



Argosy 2007

All that was missing was some seated twerp doing "Streets Of London".....

Now and then, I come across a record that aligns with the stage in life I've reached - though I never imagined it would ever be by Frank Sinatra. Nevertheless, purchased at a car boot sale, his September Of My Years 'concept' LP - with tracks like "Last Night When We Were Young", "When The Wind Was Green", "It Was A Very Good Year", you get the drift - has been on instant replay whenever I've been in the throes of some onerous household chore. Perhaps a subliminal reason for this is that time has been punctuated lately by five deaths of folk known to me. All were from over the hill generations such as my own.

The most venerable was Peter Mound, head of music during my ignominious sojourn at Farnborough Grammar School. He awoke in me a wayward earnestness in so far as his lessons were not approached as avenues for either illicit relaxation or larking about, but striving to at least half understand the rules of harmony, counterpoint and all that. It's thanks to him that I can sight-read - at a snail's pace, mind - and very laboriously script the dots of the principal riffs of my compositions for cellotaping at the appropriate junctures on 'sheet music' otherwise containing nothing but lyrics, chord letters and notation peculiar to myself.

Handsome, aged about thirty, and with dark hair as long as it could be without being called to task by the headmaster, he had a way of grinning over the top of his spectacles that just about slew me - and wonderment at Mr. Mound motivated a thirteen-year-old to audition for and gain the contralto role of 'Ham' in his production of Noyes Fludde, Benjamin Britten's opera, at Guildford cathedral with the Grammar's sister establishment, Aldershot County High School For Girls. One of enough minor problems for Mr. Mound to start World War III was me being unable to pitch a three-part harmony passage. This necessitated a Saturday morning standing over the piano in his front room, attacking the offending notes from different angles. Gently, he intimated that I might have to 'be philosophical about it' if he decided to replace me with an understudy, but, in the end, he didn't have the heart.

It was through him that I first heard Edgard Varese, and when my biography of the latter was on the verge of going into print, I made e-mail contact with Mr. Mound, daring to call him 'Peter' when speaking

to him two or three times in a phone. I was intended to stop off at his home in Farnham in January on the way back from a meeting with a publisher, but when I rang to say I was on the way, his wife told me he was too ill to see anyone. He was gone by March.

That same month, I attended a 'Celebration Of The Life of Art Wood' back at York House in Twickenham. The real stars of the evening were an ecstatic capacity audience, many recollecting nights less than a mile away at Eel Pie Island hotel functions room - 'a place to dance to the music of a locomotive band,' Dickens called it - and among such 'locomotive bands' in the mid-1960s was The Artwoods who, like their Downliners Sect blood-brothers, almost-but-not-quite Made It in the lottery that is pop.

With a photo enlargement of the genial Art as backdrop, the Sect and an Artwoods - with no less than Jon Lord on keyboards and Ronnie, Art's Rolling Stone sibling, on guitar - mingled R&B set-works with what may be considered their 'hits'. Delivering crowd-pleasing goods too were a diverting array of further turns, whether, say, a skiffle trio led by Chas McDevitt, ex-(Small) Face Kenney Jones's new group and the now customary cameo by some elderly Tiller Girls, conspicuous too in The Art Wood All-Stars - though the show was stolen by Mick Avory commandeering the central microphone for a "Dedicated Follower Of Fashion" that had me wondering, if not seriously, whether in Ray Davies, The Kinks had chosen the right man to be lead singer.

In 2004, I'd conducted what neither Art nor I could have realised was his last interview. Game and articulate, he was proud of the vocational triumphs of Ronnie - who, predictably, was the most entertaining of the eulogists at the funeral. Charlie Watts was present too in a huge turn-out on a rainy winter's day. My black suede winkle-pickers became so soaking wet that an offer to a lift to the railway station was an incentive to forgo the burial after a ceremony soundtracked by an omnes fortissimo "All Things Bright And Beautiful" and recordings by Art such as "Hoochie Coochie Man" - something of a signature tune - and "Midnight Special".

