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For the first half of 2011 and slightly beyond, I was on the road with *CLAYSON SINGS BREL* - billed sometimes as *CLAYSON SINGS CHANSON*. Response was most encouraging in that attendance was most impressive, even mid-week at the Frome Festival - and the Stormy Monday in Barnes, apparently a famous cabaret venue. Indeed, both Tony Bennett and Buddy Greco have worked there in recent years - though I bet neither of them had to change in the kitchen as I did.

None of the audiences seemed to mind that, although the lion's share of the repertoire was from Jacques Brel's portfolio, we delivered items by other *chansoniers*, Gallic and English, as well as going off on tangents with such as 'Un Grand Sommeil Noir', Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich's 'Last Night In Soho' - sung absolutely straight - and, by contrast, 'Sweeney Todd The Barber' an ancient music hall opus that I used to perform with Clayson and the Argonauts (and Billy and the Conquerors), but haven't unveiled in public for a quarter of a century. Crucially, the majority of the lyrics were in English - and the overall effect was/is intended to be at least as entertaining as it is educational.

In reciprocation, there was enthusiastic provincial media coverage - with *The Newbury*

*Weekly News* particularly fulsome with phrases like 'mesmerising', 'a man possessed', 'a wonderful evening by a master raconteur at the top of his game' after we reached its Ace Space auditorium at the end of July. Six months earlier, it had been heaving at nearby Reading's Rising Sun arts centre - and a consequence of this was an immediate booking at Pangbourne Village Hall for the town's French Society, complete with a raffle and an interminable quiz.

More typical Clayson recitals included headlining over Hungry Dog, Pog and The Astronauts before a small Wednesday night crowd in a functions room above licensed premises off the Strand. *En route*, my sat-nav went haywire, and I arrived by guesswork in time for a cursory soundcheck. Worse, someone who'd undergone a complicated train journey from Essex specifically to see me, messaged the following afternoon to explain his absence during my slot: 'went downstairs to watch the end of the football, then out for a little stroll round Embankment Gardens, ended up down a dead end, climbed a fence, fell and cut my head open - claret everywhere.'

A more splendid time was had by all during Clayson dates in Kent and Surrey, opening - as I had the previous summer - for *It's A Beautiful Day*, led still by violinist David La Flamme, who began as a soloist in the Utah Symphony Orchestra. He and his wife Linda - backing singer and supplier of onstage glamour - are the only ones remaining from the near-original line-up, but as long as they appear on the boards, the group is in recognisable form as far as its long term fans are concerned. Their administrative strategy is to hire local backing musicians from every country they visit. On this occasion, their accompanists included a couple of former Pretty Things.

Throughout the expedition, David and Linda - and tour manager John Roberts - were beset with enough problems, major and minor, to start World War III - most seriously a stomach complaint traceable to something she ate that necessitated Linda's non-appearance for the final show. Doubtlessly, there's a lot of good karma on the way.

As for me, the first evening was a job of work, but I truly enjoyed the second - at which, incidentally, I was interviewed on film in the dressing room (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xr2qhljPBnA>). It was particularly heartening that a fellow there the night before brought his girlfriend and a mate along specifically to see me. While I was manning the merchandising table afterwards, he introduced himself as Dave Dawson, and the subsequent conversation revealed that he too was an entertainer.

Flattered by his interest in my efforts, I arrived a few weeks later at an unlikely setting for his outstanding talent - a nondescript provincial pub early on a Sunday evening of weather changing from mellow sunshine to torrential rain and back again within minutes. A clientele of three (including me) plus a solitary barmaid watched an epitome of the gifted entertainer outlined in 'It Will Be My Day' on *1971's Aznavour Sings Aznavour Volume 2*, the fellow who's 'struggled and strived but never arrived, and I'm still unknown'.

Like that person, all Dave Dawson needs is the means to get to the next level. Every element is in place: the 100% stage presence, the 'common touch', the versatility - and a voice that can cope with any given song from a vast and varied repertoire, be it Matt Monro's 'Walk Away' or a 'Paint It Black' with Brian Jones's masterful sitar passagework duplicated by Dave's supple fretboard picking. Within self-prescribed limits, he took on and resolved risky, even daredevil, extemporisations without putting off a growing crowd of drinkers, even silencing them at times like a mass bell in Madrid.

To return to the all-important topic of Alan Clayson, there were two engagements with John Cooper Clarke, who, as a Mancunian 'punk poet', was of the same late 1970s vintage as Clayson and the Argonauts - in that during night on two years of relentless one-nighters, we led parallel lives, forever appearing, it seemed, either one week ahead or after each other in venues from Amsterdam to Edinburgh. When we finally met - backstage at Reading's newish six hundred-capacity Sub 89 this February - John turned out to a most amiable fellow who was at least as knowledgeable - and as enthusiastic - as myself about obscure trackways of pop.

