



THE ARGOSY 2008

Things are happening, though they appear to be doing so with majestic slowness. Usually, because there's a danger of looking daft if trails go cold, I don't telegraph them in these epistles, but five summer days at Wreckless Eric's studio *sur le continent* might have spawned the bulk of a proposed new Clayson solo album.

Eric dwells in a village landlocked in south-west France with his North American wife Amy Rigby, a singing composer of similar artistic appetite and cultural background. In the booklet of 2008's eponymous album together - a surprisingly easy marriage of otherworldly aetheria, C&W sweetcorn and points in between - they are pictured in their leafy garden and in the front room where every note had been hand-tooled in a workshop ambience and with an Aladdin's cave of equipment and instruments. These range from sophisticated digital to ancient analogue, and the newest-fangled synthesiser to the wheezy old harmonium I'd pressed six years earlier when, with Eric at the controls in his Brighton flat, we'd been working on a waltz-time ballad penned shortly after Screaming Lord Sutch's burial in July 1999, and embracing samplings of his Lordship's voice.

As night thickened on what was left of the day of my arrival *chez* Goulden, one of eight Claysongs we hoped to finish before my return flight assumed less amorphous form, but, if freighted with an instrumental counterpoint lifted shamelessly from a Beethoven concerto, it defied succinct description - as you might guess from its very name, 'Forest De Winter Kit-Kat'. So began a sonic adventure in which there were moments when two men in deep middle age, aided and abetted by the lady of the house, behaved like unrestrained children in a toy shop.

Hours before we resumed recording, eyelids had parted on a morning swimming with humidity. The millstones of everyday life seemed to have ground to a standstill, apart from our continued hacking out of a record as if from a lump of solid acetate. Foreheads were bestowed perpetually with pinpricks of sweat as we stuck doggedly to the sharp demarcation line between producer and client. Having been on the other side of the fence - as midwife to releases by Dave Berry and Welwyn Garden City's boss group, The Astronauts - I understood fully the necessity of taking direction from one who had already apportioned trackage, short-listed devices and effects, and visualised each item's overall 'shape'. Conversely, recognising that I was as battle-hardened by the pop process as he, Eric was open to ideas that, if not guaranteed to achieve desired outcome, might be worth considering.

So far, so amiable, but heavy air was still flopping like a wet raincoat over the surrounding hills, and double-glazing stayed shut against the infiltration of noise both ways. Foreseeably, I'd be bathed in tedium during this or that mechanical procedure, and Eric might have bitten back on irritation at some of my back-seat-driver-ish suggestions. Yet our personal dynamic was such that utterances unamusing to anyone else might have us howling with laughter on the carpet.

This partly because Eric and I both have a touch of the obsessive-compulsive. At mealtimes, we tend automatically to arrange place-mats, cutlery, salt cellars *et al* into Mondrian-like patterns. More germane to this dialogue, in the uncluttered orderliness of the small studio, Eric's guitars are racked as if in a trade fayre; pedals and minor percussion gaze at you from spirit-levelled shelves, and three banks of keyboards stand in regimented lines. Towering over all like a Castle Sinister are the ladings on the table that has sprouted along the length of an entire wall. An old TEAC tape-recorder flanks the switches, dials, faders and screens of a multi-track console at which Eric, perched on a high stool, labours like a painter at a canvas.

He and I earned our recreational pauses by layering flesh onto the skeletons of 'The Prettiest Girl' and 'Celestial City'. Yet it has to be said that, like 'Forest De Winter Kit-Kat', these had been routined from my primitive demos, and even turned into workable backing tracks shortly before Eric uprooted to mainland Europe in 2006. They were by either the pair of us or Eric on guitars, bass, programmed drums and more, overseeing the xeroxing or enhancing of my keyboard parts by Graham Beck, heard too on *Bungalow Hi*, Goulden's last 'British' album.