Within a fortnight, Rick Hardy, killed in a road accident on the 12th of December 2006, was laid to rest at Mortlake cemetery too. Suffering from 'bereavement fatigue', I didn't go - as I didn't either to Peter Mound's memorial concert - but I spared much thought for Rick that day, having known and liked him for ten years. He'd been one of the dramatis personae I'd encountered when researching Hamburg: The Cradle of British Rock - for, resident at Soho's 2Is Coffee Bar, a shrine of British pop, he, Tony Sheridan and others had been hired in 1960 for reassembly as 'The Jets' in the Kaiserkeller. Five scruffy Liverpoolians arrived there a few weeks later, and Rick helped John Lennon choose the Rickenbacker he would still be picking at the height of Beatlemania. On a flying visit to the Star-Club in 1962, Rick joined The Beatles onstage, borrowing Lennon's instrument to give 'em "I Go Ape" and "C'mon Everybody".

He came to but did not participate in a couple of my performances - and I was there for respective one-nighters in an old folks home and a working mans club where Rick was trading in the gags and comic songs - some self-penned - that had kept him in well-paid work since hanging up his rock 'n' roll shoes. He was also a talented

photographer, providing about a third of the Hamburg plate section.

Next up was Tony Dangerfield, my bass playing colleague in Lord Sutch's Savages, taken by a stroke at the age of sixty-two. His Guardian obituary - which may be read in unexpurgated form else where on this web-site - appeared the day after the rockers' reunion that was his send-off at Hendon on a glorious June day. Receding hair apart, Tony had clung onto the good looks and slim physique that had caused Joe Meek to single him out for solo stardom that wasn't to be. 2005's *The Rebel's Got Soul* proved, indeed, to be his musical epitaph - and an unexpected one in that it extended to reggae, soul and further areas as far removed from the Savages and most of his other output as it could be. My only criticism - and it's a very subjective one - is that the too-pure tone of a synthesised vibraphone lent a certain BBC Light Programme edge to otherwise fiery passagework on an album that completely justifies the words of John McNally of The Searchers: 'You don't have to be young to make good records'.

Tony, Rick, Art and Mr. Mound were all good men and true, but their shufflings off this mortal coil paled beside that of Garry Jones, one of my closest friends. In the middle of summer, his cancer reared up again, and he deteriorated to the degree that his brother flew over from Canada, and Garry married Katy, his longtime girlfriend, in hospital. During one visit, I actually mentioned the D-word indirectly, i.e. 'Do you reckon you're going to pull through?' Via a notepad - because Garry could no longer speak - he was quite willing to ruminate about this, though it was a bit like speaking to Meher Baba as Garry couldn't write very quickly and much of it was illegible.

The least I could do for him was get in touch with Annette Peacock - for whom he thrummed bass in the 1980s - who sent a message not long before Garry faded away peacefully on the 20th of August. I still can't believe it's happened. When writing the tribute to him on another part of www.alanclayson.com, it crossed my mind to dial him to check some fact or other.

At the funeral in a former Mormon temple - now Church of England - famous for one Sunday service being dignified by the touring Osmonds, one of a combo fronted by Roger Winslet, father of Hollywood icon Kate, had volunteered to pump the pipe organ, but he was somewhat out of his depth. The 23rd Psalm and "Jerusalem" were taken at a - and this either is or isn't the most apt adjective to use - funereal tempo. However, he's got the hang of "God Only Knows", the play-out as the coffin left for the crematorium.

Hopefully, all this hasn't been too oppressively mawkish. If it has, I'd like to point out that there stand restaurants where diners can select from a tank an anxious fish to be netted, slaughtered and gutted before their very eyes. In like fashion, maybe a prelusive scent of death has whetted your literary appetite for the rest of this account of the past year.

It begins with what I can now joke about as my-fight-for-life. However, there was nothing remotely funny about an ambulance rushing me to accident-and-emergency twice in the same autumn week, with a kidney stone, the most painful medical condition known to humankind, worse than giving birth apparently - and worse than a

previous episode in 1998. It fostered in me a fine shamelessness. All so-called English reserve evaporated and, even as the paramedics were knocking on the door, I was writhing on the sofa and yelling for them to do something.

