



The year gone has been punctuated by trips to hospital connected with a cancer scare - which proved to be unfounded - a knee operation (after the removal of a cartilage when I was eleven came home to roost) - and, only last month, extreme surgery in the region of my oesophagus and stomach to curtail acid reflux and thus prevent me from ending up like Jimi Hendrix by drowning in my own vomit. Both the latter visits involved a general anesthetic - which, these days, makes you feel like a human tape-edit in that there's no sense of drifting away or of passing time. A split-second after the injection, you're in the recovery room, asking, 'Have you done it yet?' They don't even ask you to count up to four anymore.

In all cases, I remained in the clutches of the National Health service for the minimum time possible - though for the acid reflux business, I turned up as directed at 7.30 a.m., but was told ten hours later that all the preceding butchery had overrun and that it *might* be possible to fit me in tomorrow. I'm not a very patient patient. Bored out of my skull and furious, I discharged myself immediately, refusing to sign a form stating I'd done so 'contrary to medical advice' for the excellent reason that I'd received no 'medical advice' to be 'contrary' to. Six weeks later, however, my case came up, and I was stuck in a ward bed next to the most self-centred man in the world, a person worthy of a situation comedy or a concept album for his recurrent 'my back hurts something cruel' and querulous demands of every passing nurse about, say, glasses of water, re-arranging his pillows and even to do something about the Moon keeping him awake.

That's enough of ailments - except to say that, though I'm recovering, I've got to eat boring food and live a boring life for the next four weeks - which also happens to embrace a show in Liverpool, the first since an uproarious Clayson and the Argonauts appearance at a palais along Mathew Street where the spirit of 1977 faced the ghost of 1962, namely that patch of unofficial countryside upon which a Cavern was to be reconstructed on the site of the old one after Merseyside in recession fell back on its cradling of The Beatles.

In my unlooked-for role as a Beatles 'expert' - and because Sanctuary Publishers were about to repromote four associated books in various formats - box-set, abridged box-set and spoken word (by renowned British radio presenter Mike Read) - I was a 'personality' during the babble and crush of a London Beatles Day in the basement of some plush hotel, memorable for this dingbat with a silly laugh hovering round me all afternoon, preaching a sermon about what Chet Flippo thought about *Band On The Run* and what Simon Frith thought he meant, and a sojourn, weak with relief, in licensed premises afterwards, moaning about the climate of the present-day charts with Mike Robinson, producer of Splodgenessabounds' UK smash, 'Two Pints Of Lager And A Packet Of Crisps'.

We also touched on other topical matters such as the war with Iraq - which is now entering its second year as far as most people are concerned. Usually, I'm a fairly non-doctrinal kinda guy, but I've rarely been so angry about what doesn't concern me directly. This probably sounds simple-minded, but if it's purely a fight against tyranny, why haven't Bush and his pals (including our own Mr. Blair) piled into Zimbabwe too? The answer is that Iraq is this century's Black Hills of Dakota, and Saddam is its Geronimo.

As an infinitesimal cog in the build-up to the distant bloodshed, I was co-compere - with TV and film actor Robert Powell - of a charity show starring The Yardbirds in Twickenham on 24 January, but, two days later, I was actually performing on the same bill as the group at the Marquee - which had moved from Soho to Islington, and is presently facing grave financial woes.

Nevertheless, it was quite a poignant occasion for me as I hadn't worked at this prestigious venue for a quarter of a century. This time around, however, I wasn't headlining with the Argonauts, but supporting with Wreckless Eric my only accompanist. We were received with some affection, even earning an encore, but it was all a bit Bill Haley and the Comets somehow. I was, however, impressed with the efficiency of the staff who had our equipment off the stage and into the lift to the loading bay while the last major sixth was still reverberating. Also, in contrast to the Soho location, our dressing room wasn't rank and squalid with graffiti-covered walls, but clean and furbished with shower unit, refrigerator freighted with drink and snacks, and mirrors surrounded by light-bulbs (not all of them working). Neither were we paid in loose change.

