

# ALAN CLAYSON'S ARGOSY 2002

A minority -me included - found John Entwistle's macabre, cynical compositions the most agreeable aspect of The Who, both together and apart. A man who wrote songs about alcoholism, miserliness, voyeurism, insurance swindles and spiders deserved attention. I was, therefore, saddened by his sudden passing.

On a world-wide scale, however, the biggest pop death has been that of George Harrison a few months earlier. For me, that particular day started out in a "normal" way. Then the BBC rang at 8.15 a.m. - and, next, so did ITV, NBC, Paris, Brasilia, Canberra, Prague... Thus the pattern was set for the rest of the week. I didn't get to bed until dawn the next morning, having endured a holocaust of down-the-line interviews - including one whilst I was trying to wash my hair - being taxied round London to various television stations and cobbling together articles for such disparate journals as *Eastern Eye*, *Hello!* and

*Guitar*. It was all very lucrative especially when my biography of George was serialized in the *Daily Mail*, but more typical was receiving £100 for merely being on stand-by for about an hour at BBC Television Centre. Yet I'm not especially proud of anything I did during what was an exhilarating, exhausting and slightly eerie experience.

Among the side-effects of all this media exposure was that, via the web-site, I was reached by acquaintances with whom I'd had no contact for ten, twenty, even thirty years - with good reason in a couple of cases. Moreover, because I'd been seen on TV in Eastern Europe - presumably with sub-titles - I was approached to perform at a very ambitious international music exposition scheduled for a September weekend in Moscow. I'd have done it for just the air-fare and accommodation, but as the powers behind it - who seemed to be connected to the Ministry of Culture - asked me (in excellent broken English) if I wanted paying, I felt obliged to name a fee to give myself professional credibility.

There followed weeks of to-ing and fro-ing of e-mails, and much excited anti...icipation in our household. Then came a sudden and ominous silence from Moscow which continues to this day. I think that they'd realized exactly what they were taking on and panicked. Anyway, because I'd been telling everyone that I was off "on a tour of Russia", I continued to behave as if this was a possibility long after the trail went cold.

Engagements that actually took place this year have been confined to England. The most singular amongst these took place in June when I was responsible for ten minutes on the bill at a memorial concert for Screaming Lord Sutch at the Ace Cafe, a famous bikers' hang-out on London's North Circular Road. It was one of the worst-organized events in which I've ever been involved. Supposed to start at 7.30 p.m., it got underway just over two hours later. Into the bargain, technical difficulties climaxed with the cancellation of a preview of the Sutch episode of a forthcoming *Juke Box Heroes* series on Channel Four. There were also no less than four different renderings of "Roll Over Beethoven" as what was left of the evening progressed.

After a lot of hanging about, I gave 'em "Johnny Remember Me", preceded by "The Last Show On Earth", a waltz-time ballad that was my attempt to come to terms with what happened to Lord David. Even as I pitched into the first line through a muffled, feedback-ridden PA system, I realized that it was hardly suitable for a crowd expecting the good old good ones from others present - such as Wee Willie Harris, once bruited as a kind of British "answer" to Jerry Lee Lewis. He was received with some affection while he was on the boards, but cut a lonely figure afterwards, seated at his merchandise stall.

Never mind. I was central figure in an impromptu dressing room crack at Johnny Kidd's "Please Don't Touch" with personnel from The Downliners Sect, and, despite everything, I'm glad I put in an appearance at the Ace - which is as much a museum as a cafe nowadays with its "Rockers Shop" (mugs, T-shirts, displays of old photographs and memorabilia, you get the drift). There was also a hidden oral

history going the rounds amongst the clientele - like the legend that, on a clear night in 1964, someone rode from the Ace to the Palace Pier in Brighton in less than half-an-hour. This was before there were speed restrictions on British roads, but I'm still not convinced that this story is true.

Shortly after my expedition to the Ace, I wasn't sure how convincing I was as an olde-tyme rock 'n' roller when little persuasion was needed for me to deputize for the indisposed bass player in a local revivalist outfit called The Rockets for a celebration of the Queen's golden jubilee in a school hall near Newbury. We didn't play "Roll Over Beethoven", but otherwise it was "Hounddog", "Blue Suede Shoes", "Johnny B. Goode" and all the rest of them. (I was waved in to emote "Shakin' All Over" and "Twenty Flight Rock".) It was unambitious stuff, but unpretentious and we all had a laugh - though later I discovered that the metal clasp on my leather jacket had scratched the veneer on the back of my - borrowed - instrument quite seriously.

More legitimate Clayson recitals lately have embraced one in the basement of the Sanctuary, a vegetarian restaurant in Brighton, supported by Project Adorno and Steve Lake - and a return to Dimbola Lodge on the Isle of Wight, where I was accompanied by Dick Taylor and Brian Hinton. I have also premiered three new compositions: "I Hear Voices", "A Song Called Bastard" and "If I Lost You".

Of older numbers in the set, "The Moonlight Skater" is becoming sufficiently well-known for a murmur, even a vague ripple of applause, to rear up sometimes when I announce it. In April, "The Moonlight Skater" - and Wreckless Eric's production of "The Last Show On Earth" - were selected for a compilation album, *Nine Times Two: Contemporary English Chanson*. Two months ago, I was astounded when Sexy Intellectual (!), an independent label based where London bleeds into Surrey, rang to say they'd like to issue "The Moonlight Skater" as a single.