Because the blockage couldn't be removed easily, I was under the scalpel three times over the next month, firstly to bypass it, leaving me with an uncomfortable awareness in my inflamed insides of a plastic device called a 'stent'. Have you seen *Alien*? I'm alluding to the scene where it leaps out of John Hurt's torso. Two days later, the accumulated nausea, anaesthetic, fatigue and morphine brought on all manner of side-effects which climaxed with me blacking out on the kitchen floor, and being returned for 'tests' to the selfsame ward where Garry had been in palliative care.

My spells in hospital were not as tedious as they might have been, owing mainly to a review copy of *The Restless Generation*, Pete Frame's chronicle of a decade when bomb sites served as unofficial playgrounds and car parks as a result of most UK cities and larger towns being half-blown out of existence by the Luftwaffe. Subtitled "How rock music changed the face of 1950s Britain", this magnum opus's laugh-out-loud wit enlivened desperate hours broken only by meals, the ministrations of doctors and nurses, a bloke who not so much talked as roared in his sleep - and a frisson of excitement when an inmate of a local mental institution was placed in the bed next to mine - with wardens at his side day and night, even if, under constant sedation as he was, he didn't start raving or behaving in any untoward way whatsoever.

While I'm still feeling a little sore around the solar plexus, my digestive system is sort of getting back to normal, and I'm able to concentrate on work less reluctantly. Yet I decided to pull out of a *Halloe'en* night show in Brighton. He who hesitates is sometimes saved - because, four years ago, a fortnight after a stomach operation, I made the error of pressing ahead with a booking in Liverpool (see *Argosy* 2003). 'The show must go on' isn't always a sound maxim to follow. Nonetheless, please don't get the impression that I'm forever in a poor state of health. I'm very much the opposite most of the time.

However, not improving either my physical condition or my temper was the sudden disappearance, courtesy of some gremlin, of half a chapter - five thousand words - of the autobiography I've been commissioned to do by *Chrome Dreams*. What with this and other grave delays, I've been at it since July and have only just joined *Turnpike*. With the working title *Nut Rocker*, I estimate that it's going to be a long time coming.

Since the early 1990s, all my books have been put together on an *Amstrad* - because (a) I'm very much a Luddite and (b) I've had disasters on the PC, a machine I've come to loathe, whereby I've lost entire articles, lyrics, letters, you name it. Perhaps the fault's all mine, but I can't help but regard my PC as a senile but spiteful elderly relation. Recently - and I do understand that it's a stupid thing to do - I've taken to clipping it round the 'ear' whenever it's being inordinately slow and/or malevolent.

Much of my income since summer has been scratched from

critiques, obituaries - and a column devoted to modern classical music for The Beat, a mail-order periodical 'dedicated to the Music and Stars of Rock 'N' Roll, R&B, Blues and other music from the 50s, 60s and 70s. Presumably, I represent 'other music'. My chief qualifications for this are Edgard Varese and membership of the now sundered Portsmouth Sinfonia.

For purposes that are yet non-specific, there have also been taped conversations with such disparate luminaries as Billie Davis - whose career left the runway with 1962's delightfully gormless "Will I What" duet with Mike Sarne - and Dave Pegg of Fairport Convention.

More crucially, two Clayson tomes reached the shops in spring. I was quite pleased with The Origin Of The Species - original title: Something Happened To Me Yesterday: Sunrise On The Rolling Stones - but The Gospel According To Lennon, a pot-pourri from the arch-Beatle's forty years on this planet, will become, I trust, a well-concealed ledger in my cultural account, owing to issues I had with the publisher - which are detailed in another part of this site - and consequent extreme strategy that halted just short of me mailing 'damage limitation' statements to Record Collector, Mojo, Q, the Guardian media supplement, Farming News, Yachting Monthly and every other media outlet going.

I'm not exactly boastful either about being a 'talking head' on what can only be described as 'trash TV'. For approximately thirty seconds each on two consecutive Saturdays - plus repeats - I was on BBC3's The Most Annoying Pop Moments We Love To Hate, pontificating on topics like Phil Spector, Ozzy Osbourne and the McCartney divorce. Weighing up the cash benefits against my self-picture as an artist too, I spoke of all the wives and girlfriends of The Beatles for New York's ABC News, albeit distracted by the off-camera inquisitor's mini-skirt and low cleavage.

