside supermarket Better Best Bargains – Danny KaanWritten by Shaun Kitchener, a Steps fan and Hollyoaks script veteran, it centres on four friends looking for love while working at seaside supermarket Better Best Bargains. In other words, it’s Sex & The City meets Poundland: a very Steps kind of combination. There are also little Easter eggs scattered throughout for Steps obsessives, like a passing reference to Pasta a la Clara (if you know, you know).“But it’s not reliant on those in-jokes,” clarifies Richards. “I think people will be quite surprised that they can enjoy it as a musical in its own right without knowing any of the songs at all.”“And with a lot of our songs, there’s a banging pop beat, but also an underlying sadness, even darkness,” says Watkins. “I call it party with heart. Perfect musical material.”Even 5,6,7,8 – the novelty techno hoedown, complete with line-dancing video, that launched the band’s career – is present and correct.For a while, though, that song threatened to stymie Steps’ progress before they’d even got started. After answering a mid-90s ad in The Stage newspaper placed by a team of writers and managers looking to put a mixed singing group together, they were chosen from thousands of applicants. But the Marmite quality of 5,6,7,8 was such that only producer Pete Waterman was willing to have his name on it.‘Abba on speed’Waterman took them under his wing, billing them as “Abba on speed,” and sourcing songs for them that exemplified, in his words, “the cardinal points of the pop compass – I love you, I hate you, f–k off, come back.” Did it rankle that they were never admitted to the cool club? (There’s a brief pause while the meaning of “rankle” is explained to a baffled-looking Watkins.)“I used to find it annoying,” says Richards. “We were selling more tickets, more albums. But we just weren’t recognised when it came to awards, recognition from our peers or from the industry.”“Do you remember,” interjects Watkins, “we’d go to massive TV shows like the Smash Hits Poll Winners’ Party, and there’d be All Saints coming in, resplendent in their Maharishi outfits, 5ive there with their entourage, and we’d have to change behind a cardboard cutout of Sugababes or whoever. And we’d be in the same outfits we’d had for years.”“I was chatting away with one of the All Saints girls,” says Latchford-Evans, “and she asked me to go and get her a drink. She thought I was one of the crew.” Small wonder, then, that the five formed a tight, protective unit, in which their personalities were given free rein. “Between the five of us we have a really lovely blend,” says Scott-Lee. “It’s like when I used to watch Friends. You wanted to be in that gang.”Steps’ shonky arm-ography, which anyone could copy from home, was part of its homespun allure - Dave Hogan/Hulton ArchiveThis mutual support network helped avoid the flame-outs that consumed peers like Robbie Williams and Brian Harvey. But there were still difficulties.“I always remember one time,” puts in Watkins, “I suffer with insomnia, and we were in Australia, and I don’t know what happened, but I literally broke down and I cried and cried. I was probably 22-23 and I’d never done that in my life. It was the closest I’d had to some kind of breakdown. We didn’t realise at the time that we could take control, you know? We were given a schedule, we were like robots, it was, ‘You do this, you do that.’”The splitThis seems an opportune time to bring up the fact that, when the group toured America with Britney Spears in 1999, Watkins, pleading exhaustion from lack of sleep, got to bed down on her private jet. Meanwhile, his bandmates slumped it on the tour bus: an event, among others, that precipitated their original split a couple of years after.Watkins and Richards handed their bandmates a letter informing them that they were embarking on a career as a duo – one which almost immediately, and maybe karmically, tanked. (“Did you really hate us?” asked a tearful Tozer of the pair in the Sky documentary, to awkward silences and not-exactly-rush-to-denial shrugs).“It’s all water under the bridge now,” says Watkins breezily of their past differences. “I was really going through it at the time when we first split, and, I haven’t really told anybody about this, but I went down the route of getting diagnosed for ADHD, and knowing now what I know, it all makes sense.”“I’m glad we split up when we did,” says Richards firmly. “If we’d kept going, burnout would have been worse, and the relationships may have been damaged beyond repair.But in that 10-year hiatus, I figured out who I was and where I fit in the world. I did this from leaving school, I signed my first record deal when I turned 18, and I didn’t have any other life. I had no idea how to be a grown-up. When it did stop, I was like, this is great, then, s–tshow do you pay a gas bill? How does the washing machine work?”