Off the French assembly-line without fuss or melodrama also poured 'Cressida', 'Teenage Runaway', 'Heart Of Darkness' - and worth-the-whole-price-of-the-album 'Ug The Caveman', about a horror-fixated disc-jockey, and infused with the one-shot novelty of such as 'Mr. Bass Man', 'Yellow Submarine' and, more pertinently, 'Monster Mash'. One of its idiosyncrasies was my doubled-up vocal in unprecedented bass register, augmented during the bridge section by Amy cooing like a sweetly bestial Emmylou Harris.

With a day to go and in the teeth of the heat, we were still firing on all cylinders - as exemplified by 'Heedless Child', a Clayson-Goulden composition with a text traceable to me motoring away, veiled in melancholy on leaving my younger son outside a student hostel on the afternoon he began at the distant University of Lincoln. The melody was Eric's. To familiarise me with its finer nuances, he'd taken me through it as a pre-session loosener for the previous two days so that it would flow more naturally onto hard disc.

It did so as the sunlight turned rancid. Then, with time in hand and rather light-headed, we had nothing to lose in a little messing about, beginning with what is likely to be the album's only non-original, appositely Gallic 'Un Grand Sommeil Noir', a setting of a Verlaine poem by Edgard Varese, subject of one of my biographies, and one of the most daring icons of modern classical music. A version by *bel canto* soprano Mireille Delunsch proved a helpful demo.

We weren't quite so out of our depth with 'This Hollow Crown', a sort of Clayson 'Don't Cry For Me Argentina', penned *circa* 1974 when, as a one-man composer, librettist, choreographer and set designer, I'd been nagging, on and off, for weeks at an 'opera' concerning the Abdication Crisis - that had boiled down to just three arias after I lost sympathy with the central character.

'This Hollow Crown' was sturdy enough to warrant a trial mix along with the scheduled stuff - to which we listened on Eric and Amy's car stereo beneath a starry canopy with the moon shining brightly over the vastness of slumbering woodlands and story-book meadows.

The Aquitaine countryside never looked more beautiful - certainly more so than the concrete desolation outside the terminal at Stansted, a couple of hours along the air corridor. Hurling down the M25, I couldn't resist an earful of work-in-progress at what may be titled either *Dover Soul* or *A Windmill Too Far* - an allusion to Don Quixote - when cast adrift on the CD oceans before 2009 is out. No question, Eric Goulden had drawn from me the best I could give at the time, inspiring confidence about the concluding sessions this coming January. For that reason alone, should the finished product suffer critical rubbishings and have the same commercial impact as a tract from the Flat Earth Society, well, so what?

As it's been for much of the past twenty years, my principal source of income remains through writing. The Rolling Stones monopolised books published in 2008, namely Japanese translations of the Jagger and Richards biographies, and my contribution to Flametree's

'Classic Albums' series - eighty thousands words about Beggars Banquet - after I'd raged through labyrinthine (and mostly pointless) 'recommendations' by the sub-editor - some smart-alec in New York who fancied himself as some kind of Stones oracle.

Other than that, there's been the usual obituaries, critiques and sleeve notes - plus commissions from Guitar & Bass magazine, among them a piece concerning Ian 'Tich' Amey (of Dave Dee-Dozy-Beaky-Mick-and-Tich), who stole a standing-room-only Sounds Of The Sixties show I witnessed in May via his jaw-dropping mastery of balalaika, mandolin - oh, and guitar. In between dealing with tasks like this that earn immediate money rather than on what I think matters more, I've continued slogging through Nut Rocker - which has just got past the formation of Clayson and the Argonauts in 1975. Fortunately (or unfortunately), the contract didn't specify a deadline.

There's nothing like a tangible commitment by an outside party to motivate the completion of a project, even when it necessitates a degree of compromise. How many artists have had to make that in order to merely stay alive? This may be instanced by most composers of the mainstream 'classical' period who, with maybe fifteen children to feed, were obliged to cater for the recreational whims of the king, duchess, archbishop or whoever else was their paymaster - the olde-tyme equivalent of a radio station programmer. Generally, they weren't hooked on experiment - and so how could Mozart, Handel and all that shower ever progress when under a dictate along the lines of 'There's a state banquet coming up. You've got to hack out music for it. Make sure it's something I can enjoy'?