At this juncture, I ought to mention Eric's recent autobiography, *A Dysfunctional Success* (Do-Not Press, ISBN 1 904 316 18 2), which comes closer to the glory and the stupidity of tilting for rock stardom than a million glossy concert programmes. Rather than bestow upon himself a splendid certainty about everything he ever said or did, Eric mingles humour and self-effacing gloom as he crawls from the sub-cultural woodwork during a troubled provincial childhood and a happier period at art college. An alluring dinginess pervades too throughout his post-Stiff 'wilderness years' when a now battle-hardened - and booze-addled - author led the short-lived Captains Of Industry and then the amazing Len Bright Combo, which cultivated a comically seedy image and the sound of a backdated 1960s beat group.

That's where the story ends. Hopefully, there'll be a second volume taking us up to the present as a further testament to a now dried-out Eric's courage in remaining true to a star shining like no other in the pop firmament.

My own literary efforts this year have included obituaries for people yet to die, beginning with Freddie (of Freddie and the Dreamers, whose 2002 heart attack has left him wheelchair-bound), Mike Smith (once of The Dave Clark Five, who broke his neck this summer) and Jack Bruce (liver transplant). When commissioned to write the first of these by *The Guardian*, I was taken aback by this descent with the promptness of a vulture upon the first hint of a celebrity's demise, but was informed that Jerry Lee Lewis's had been penned thirty years ago (though updated periodically).

The life of veteran pop journalist John Tobler - who, effectively, lifted me off the runway via his 1976 review in the *NME* - was celebrated less morbidly with a 'surprise' sixtieth birthday party in his new home city of Newcastle, complete with a *This Is Your Life*-esque citation, and performances by several who have loomed large in his legend, such as Steve Gibbons, who was my travelling companion on the return train the next day as far as Birmingham. Because we both have had albums issued by Havic Records, there's been talk - and only talk so far - about the pair of us touring together next summer.

If time permitted, I'd welcome such an opportunity as a change from the sporadic one-nighters that have been my lot since the last epistle from Claysonville. Amongst these have been a rather fraught set on a bleak Monday night in North London - again with Wreckless Eric - with a truly objectionable master-of-ceremonies who ate into our spot with an over-long turn of his own, and, as a result, started bursting into valedictory applause whilst attempting to stride onto the boards to wind up the proceedings every time there was a *tacit* or *diminuendo*.

Far more agreeable was my hand in the ten-day run of *English Chansons: A Celebration Of Contemporary Urban Song* in March up the West End no less, albeit at a venue called, unprepossessingly, the Drill Hall. For my two performances - a matinee and a soiree on the same weekend - I was reunited with Chris Gore - who was also on keyboards for a recital at Club 85 in Hitchin (a town that cradled the Day Turnpike Went to a Recording Studio in 1973) before an audience of around two hundred 'youths' and, half a class up, 'young people' to whom, because most of them had never heard of me, I brought the aura of a fresh sensation, even if (a) I was old enough to be their Dad and (b) my voice started packing up halfway through for reasons to do with the then-worsening acid reflux. All the same, we went the distance, and were rebooked for January by a promoter who takes no account of inflation.

As flattering was a solicited outlet for my 'economic' acting ability as the only person on camera in a film short entitled *Blocked*. The plot - if it had one - was about a poet grappling with his muse and thinking about the death of some bloke. I don't think it's ever going to be on in a cinema near you.

Other activities have included a Jacques Brel extravaganza at Whitby Pavilion with Robb Johnson and Des de Moor, and a return - for the fifth autumn running - to Dimbola Lodge on the Isle of Wight where, in deference to co-star Dick Taylor, I gave 'em a higher percentage of Pretty Things numbers than ever before, notably 'Can't Stand The Pain' (from *Get The Picture*) and 'The Sun' (*Emotions*), which Dick tells me were world premieres as the Things themselves have never played either on the boards.