“It was a little like being in prison,” laughs Tozer. “A very shiny prison.”Today, Scott-Lee runs a performing arts school in Dubai, and Latchford-Evans is a qualified personal trainer. All of the band have done the requisite musical, reality TV or panto stints, and they all have kids. They’ve even made peace with 5678 (after years of outsourcing its performance – to fan videos, or dancers in giant Steps heads – they now “throw everything at it,” according to Watkins: “chaps, saloon doors, ten-gallon hats, the lot”).They’re proud that they get fans coming up to them saying their songs helped them come out or sound-tracked the most important moments of their lives. And they’re bemused, but gratified, that the in-crowd that once shunned them have come out themselves as Steps fans.“Finally, it’s OK to like us,” grins Watkins.Here & Now opens at the Aylesbury Waterside Theatre on August 29th and tours the country until May 2026; details at thestepsmusical.Broaden your horizons with award-winning British journalism. Try The Telegraph free for 1 month with unlimited access to our award-winning website, exclusive app, money-saving offers and more. Steps split in 2001 and have reformed three times since then(Image: Getty Images)Lee Latchford-Evans is appearing on Celebrity Mastermind tonight. The singer was one fifth of pop group Steps, who enjoyed huge success in the ‘90s, selling more than 20 million records around the world.The band, made up of Lee, Claire Richards, Lisa Scott-Lee, Ian ‘H’ Watkins and Faye Tozer, split in 2001 and have reformed three times. We take a look at what happened to each member after the group’s hey day...LeeLee turned to the stage after Steps’ original split, starring in Grease in the West End and he also opted for reality TV, winning Commando VIP. The versatile performer, 49, is a qualified personal trainer and last year launched a workout based on the band’s hits - The 5,6,7,8 Method.Lee has been married to dancer Kerry-Lucy for more than a decade(Image: Copyright unknown)READ MORE: Woman captures ‘ghost soldier’ on camera after her dogs started barking ‘like crazy’Married to actress and dancer Kerry-Lucy for 12 years this year the couple are parents to two-year-old Leo. “We’ve wanted a baby for so long,” said the star following his son’s birth.LisaLisa, 48, runs a performing arts school in Dubai, where she lives with husband Johnny Shentall, formerly of pop group Hear-Say and their teenagers Jaden and Lily. “Steps has been my life for the last 24 years but being the principal of the school is my day job,” she said. ‘I’m mainly office-based now but still teach the kids singing and dance sometimes. I’m really proud to be able to tell people I’m a teacher.” Lisa previously launched a solo career and appeared on reality TV shows including her own, Totally Scott-Lee, Dancing On Ice and CelebAir.FayeLisa lives in Dubai with her family of four(Image: PA)Faye is married to Michael Smith(Image: Internet Unknown)Faye starred in West End shows including Everybody’s Talking About Jamie, Me and My Girl and Tell Me on a Sunday after Steps split. She appeared on Strictly Come Dancing in 2018, where she finished runner-up and The Celebrity Chase.Faye, 48, was married to Jesper Inr for five years and is now married to Michael Smith with a 14-year-old son called Benjamin. Faye describes her IT specialist beau as “the best thing that ever happened to me”.ClaireThe singer with husband Reece and kids Charlie and Daisy(Image: Daily Record)Claire teamed up with band member H when the group split to form Claire & H, before she took a career break to have her children Charlie and Daisy. The singer is married to their dad Reece Hill, former publicity manager of Steps and was previously wed to band backing dancer Mark Webb.Claire, 46, has taken part in reality TV shows including Celebrity Big Brother and been part of the Loose Women panel. She released her second solo album Euphoria last year.HClaire and H formed a duo after Steps split(Image: Getty Images)The star is dad to twin sons Macsen and Cybi, who turn 7 this year(Image: Getty Images)After success as a duo with Claire H turned to musical theatre, starring in Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat. He has appeared in several pantos and took on reality TV shows including Celebrity Big Brother.The singer has twin sons, Macsen and Cybi Ryder-Watkins, with his ex Craig Ryder and He made history in 2020 when he became half of the first ever male pairing on Dancing On Ice with skating partner Matt Evers, making it to week five.Watch Celebrity Mastermind tonight at 7.30pm on BBC One or on BBC iPlayer>Welcome to STEPS, a private not-for-profit, community-based organization providing a continuum of quality, comprehensive substance use treatment services and education to individuals, including those with co-occurring disorders, regardless of age, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or national origin. Prioritizing those who are indigent, pregnant, postpartum, have children and/or IV drug users in Central Florida. Founded in 1983 by a group of concerned citizens STEPS has been dedicated to serving the needs of the community ever since. 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