In my own experience, that's akin to what dealt a body blow to Clayson and the Argonauts when we were signed to Virgin Records for a disinclined one-shot single, 'The Taster', in 1978 - which is why, long freed from the constraints of tilting at the charts, I don't trouble with that ignoble ditty when on the boards either on my own or with the twenty-first century Argonauts.

Both entities tend to undertake bookings in seasonal bursts. The group was more active in spring than in an autumn conspicuous for a gig-as-a-Dadaist-concept in Swindon. Making his debut in February at the Dirty Water club in Tufnell Park, London N19, was our new drummer - or maybe not so new - because Graham Bartholomew was in the big-band edition in the 1980s. Since then, he's carved a niche as a classical percussionist. Indeed, the sharp-eyed might spot him in the BBC Concert and Henley Symphony orchestras - and notice that Graham has been spared the external wear-and-tear of the intervening quarter of a century, most obviously by hair the same colour it's always been, and all of it staying on his head.

The Dirty Water - specialising in 'garage punk' - was a baptism of fire, beginning with a soundcheck that fuelled its manager's growing suspicion that we were counter to his designations about what should and shouldn't be played there. Next, the show started late; the two preceding acts overran - though the first was intriguing for an incorporation of *three* drummers, positioned upfront and smashing out exactly the same rhythm on every number - and we went on at just about midnight, two hours past the agreed time. Furthermore, attendance wasn't as high as anticipated, owing to an inconsiderate bloke flinging himself beneath the wheels of a tube-train during the rush-hour, causing the Northern Line's closure for most of the evening.

As showtime approached, we loitered in a truly dingy dressing room - graffiti on the walls, a puddle of some noxious liquid in a corner - and I wondered why, after over thirty years in the business, I was still surrounded by ugliness. I observed too what a bunch of ravers the Argonauts had become: one reading the *Evening Standard*, another with his nose in some paperback, and others regretting us not insisting on taking the middle spot on the bill so we could go home early. All that was missing was the chamomile tea and, perhaps, a chess tournament followed by a debate about the transmutation of souls. Finally, we went the distance on stage, got paid and collapsed into bed not long before dawn.

It was the same story back at the Metro, scene of our triumph in 2005. A *why-the-hell-am-I-doing-this?* mood impinged itself as early as the previous afternoon when, within five minutes, I received calls from both warm-up groups, asking to not only use our back-line, but to *borrow*

our instruments too. Anticipating how the Argonauts were likely to feel about this, I responded to each with a pleasant and side-stepping dissemblance that was the vehicle of no information or help whatsoever. This might seem mean-spirited, but owing to the complications of an intention to film the spectacular, the setting of amplifier levels, and Graham's employment of an electronic kit, it made sounder sense for them to liaise with each other about sharing resources.

When it came to it, both dragged out their slots with tunings-up lasting minutes on end, false starts and, most unprofessionally of all, one of them delivering a long and unasked-for encore. The upshot was that we had to try to cram our set into the time that was left before the place metamorphosed into a disco at 10.30 p.m. Thus, we fought the clock in the light of the dancers queuing in freezing rain, and a self-awareness of the lenses chronicling our every gesture. To crown it all, a thief was poking about in the band room and was about to clean out Pete Cox's wallet.

Provincial engagements were jubilees by comparison. On the Saturday after a scintillating return to Club 85 in Hitchin, we gave 'em a well-received and unbroken routine (viewable on the home page of www.alanclayson.com), embracing 'The Landlocked Sailor', 'Arnold Layne' and a lot more besides at the Garry Jones Memorial Concert ('Jonesfest') in Reading. - which I opened with a solo 'God Only Knows' (played on 'holy' organ at the funeral) to my own keyboard fingering. With an across-the-board audience ranging from musical confreres to folk from Garry's place of work, it was an uplifting extravaganza - though I could have done with less of baritone saxophonist Tim Hill's ten-minute unaccompanied *peep-parp* lament. Nonetheless, a reformed El Seven - the combo Garry and John Townsend led in the 1970s - went down well as did seated singing guitarist Terry Clarke with a number pertinent to Garry, 'The Boys In The Band'.

