



ARGOSY SIX

It's a sure sign of middle-age that ailments are at the forefront of this discussion once again. The most minor was a root canal filling with a preliminary injection that almost shot me through the roof of the dentist's. More insidious, however, has been the protracted fall-out from November 2003's stomach operation. It isn't necessary to go into distressing detail - and I'm neither a malingerer nor a hypochondriac by nature - but for weeks afterwards, I was conspicuous for a ghastly pallor and profound weight loss - because, after a while, starvation and dizzy spells were preferable to the nausea and chronic indigestion that food induced.

It was, therefore, a mistake to go ahead with an engagement - three weeks after coming round from the anaesthetic - at the cavernous Bluecoat Chambers in Liverpool. Nevertheless, it was flattering that among those present were Mick and Sarah Jones all the way from Gravesend,, and a couple who'd flown in from Belfast - for whom Chris Gore and I delivered a request, thirty-year-old "Pagan Mercia". We also premiered a new composition, "Heedless Child" traceable to me driving away with tears in my eyes after leaving my younger son Harry with his belongings on his first day at the distant University of Lincoln the previous September.

The night was extraordinary otherwise for a guest spot by guitarist John Townsend, a sometime Argonaut; Chris's lounge bar-style fingering of Merseybeat standards during the intermission, and us and nearly half the audience indulging in a carouse-cum-post mortem in various bars of the Adelphi Hotel after walking through a city centre that was like a scene from Satyricon.



Since then, my only stage appearances have been introducing The Yardbirds at an Eel

Pie Club bash at Twickenham Rugby Stadium, and a one-song cameo when Robb Johnston topped the bill at a parochial folk concert. All existing bookings were cancelled after I blacked out on New Year's Day, and decided at last to heed medical advice.

I did not, however, retreat from public life. On an autumn Saturday, for instance, I was a "talking head" on ITV's prime-time *It Shouldn't Happen To A Pop Star*. Most of the hour or so of interview footage was edited down to the most sensationalist sound bites. These included one that drew from Jack, Harry's brother, the telephoned comment, "That was awesome, Dad! You said fuck twice on national TV!" Certain older relatives, however, weren't very pleased.

This deplorable episode was prefaced by other pontifications on the Discovery channel, BBC Radio Four (a programme about soul music) and a Led Zeppelin DVD. The most intriguing, nonetheless, was when I was central figure of *One-Way Single Parent Family Favourites* one Sunday lunch-time on Resonance FM, a radio station based along Denmark Street - London's Tin Pan Alley - on which I had carte blanche to chat to host Pete Sergeant (see [Eel Pie](#)) about my life, my dreams, my aspirations while airing royalty-earning selections from my discography and some of my favourite records, covering a waterfront on this occasion from Edward German to Edgard Varese, Y Tebot Piws to Twinkle, Project Adorno to The Pretty Things.

There have been too media plugs for the on-going Rolling Stones project and a biography of Yoko Ono (with Robb Johnston and Barb Jungr) as well as the usual reviews and articles - such as a feature for the now-defunct *Ink* (about my literary motivation and methodology) and an obituary of Paul Atkinson, one of the quiet blokes in *The Zombies*.

It was to a living Zombie, Colin Blunstone, that I turned during the dark hours of 2003 when my baritone kept shrinking to a tortured rasp midway through performances, forcing me to kind of extemporise huskily as if a given number's sentiment couldn't be expressed through orthodox melodic articulation. Colin suggested a voice coach - which I tried for two expensive sessions until I learnt that it was possible to receive therapy on the National Health if you could convince the Audiology Unit of the local hospital that you were a pro.

Acid reflux was only part of the problem. The rest was through vocal cords rebelling after a lifetime of bad habits, principally singing from the throat rather than the diaphragm. I also started quizzing other vocalists on what remedies they use. Phil May swears by a substance called Propolis - available in health stores - and so does Arthur Brown, who is advantaged further by the repercussions of two years of classical training when he was a young man.