My immediate response was along the lines of "You do understand that it's likely to have the same market impact as a tract from the Flat Earth Society". Sexy Intellectual countered that the usual Top Forty rules don't apply during the December sell-in. So far, promotional copies exist - and the company intend to go ahead with a pressing if there's any noticeable national airplay. However, it's almost December, and the chances of a it being a Christmas Number One - or a Christmas Number Anything - grow slimmer by the hour. In parenthesis, if you're interested in buying "The Moonlight Skater", try [mail@sexyintellectual.com](mailto:mail@sexyintellectual.com).

I have, nevertheless, scored a Number One of sorts in that my authorized biography of The Yardbirds has leapt straight in at the top of *Mojo's* book chart in the December edition. I wish, however, that Edgard Varese was selling at least moderately. As far as the general public is concerned the only indication that it's in the shops has come about through a rubbishing - amounting to a personal attack - in something called *The Wire* - though I've been told that there are rave reviews pending in *Record Collector* and a classical music periodical called *Gramophone*.

*A propos* nothing in particular, I ought to mention that I interviewed an eighty-one-year-old Bert Weedon - still doing regular one-nighters - last spring for *Guitar*, and, several weeks ago, took part in one of the strangest recording sessions of my life. Bob Taylor, a former member of The Downliners Sect, summoned me to a studio in Brompton to assist with his "concept album" of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Attending too were Dick Heckstall-Smith, Don and Keith of the Sect - and Art Wood, once leader of, well, The Artwoods. He has a famous brother in Ted of Bob Kerr's Whoopee Band - and another sibling, Ronnie, has something to do with The Rolling Stones.

The five of us were required to congregate round an omni-directional microphone to re-enact the Battle of Hastings by bawling scripted lines actually in Anglo-Saxon. It all got very frenzied and degenerated into chaos, but Bob - who video-ed our antics - seemed pleased with the outcome.

It was certainly a welcome break from my latest writing project - which is just what the world needs: another book about John Lennon. This is for a bigger advance than usual from Sanctuary, who reissued my respective lives of George and Ringo. Next up is one about Paul so that the firm can put out all four Beatles as a boxed-set.

I can't help thinking that it's going to be a feat of interior decorating rather than a work of literature. Another problem I have is this: I don't know about you, but most of the music by The Beatles, together

and apart, has become so embedded by four decades of availability and airplay that I hear it now no more than a sailor hears the sea. To ask my opinion of “She Loves You”, “Strawberry Fields Forever”, “My Sweet Lord”, “Imagine” or Mull Of Kintyre” is like asking me about railway lines or donkeys’ false teeth - because I can’t say anything constructive about them any more. They’re just there.

More agreeable than listening to the entire Beatles catalogue, therefore, was a concert during the August Bank holiday by the reconstituted Tebot Piws at an outdoors festival in North Wales, curated by Bryn Terfel, an operatic baritone who often sings at the Last Night Of The Proms. Harry and I received “access all areas” passes through the offices of Alun “Sbardun” Huws, the group’s lead guitarist. It was worth every second of a five hundred-mile round trip, and a night in a bed-and-breakfast just outside Bangor, with a severe landlady who’d put “Do Not Use The Shower For More Than Five Minutes”, “Do Not Bring Takeaway Food Into Your Room” and notices of similarly negative ilk everywhere you looked.

When we arrived backstage, we brushed past internationally-renowned Bryn Terfel to pay our respects to the Piws, who were being filmed for a BBC Wales documentary into which I was roped in to gush about how I’d come to be their “Number One English fan”. By this time, I’d so lost my cool that I made Harry take a photo - which is now framed and in pride of place on the piano - of me with Dewi, Sbardun, Stan and Ems, our arms clasped around each other.

After we left them to get psyched up, I was on Cloud Nine. Harry had never seen me in this quasi-teenage state before. At my urging, he and I managed to position ourselves in the very middle of the crash-barrier in front of the stage. Fortunately, Y Tebot Piws’ performance was beyond my wildest dreams. They were augmented by a string quartet, a vocal trio, keyboards, bass, drums...and they did nothing that hadn’t been a smash hit for them in the parallel dimension that is the Welsh pop scene - “Yr Hogyn Pren”, “Blaenau Ffestiniog”, “Godro’r Fuwch”, “Helo Dymbo”, you name ‘em. Even Harry was blasting up chorus after *omnes fortissimo* chorus of “D’yn Ni Ddim Yn Mynd I Birmingham” along with every other member of an ecstatic audience. You’ll think I’m being silly, but it really was on a par - and, after a fashion, may have superseded - The Rolling Stones at Hyde Park, Dave Vanian and his Phantom Chords at the Chelsea Bridge Reunion, and, dare I say it, The Kinks’ concert to which I took Jack and Harry in 1991: as heroic and as impossible as that.

The rest of the festival - or, at least, this “Dragon’s Fire” night - was...intriguing, partly because we must have been the only Englishmen present, grooving to the likes of a Welsh-language heavy-metal group, a Welsh-language compere - and a Welsh-language version of The Beach Boys’ “Wouldn’t It Be Nice”.

Three months earlier, I’d heard Brian Wilson’s arrangement - in English - of the selfsame number at the Royal Festival Hall. I wasn’t intending to go, but a friend had a spare ticket. Whilst not in the same league as the Tebot Piws spectacular, it was uplifting, mainly because Brian wasn’t an onstage passenger as, say, Peter Green seems to be since his own return from Rip Van Winkle-esque vocational slumber. Also it’s the only time that I ever witnessed an artist enjoy a standing ovation before he’s so much as emitted a single note.

Information about “The Moonlight Skater” single is available via [mail@sexyintellectual.com](mailto:mail@sexyintellectual.com)