Memorable too are appearances that same month at Brighton's Prince Albert - minus an indisposed Andy Lavery, and where my long-lost cousin Marion and her husband materialised backstage, and a nephew was to fore in the supporting Beat Presidents - and the Cellars in Southsea after each was publicised with thirty respective seconds on ITV's *South Today* evening news bulletin (the 'and finally' *cat-stuck-in-a-tree* bit), sending ticket sales through the roof. We went down a particular storm at the Cellars, which was captured on camera by Harry with his media studies degree, directing Jack and their friend John. There were no less than four encores - including an 'impromptu' 'Wild Weekend' in honour of the very late Mike Smith of The Dave Clark Five.

Moments like these are becoming rarer, partly because of the expectations of consumers raised on *watching* rather than *listening to* freeze-dried, computer-proficient MTV pop containing no margin of error or cracks in the image - and not so much musicians who have formed groups as corporation executives who are effectuating mergers in an industry now as dependent as any other upon what can be proved by a column of figures.

On this basis, quality is usually costly, even if packaged and presented in the way with which we were obliged to deal at Southsea: hand-held cameras from within the audience, an unadorned production criteria, indifference to conspicuous marketing problems - hinged mostly on the ravages of time on the principals - and music that feels like it's hanging on a thread during an event that happened at only one time and in one place.

Hence the delay and attendant difficulties with *Aetheria: Alan Clayson And The Argonauts In Concert*, a DVD first earmarked to be in the shops in time for last winter's 'tourette'. Spanners hurled in the works about artwork, the visuals at the Cellars, and the inherent problems when an interested company tried again at the Metro had me putting forward the idea of calling it either *Beat The Clock: A Rough Night In London* or *You Ought To See Us On A Good Night!*. Certainly, I was struggling to care about whether any DVD was released or not until another firm, Kissing Spell, offered to put out the December 2005 'comeback' concert next spring.

For a purpose that is presently non-specific, one of the Clayson solo dates in October and November was also immortalised likewise. Luckily, that night - at the Thunderbolt in Bristol -

was as wild in its way as it'd been with the Argonauts at the Cellars. On the principle that a drop of black makes white paint whiter, I was spurred into an especially *bravura* performance by slight damage to the Dan-Electro guitar left to me by Garry Jones, which is now the twelve-string I use permanently on stage (though wracked with guilt about the faithful old acoustic that seldom leaves its case nowadays). Into the bargain, aspects of my past life flashed before me in the frozen faces of a sister and two nieces - one of whom was She Tells Lies, essentially a gifted singer-songwriter in the grand tradition - within the staring mob.

Worthy of mention too is the first of two recitals at the Latest Music Bar (formerly the Joogleberry Playhouse) in Brighton - where about forty (including Scarlett and George of The Malchicks) turned out - good going for a Tuesday, traditionally a hard night, especially in the ongoing economic malaise, and where John Harries - making his maiden appearance as 'Windgather' - all but emptied the building with his electronic and free jazz avant-gardening (that, personally, I found absorbing).

Then there was a celebration at Club 85 of thirty years of The Astronauts - during which I indulged myself with 'interpretations' of 'Twenty Flight Rock', 'Please Don't Touch', 'This Strange Effect', 'Johnny Remember Me' and a medley of 'Shakin' All Over', 'The End' and 'Gloria'. You will never experience the like of it again - or will you? See, I was pondering giving 'em the same at the similar 'Adornofest' - the difference a decade made to Project Adorno - back at the Latest Music Bar, but elected to stick to what had seen me through the string of one-nighters that had paved the way to it. In parenthesis, the Adornofest audience was dignified by the presence of virtuoso multi-instrumentalist Nick Pynn, also a mainstay of The Lost-And-Found Orchestra, who trade in original compositions for 'found' objects - saws, bellows, bottles, kettles, drainpipes, dustbins, you name it.