A charming biker girl named Rachael fired the questions when I chatted about Pink Floyd's Meddle plus the usual various Beatles and Stones items in a DVD clinic near London Bridge, but it had been sometime Clayson and the Argonauts manager Clive Stanhope's sacerdotal drawl that prompted my contributions to Original Soundtrack Recordings: Music At The Movies on Radio Two in January.

The easiest money made in 2007 - and, indeed, at any other time - was a sinecure as an 'adviser' for a heavily publicised Timewatch programme to do with John-Paul-George-and-Ringo's touring years. It's not much of an exaggeration to say that all I did was bank cheques. They've never been my favourite group, but I seem to surface in Beatles retrospectives of all types as frequently as supporting actor Victor Maddern did in British movies. Only last August, I was 'a slightly wild character' in a memoir by Geoffrey Ellis, a former NEMS executive to whom I was introduced when a 'personality' at the 1996 Chicago Beatlefest.

I was as bemused when leafing through Hundred Watts: A Life In Music by Ron Watts, who loomed as large in my legend as he did in that of The Sex Pistols, going so far as to offer Clayson and the Argonauts his services as manager on noting reaction to us at his two principal venues, High Wycombe's Nag's Head and, more

prestigiously, the 100 Club. I can still see him now, at the rear of the mob, eyeing a biscuit tin of coins and then us on the boards, fingering his moustache with sly satisfaction. Why then was there not so much as a sentence about us in what was his mostly diverting and amusing haunting of the backstairs of UK pop?

This glaring omission was mitigated, I suppose, by a paragraph about me in a glossy University of Reading gazette 'for Alumni and Friends', and when I was interviewed for a newspaper local to Dover, my place of birth, in a series hinged on renowned worthies with connections to the port - though there might have been an element of barrel-scraping in my case. I was also listed in a Reading Chronicle piece on the city's rock stars, along with the likes of Ricky Gervais (!), Roger Winslet, Ian Gillan, Mike Oldfield and The Chemical Brothers - but with not a word about either Arthur Brown or Mike Cooper.

Chaos theory appears to apply too with regard to the ratio between advance bookings and customers rolling up on the night. Since Clayson and the Argonauts' exhumation, we've had spillings out onto the pavement following hardly any sales in advance, but there were two concurrences early in 2007 when we played before a mere handful of curiosity-seekers. It seems to depend on such a number of variables these days - and other acts of our vintage with whom I've exchanged persecution complexes say much the same.

As to the quality of our performances, the present edition of the group was truly tearing it up in front of around twenty mid-week at the Half-Moon in Putney (scene of our apparent finale in 1986). Not so impassioned, however, was a recital on a freezing February evening at Windsor Arts Centre - where the sound engineer was another Farnborough Grammar Old Boy. He'd been there, damn him, precisely thirty-six years ago to the month when, backed by a drummer, bass player and my own guitar slashing, I lasted just over ten long minutes at the Kiln Hall in Hartley Wintney, a village near Fleet, bisected by both the A30 and a social division of tea-shoppe gentility and what our colonial cousins would call 'trailer trash'. Every electrical artifice, including the only microphone, was powered by the same puny amplifier - with the fretboard instruments, via some tricky soldering, fed perilously through one jack-plug. The subsequent fiasco terminated with me swearing and flicking a V-sign at the onlooking 'young people' and 'youths', then unplugging and storming dramatically out of the building. Not for the first or the last time, I was the central figure in a theatre of embarrassment.

A battle-hardened old pro nowadays, I'm planning an Argonauts 'tourette' for the New Year, and am nagging the label concerned about a DVD with the provisional title Aetheria: Alan Clayson And The Argonauts In Concert. The location was the Cellars in Southsea, co-promoted by John Roberts of Barking Spider - responsible for me opening for The Muffin Men in 2005 (see Argosy 2005) - and the venue's proprietor Steve Pitt, who, in an e-mail that passed between them, enthused, 'CLAYSON: went on his web-site today and had a good listen. It's insane!!! I love it!!! What an amazing blend of rock opera, 60s concept stuff (e.g. Ogden's Nut Gone Flake) and pre-punk general lunacy!!!!'