Has Ritchie Blackmore ever performed 'Just Like Eddie' - the Heinz single on which he was responsible for the guitar section in which it lived - on stage? He didn't when I received a sudden press ticket for Blackmore's Night in November. Overall, it was a disappointing experience because I'd expected it to be like 2002's *Past Times With Good Company*. This was a double-CD in-concert offering that I wasn't expecting to enjoy - as I'd never been all that gone on Deep Purple or Rainbow - but did because it wasn't anything like that. However, in the flesh, Blackmore's Night interspersed excerpts from *Past Times With Good Company* - all amplified mediaeval instrumentation and the mezzo-soprano of the gorgeous Candice Night - with 'Black Night' and further concessions to the kind of person who talked during the quiet bits and cheered loudly whenever Ritchie put down his lute and strapped on a Stratocaster.

Two more events at which I have been a spectator rather than cynosure of all eyes were the launch of *I'm With The Band*, Pamela des Barres's revised memoir of her days as a super-groupie and one of Girls Together Outrageously - where the main purpose of the evening for many was to see and be seen - and at a 'British Legends Of Rhythm And Blues' package featuring Zoot Money, Long John Baldry, Paul Williams and Ray Dorset (Mungo Jerry). You'll think I'm terrible, but the highlights of it were Zoot and Long John's banter between numbers, Ray's show-stealing blink-and-you'll-miss-him cavortings and, for the wrong reasons, the obligatory 'Let The Heartaches Begin' finale.

That same week, more where-it's-at for me was an absolutely aethereal concert by the Riga Cathedral Girls Choir, even though I forewent the chance to lig with the band after the show. Inese, however, was able to speak her native language with the conductor and blag a copy of the girls' latest album.

The old country reared up too in the Latvian inscription on the headstone to my mother-in-law's grave, and Inese's last look at the interior of the house in which she grew up. Other domestic news is that, now in his second year of the University of Bournemouth, Jack has moved into what I'd describe as a 'posh' if crowded house. Certainly, it's light-years from the semi-derelict dumps in which I dwelt when I were a lad. He's also learning the rudiments of the guitar I bought for him at a car-boot sale a decade ago. So far, he's mastered the three-chord trick that is the key to The Troggs, 'You Really Got Me' and 'I Need You' by The Kinks, and 'Californication' by The Red Hot Chilli Peppers.

Harry has a room in a hostel also containing six girls at Lincoln University. As part of his media studies course, he has to make a three-minute celluloid study of a topic from modern history. He sought my advice, and I've put him in touch with Dave Berry who lives nearby. While he seems to find the course absorbing, Harry had not forsaken his interest in wrestling, and may be making a semi-professional debut in this capacity sooner rather than later. We've been trying to think up a suitable alias for him. The favourites so far are 'Menacing Quentin', 'Thorfinn The Mighty' and 'Cassius Clayson'. Any further suggestions will be welcomed with open arms.

Finally, something associated vaguely with wrestling took place a few weeks ago when I entered a supermarket to be confronted with two fellows stuffing items up their anoraks quite openly. When I used to shoplift, at least I had the grace to do it furtively. They pushed past me, and one of them sort of smirked. That was all. It came and went in the blink of an eye. Yet, in that instance, something in me snapped and, as they left the building, I abandoned my trolley and rushed out too.

I seized hold of one of their anoraks, but, crying out 'Fuck off! Fuck off! Fuck off!', the wearer wriggled out of the garment and fled, his stolen goods clattering onto the pavement. Passers-by clapped and praised my courage - which on my terms is a mixture of panic and lunacy - but the store detective reprimanded me for being silly - along the lines of 'He could have had a knife' and 'He could do you for assault'. The longer term effect of this episode, however, is that I've now acquired a reputation as the local hard man, perhaps the most miscast role I've ever played.

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