During Praveen of Project Adorno's introduction that evening, I was taken aback when he ran a tape of Peter Sissons interviewing me at short notice on BBC News 24 one lunchtime in July about Mick Jagger's sixty-fifth birthday. The renowned broadcaster was most affable, but I couldn't help but picture him as 'Pontifical Pete', head boy of Liverpool Institute High School For Boys when the younger Paul McCartney and George Harrison were there.

George entered the conversation during a like chore - about life in Hollywood-on-Thames (i.e. famous showbiz personalities living in the Henley-Ascot-Windsor triangle). Yet it took place in the front window of a Camden pub about a mile from the Dirty Water - so that red buses shunting past would indicate that it was actually happening in England. Onlookers gathered outside, and two women sought my autograph afterwards, convinced that I was either Andy Warhol (!) or 'Doc' out of *Back To The Future*.

There was less vagueness about who I was when, with my lecturer's hat on, I prefaced a screening of two pop movies during the *Filmspeak* season at the Thunderbolt. One of these was for *Backbeat*, where I was joined by Allan Williams, the self-styled Man Who Gave The Beatles Away - and who, as I discovered during an after-hours carouse, still has a fine operatic tenor.

As a Beatles 'expert' too, I reviewed (for *Record Collector*) Philip Norman's *John Lennon: The Definitive Biography*, one of the most astonishing feats of scholarship and research in *any* literary genre, despite an inclination to soft-pedal his subject's more wallyish exploits and pontifications in the later 1960s and beyond.

This is probably a suitable point to stress that, while I reckon The Beatles were OK, as far as British beat groups were concerned, I was more 'into' the likes of The Yardbirds, The Kinks, The Pretty Things, The Zombies - and The Dave Clark Five - for, though it seemed inevitable since he broke his spine in 2003, Mike Smith's death saddened me more than those of Lennon and Harrison, though this was in part to do with the only occasion I ever met him - in licensed premises in Putney - when he came across as a very pleasant fellow.

So was pianist Russell Churney - once among the cast of the Jacques Brel revue with me, Robb Johnson, Barb Jung, Attila The Stockbroker and others - who was gone at the age of

forty-two. Another passing this year was that of Sean Body, director of Helter-Skelter, who had the entrepreneurial boldness not only to take on my Troggs biography (with Jacqueline Ryan), but to let me present in 1996 a decidedly peculiar 'evening of chanson' in the associated dedicated music book shop's basement in Denmark Street, once London's Tin Pan Alley. All my recollections of Sean are happy and amusing ones - and it's the same with everyone else I knew who entered his orbit.

I shall treasure too an April afternoon with Eric Burdon and a cassette recorder. He was on a flying visit to England for a concert with War at the Royal Albert Hall, and to plug a solo album, *Soul Of A Man*. What's left of his hair is now quite white, and the lines on his visage also reveal that his sixty-seven years on this planet haven't been quiet ones. Yet Eric Burdon still looks like Eric Burdon. That may seem a silly statement, but, for all the often unremitting media visibility, other rock stars don't pass muster in this respect when bereft of the stage trappings. George Harrison, for example, looked in the flesh like someone who looked like George Harrison.

In the refectory of a Kensington hotel, Eric and I spoke of art, politics, singing, sex, drugs, fame - and some of the myths and legends of a life less ordinary. A few weeks later, however, I kept strictly to the point on the telephone when questioning Dave Clark about a new greatest hits collection - though I contrived to tell him in so many words that much of my adolescence was made halfway bearable though rejoicing in his Five's successes as if they were my own. What's more, I was flattered to be listed among 'famous fans' on a Five website (www.dc5bitsandpieces.com), and I felt a glow of vindicated pride when Dave and the other two surviving members of the group were inducted into the US Rock 'N' Roll Hall Of Fame at New York's Waldorf-Astoria in March. You can imagine, therefore, how the hours dragged by as I awaited Dave's ring.