We finished with three encores, and, through a press of well-wishers,

stumped an awestruck fellow who said he's seen and been 'knocked out' by the old group somewhere in London in 1977. What he'd just witnessed was as new and disquieting an experience for Phyllis, a fan and dear friend all the way from Illinois: 'I was totally amazed by your performance. I've never seen anyone able to make a tiny stage into a huge space of energy. You're beautiful, you're wild and you guys FUCKING ROCK!!!'

A party from distant Penzance turned up at New Greenham Arts Centre, just beyond Newbury, where an attempt had been made to tape a 'live' album, complete with casually strewn mistakes, but the idea was abandoned in favour of a visual project when we were sent footage of most of our set by a lensman associated with the support group, Mark T and his Rootdogs.

In the same auditorium in June, I made a guest appearance at a show to mark Mark's fiftieth birthday, with "Celestial City" and, by contrast, a medley of "Shakin' All Over" and "Gloria", my party-piece for such occasions.

The most important enterprise in my own right, however, was the Clash of the Titans that was myself and John Otway - who was accompanied by Barry Upton, producer of his "Bunsen Burner" hit in 2002 - back at the Cellars, three months after I'd been there with the Argonauts. It was an absolute blast, aided by ticket sales going through the roof following a plug on the regional television magazine, South Today, making a big deal about us appearing on the same stage for the first time in thirty years. That had been when Melody Maker had gasped about 'the most inspired piece of casting since Richard Fleischer set Tony Curtis against Kirk Douglas in The Vikings, Otway and Clayson presently occupy premier positions on rock's Lunatic Fringe, challenged only by Wreckless Eric.' The edge was taken off the Southsea reunion fractionally, however, when , still plastered with stage make-up that caused the two cops to exchange we've-got-a-right-one-here glances, I was breathalysed - negatively, I might add - on the way home. As chance would have it, this incident took place when hurtling through Fleet towards Hartley Wintney.

At two further solo ventures - both in May - I was flattered that idols of my adolescence were in respective audiences. Arthur Brown presented me with a fine pair of brown shoes during an intermission at a 'Celebration Of Serge Gainsbourg' in the cavernous Old Market Garage in Lewes, where I was declaiming extracts from the relevant biography. That afternoon, the God of Hellfire, Dick Taylor and Scarlett Wrench, sixteen-year-old X-factor of The Malchicks, were around when I investigated the studio co-owned by their manager, the celebrated Mark St. John. It was, undoubtedly, the most impressive, well-appointed and generally agreeable recording complex I've ever known - proficiently clean and refreshing worlds away from the doss-houses where you get to recognise individual biscuit crumbs on the day-to-day journeyings up and down a ledge on which an empty can of orangeade might also linger for grubby weeks next to a discarded tape-head swab-stick.

Two weeks earlier, an exuberant and affectionate Twinkle had turned up at the second of two consecutive evenings back at Dimbola Lodge on the Isle of Wight (see Argosy 2000). The first was as 'special guest' at a ghastly Friday night folk club by any other name,

epitomised by a Joni Mitchell impersonator, someone reciting a poem about his wife's unfaithfulness, and a geezer with a beard working his way through the full twelve-odd minutes of Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row". All that was missing was some seated twerp doing "Streets Of London". The Saturday engagement had come through painter Peter Davies, who also required me to scribe programme notes for an art exhibition ('Sharing A View') previewed in the same place that weekend, and focused on island landscapes. If you're interested, my offering is reproduced at the end of this discussion.

The following month, I returned to the Isle of Wight with two press passes - the other annexed by my son Harry - for a festival headlined by The Rolling Stones. You don't need me to tell you that they were sensational, brushing aside like chaff all that preceded them like matchsticks, especially one keenly fashionable combo whose chubby little bum-boy of a lead vocalist I found truly offensive for his incessant and patronising milking of us "beautiful people" in an undisguisably posh accent.

Sir Mick Jagger's no workin' class 'ero either, despite his on-mic insistence that he'd camped out among the multitudes the previous night. Yet, while everyone else had been half-killing themselves to rouse the rabble, his Stones were casually cataclysmic as a matter of course - while giving a show with prideful thought for the paying customer that extended in every sense to a hydraulically-operated platform that bore Mick, Keith, Charlie and Ron plus the bass and keyboard players into the very centre of the arena and full all-round view.