Inese and I experienced Arthur when he supported *The Osric Tentacles* at Ventnor Winter Gardens in June. Today's *Crazy World* consists of an acoustic guitarist and a hand-drummer who doubles on violin among other instruments. While these two surged to climaxes all the more rewarding for a low-volume restraint, Arthur, if more than a God of Hellfire these days, remains able to swoop from sibilant mutterings to bass rumble to quasi-operatics to insane falsetto within the space of a few bars.

He also displays an alarming line in yodelling on "Circle Dance", a highlight of predominantly acoustic *Tantric Love*, a collection that was my chief source of in-car entertainment until the arrival of *Wreckless Eric's Bungalow Hi*, the musical event of the year as far as I'm concerned. OK, so we're a mutual admiration society - and I'm proud to think that Eric is my friend - but, though there were moments on it when I wanted to collapse, screaming with laughter, on the carpet, he may be responsible for the most terminal album ever released in its synthesis of bleak and eye-stretchingly adventurous

songs, and tape collages that sound at times as if they were assembled second by second, evoking some wild dream that makes perfect sense until the sleeper awakes. Perhaps you'll wonder if you've been had, but maybe by the sixth dutiful spin, individual tracks will gain sharper focus, and the entire sixty-odd minutes might reach out and hold you forever. Me? Well, for whatever reason, I was "into" it straight away; it assumed greater depth with each subsequent listen, and I have no hesitation in recommending Bungalow Hi unconditionally.

The same cannot be said of a Spencer Davis Group that headlined over The Yardbirds during a round-Britain tour last summer. All I can constructively say about them is that they did their hits, and that I sat through them like a detached spectator without much stake or even interest in the proceedings. Brian Wilson's Smile at the Royal Festival Hall, however, was another matter. It was beyond criticism, apart from the spell being broken by a lengthy encore section of "Barbara Ann", "Help Me Rhonda" et al. I went with Garry Jones, whose curriculum vitae as a bass player includes stints with such disparate artistes as Chuck Berry and Annette Peacock (who trades in an erudite blend of uneasy rock and free jazz). Garry's feelings about Wilson's music parallel those of Mad King Ludwig's for Wagner. Yet afterwards, I understood completely why he might have given up five years of his life to hear Smile, lost in myth, as vibrations hanging in the South Bank air. On the train home, I wouldn't have blamed him if he's yanked the communications cord and wandered off into the blackness to calm overwrought emotions.



While I'd anticipated flipping my lid over Smile, I hadn't been so sure about a recital by Kathryn Williams at an Arts Centre in Swindon - which I attended at the invitation of her guitarist, David Scott, who I'd met about four years ago when I was serving as a "personality" at a record fayre in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. This meant that for eight hours, on and off, I leant against a radiator, wearing an expression of fatuous affability, before a table freighted with my books and records while promenading Geordies shuffled past, wondering who the hell I was. David was one of the few who knew, and it was the long term consequence of our conversation then that had me turning a thoughtful steering wheel off the M4 exit to Swindon. Prejudging Kathryn, it crossed my mind that I might be in for a fidgety couple of hours of girly preciousness a la Melanie, replete with lyrics that made you embarrassed to be alive as she perched on a stool, emoting to her guitar, and not forgetting to beam a small, sad smile every now and then. Therefore, I'm delighted to report that it was nothing like that. A thoroughly diverting evening's entertainment mingled excerpts from her Relations "covers" album and self-penned items - from both her latest offering and the LP yet to come - that stood as tall as those she did from the portfolios of The Bee Gees, Lou Reed, Python Lee Jackson (Relation's spin-off single, "In A Broken Dream") and Mae West (!). Furthermore, the accompaniment - by Nora, a 'cellist-and-keyboard-player, and,

of course, David - was assured and uncluttered behind a rather jolly lass from the north on immediate good terms with the customers.

Certainly, I was sufficiently absorbed to drag Inese along when the troupe reached Bracknell in November - and, as a result, Relations and its predecessor, Old Low Light, have been on the turntable every time she's been in the kitchen for more than five minutes.