In 1966, however, I'd commenced a quantum jump from a preoccupation with The Dave Clark Five to one with Frank Zappa and his Mothers Of Invention, who I discussed for a Prism Films documentary in September - as I did Roy Orbison, in readiness for a BBC Radio Two programme to be transmitted twenty years after his fatal heart attack. I shall conclude this round of gratuitous boasting with the raw information that I was quoted on the front page of the 17th of February's *Sunday Times* in an article about the Stones' pot-calling-the-kettle-black comments on Amy Winehouse's descent into substance abuse; that a feature in the *South Wales Evening Post* (see www.thisissouthwales.co.uk) put my 'commitment to performance' on a par with that of P.J. Proby, and described me as 'the kind of lyricist whose words might read like a John Keats poem or Joe Orton play'; that, one day when purchasing a week's respite from August's foul weather, Inese and I ate lunch with Twinkle and an evening meal with Dick Taylor - and, lastly, that a devotee of Ray Dorset and Mungo Jerry spied this ode sprayed on the wall of a railway platform in Stockholm:-

**I WISH I WAS AN
ARGONAUT**

**SAILING THE
SEAS OF
ABYSSINIA
TO GET THE
GOLDEN FLEECE**

**BUT CLAYSON'S
WEARABOUTS
(sic)**



**FIRST I MUST
FIND**

**SO MR MUNGO
DORSET,
WILL YOU HELP
ME PLEASE?**

You don't have to read this - and I don't know *why* I'm bothering with it.

My younger son and I were in the VIP enclosure at June's Isle Of Wight festival, listening, dancing - as far as we were able - and even yelling along to the latter-day Sex Pistols. A pair of plonkers near us were chattering with disrespectful backs to the group. The one with the loudest mouth was a bald-headed porker; the other was a small nonentity with a rat-face asking to be punched. He'd fronted a bunch of in-one-ear-and-out-the-other Midlandsers during the afternoon, and had been full of "Ow yer doin'? All right?" exhortations. Crowd reaction had been subdued.

When I shushed them politely, intimating that they go somewhere else if they wanted to talk, little Rat-Face began weighing up whether there was any publicity mileage here. I could see it in his eyes. Suddenly, he exploded with an unconsciously humorous outburst of - rather la-di-da - shouting and swearing at me. Hardly anyone took any notice. That appeared to be that, apart from further impotent attempts by him and his mate to explode a trivial matter into an 'incident', even through the *New Musical Express* the following week, representing it as cheeky young shavers versus an old square. It was all so cheap, unfair and untrue - but, apart from those who were there, who's going to believe me?

Other than - mostly visual - facets of The Stooges and The Zutons, Rat Face's band and nearly every other main arena act was remarkable only for its dullness, even when that lager-saturated seventeen-year-old, fresh from puking on his with-it dad's shoes, was committed to bawling his applause to the skies. It's probable that they'll all be fading away by next summer.

The Sex Pistols, however, have become as much part of the national furniture as, well, Vera Lynn - to whose 'There'll Always Be An England' they trooped onto the vast stage: Steve Jones resembling an Ealing comedy career criminal; a wizened but fit-looking Paul Cook, and Glen Matlock, the most artistically gifted Pistol, bringing the words 'Dorian' and 'Gray' to mind. Then there was Johnny Rotten, vastly appealing as a Max Miller-esque cheeky chappie. Indeed, if his vocabulary and the group's songs weren't so pocked with 'controversy', a Royal Command Performance could beckon. Fuelling this possibility too were Johnny's sententious pronouncements about pride in your country, though no-one was certain how these were meant to be taken.

While no Scott Walker, he can - sort of - sing too now, and the others lend him a fiery and inspirational framework, advancing these days with the venerable grace of fencing masters on ovation-earning singalongs from days gone by. If anything, the replacement of the angry scowls of yore with a middle-aged joviality is almost the point because, as both entertainers *per se* and as the most distinguished living artifacts of punk, John-Paul-Steve-and-Glen are built to last.