Thus, for around twenty minutes, the matchstick figures beneath the proscenium with the horns and backing chorale became flesh-and-blood mortals within reach yet completely untouchable like deified Caesars in the midst of the conquered Gallic peasantry - but, hey, lighten up, man. It's only rock 'n' roll. Well, they didn't do that particular smash during a necessary streamlining of their usual stadium set. Nonetheless, room was found for the most recent single - "Rough Justice" - a just-sufficiently ramshackle "You Got Me Rockin'" off Voodoo Lounge, an obligatory lull for two lead vocals from Keith, and respective duets with Jagger by Paolo Nutini and Amy Winehouse. Yet it was far from cheery old timers making way for up-and-coming young stars - for "Satisfaction", "Brown Sugar", "Jumping Jack Flash" and the other ancient crowd-pleasers will be in the air long after the music of both these exquisites and that of the rest of the also-rans that weekend have been forgotten. For Harry's sake more than my own, I was relieved that the top-of-the-bill was everything I wanted it to be. The Stones are one of his 'influences' on the My Space for his new outfit, The Electronic Males, not yet a stage entity, partly because the personnel live over a hundred miles apart.

Of other events where I was an observer was one at Newbury Corn Exchange with which I might not have bothered under ordinary circumstances. However, it was a big night for Gail Hendrickx (Richards as was), Inese's best pal from college, who was singing with a Duke Ellington-Count Basie-type band from Prague with a startling thirteen-piece horn section. With a glimmer of how much she had on her plate, the near-full auditorium loved Gail for wanting to please them, and her assured soprano shimmered like moonlight over the sea of heads.

More my bag was Brian Wilson at Bournemouth Opera House. As it had been with the Stones, I hadn't contemplated going until a publicist put me - and Jack and Harry - on the guest list. The centrepiece was a new 'work' that was absorbing in its immediate familiarity, but Brian would have been lynched if he hadn't topped and tailed it with the good-old-good-ones. It was noticeable that there were quite a few empty seats, possibly because his return to public life is no longer a novelty, and he's become like London buses: if you miss one Brian Wilson round-Britain tour, there'll be another along shortly.

Breathing their round him in Bournemouth was a mixture of business - thinking about how I'd review his efforts - and pleasure - at how much the boys enjoyed it. Outlines dissolved between my professional and domestic life too when I sold most of an enormous record collection that had been simply taking up space, most of it untroubled by a gramophone needle, for maybe decades. It was strangely liberating to have rid myself of all that vinyl, though I have yet to get round to the seventy-eights.

SHARING A VIEW

As a cultural trackway, the Isle of Wight is both remote and soothingly familiar. In the sphere of music, for example, while Ryde cradled a parochial Lonnie Donegan in Philip Norman - now infinitely more renowned as an author - its rock festivals trip more easily off Joe Average's tongue when discussing the island's contribution to the rich tapestry of British pop - and the origin of this expedition may be traceable to such an event in 1970 that was close enough to this very building to be heard within its walls.

Three of the participants were among the half-million attending. Over the decades since, individual return crossings wrought the understanding that, while other areas in the kingdom can offer more obviously spectacular scenery, the topography of the Wight contains aesthetic possibilities that have more to do with the very lack of in-
yer-face drama, a subtlety that can be as loaded as another region's most vivid hues. Certainly, the island is comparable to Gauguin's South Sea retreat or Byron's Italy in its potential to inspire artistic vitality - and accommodate it as Dimbola Lodge has the work of the five acclaimed painters who occupy that wide territory between realism and abstract impressionism.

Yet outlines dissolve and contents merge - and any given landscape has not only at least a shadowy link to the others, but is also as much an embodiment of the Wight experience at its most timeless as a zephyr on an endless summer's day in Brightstone Forest; not a leaf stirring and a touch of mist on the horizon on Tennyson Down; the moon in its starry canopy shining bright as day over interior hills of storybook meadows; seething winter winds across Freshwater Bay, and the calm of sunset when the surf is down.