Whenever Harry cooks a meal, however, he tends to soundtrack it with Alice Cooper - and a week after his birthday on Bastille Day, I took him and Jack to a Cooper extravaganza at London's Hammersmith Apollo. By nefarious string-pulling, I washed up at the mixing-desk where I was impressed by the lethal professionalism of the two-guitar-bass-drums backing group, a ballerina and, for "Gutter Cat Versus The Jets", three choreographed leather-clad louts. Yet Alice guarded his stardom with the venom of a six-year-old with a new bike. Moreover, nearly all the essential elements were intact in a show as slickly contrived as a Broadway musical. While there are no gallows, guillotine or electric chair nowadays, there's still the trademark ghoul make-up, the top hat-and-cane, the androgeny, the forceful vocal attack and all manner of seedy-flash visuals: glam-rock from the chanel house with lots of funny activities involving whips, throat-slitting, fake blood, a boa constrictor, a strait-jacket and an exultant mob blasting up chorus after omnes fortissimo chorus of "Eighteen", "No More Mr. Nice Guy", "School's Out", "Poison", you name 'em - at the behest of one who, if less madcap elder brother than batty uncle now, is much more fun than any more commercially feted post-Woodstock US luminaries. I discerned a shadowy link between Alice and a Damian Hirst installation containing pigs' entrails at In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida, a "Britart" exhibition that ran throughout spring at the Tate Britain.

Having imparted this raw information, I will add no further comment, and will move on to Jack's cultural endeavours, which are focussed on his growing prowess as an electric guitarist. Over the telephone only the other day, he demonstrated his mastery of the wah-wah pedal he got for his birthday with a note-for-note reproduction of the introit to "Voodoo Chile". Overall, his fretboard fireworks are already more proficient than mine (though that's not saying much). At present, he composes nothing but riffs, but, other than advice about equipment, I don't interfere unless asked - as I was by Freddie, one of his cousins. who sent a tape of some songs he'd penned. To one steeped in 45 rpm pop, listening to them was like eavesdropping on someone's bedsit angst. Yet there was no doubting Freddie's passion and the promise of better things to come. Also, it's the bane of my existence that he - and Jack - have got so much longer to do something that I'm running out of time to do - and, if I were Freddie, I wouldn't care this much about the opinion of a fifty-three-year-old disenfranchised by whatever makes the cats all groove today.

Yet how will any of a certain type of up-and-coming musician fare now that John Peel has gone? There were periods during his nigh on-forty years at the BBC when he was, more or less, the sole outlet for non-mainstream pop - or non-mainstream anything - on national radio. My most direct dealings with John occurred during the Clayson and the Argonauts era, and after my presentation of Death Discs on Radio Two in 1996. Though we knew each other essentially in that shallow, showbiz sort of way, I always found him an approachable, endearingly self-effacing and amusing fellow - and I wish I'd had the opportunity to tell him about a pilgrimage I made in 1968 to what I'd been informed reliably was his then-home address in London. There was no-one in, so I hung around outside for most of a chilly winter's afternoon, intending to show him a bundle of my poems in hopes that he'd let me declaim them on his nameless mid-week evening show. Well, I was only seventeen.

A policeman glanced suspiciously at me and spoke into his walkie-talkie, so I chose to shove my teenage verse through the letter box and go away. I should imagine that it must have been quite near the top of John's in-tray when he passed on so suddenly.

Of late, time has been marked too by the first deaths of nearer contemporaries. I was queueing at a supermarket checkout in May whilst flicking through The Guardian to check if my Paul Atkinson obituary was in yet. It wasn't, but Susan Hill's was. At the front door with the groceries, I could no longer not believe it. It was cancer - which granted her the luxury of picking the discs to be played at her memorial service in Highgate. This included "Sugar Baby Love" by The Rubettes.

Susan was beautiful in every sense of the word. Everybody in the publishing business liked her. Everybody in her private life loved her. I entered Susan's orbit in 1988 when she was commissioning editor at Sidgwick & Jackson - and, just as Stuart Booth at Blandford Books had lifted my career as an author off the runway by contracting Call Up The Groups!, so Susan Hill piloted it into the stratosphere from 1988's Back In The High Life to Backbeat's climb into the Sunday Times and Daily Telegraph's best-seller lists six years later. I owe her so much.

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