That particular night was accorded a rave review in the *Reading Chronicle* - though I wasn't sure how to take 'Alan Clayson, with his wild hair, swirling keyboard and guitar ballads and operatic narrations might just have been from another planet'. Then it was standing-room-only at the Cellars in Southsea - and it might have spilled out onto the pavement had the edition of *Mojo*

although my act was blighted by problems with sound, it achieved the desired result of leaving 'em wanting more.

Severe technical problems also marred an April performance by The Pretty Things at the Fire Station arts centre in Windsor. They caused the show to start late, and the six musicians – including manager Mark St. John gamely deputising for an indisposed John Povey – were complaining openly about the onstage monitors. Into the bargain, an insufficiently anchored bass drum began edging forward, causing the toppling of the other components of the kit.

Yet, by the time the Things resolved into the finale – ‘Old Man Going’ from 1968’s *SF Sorrow* rock opera – they’d long been home and dry. As well as chart strikes that preceded conception for at least one third of the customers, excerpts from the latest album, *Balboa Island*, earned wild ovations. As impressive were a chorale often as breathtaking as that of The Beach Boys, and, more specifically, a delightful acoustic interlude during which founder members Dick Taylor (on bottleneck) and Phil May flashed back to extra-mural blues sessions when both were teenage students at Sidcup Art College. Admittedly, those present at Windsor *wanted* to like them, but from what could have turned into a fiasco brought forth an exclamation of ‘They’re the greatest group I’ve ever heard!’ from some dazzled youth as he vanished into the night afterwards, lost in wonder.

Another event at which I was an onlooker rather than a central figure took place in Soho in February. It was the first British exhibition of Diva Zappa’s knitting (see [here](#)) but most of the Bright Young Things who attended were there to network, be seen, scream at each other across the gallery, guzzle the free wine and scoff the finger-food. Among the celebrities there were Eddie Tudor-Pole, Sean Bean (who is shorter than expected) and a Cockney comedian called Gordon Bennett (!).

Matters are proceeding with Diva’s father’s biography, though they appear to be doing so ploddingly. However, an agent who may prove agreeable to both Gail Zappa and I has been approached - although he wants two sample chapters.

Many summer weeks were spent likewise hunched over the word-processor into the graveyard hours, finishing a commissioned update of 1988’s *Back In The High Life: A Biography Of Steve Winwood* for publication in spring by Soundcheck, a London-based company whose recent publications have included *Young Flesh Required: Growing Up With The Sex Pistols* by Alan G. Parker with Mick O’Shea, the ancient saga seen through a different prism. Not least of its attractions is a delving into the wartime prehistory of the ensemble that, to the authors’ teenage selves, had appeared as if from nowhere during one of pop’s least hysterical or outrageous moments. Like the restoration of ‘Merry Monarch’ Charles II after Cromwell’s joyless Protectorate, the time was ripe for a swing back to the in-yer-face shouting, banging and V-sign flicking of Disaffected Youth; 1950s rock ‘n’ roll surliness; offensive statements taken as ‘wit’, and the skiffle-esque notion that anyone who’d mastered the most basic musical techniques could have a go.

*Young Flesh Required* came with me when, after the adjustments to the Winwood book - now retitled *Still In The Game* - had been done, I rewarded myself by taking Inese for a weekend on the Isle of Wight during England’s extraordinarily hot Indian summer - when we found ourselves swimming in the English Channel at the beginning of October. Not long after our return - and to my profound surprise - Steve Winwood himself sent an e-mail enquiring how I felt about an authorisation. Of course, I agreed - and Soundcheck were delighted, though it’s still up in the air at present.

The *ying* to this development’s *yang* was when there were rumblings from Pan Macmillan about exhuming *Backbeat*, my film tie-in paperback (with Pauline Sutcliffe), to coincide with a West End play of the same that opened in September. It was discovered, however, that the appropriate files were no longer available, and that the cost of activating what was assumed to be a small reprint was prohibitive anyway.

With regard to my literary output too, you may be interested in a feature concerning the very late Wild Man Fischer for the October edition of *Record Collector* (see [here](#)) During a last-minute engagement in Hertfordshire a few weeks earlier - a birthday concert for Mark Astronaut, whose first disc I produced in 1979 - I spoke of Fischer in the context of how my own maiden record release was a disinclined revival of one of his songs, ‘The Taster’. Distressing details aren’t necessary about how this came to pass. It’s sufficient to say that the Tuesday morning board meeting at Virgin that chose this as the A-side may have changed the entire course of my life -

because so it was that the item already scheduled, 'Pagan Mercia', was cancelled in favour of that pile of crap (which, nonetheless, was a domestic 'turntable hit'). *Que sera sera*.

Of disjointed occurrences more germane to the past twelve months, there was the writing of several disparate obituaries for *The Independent*, ranging from Kathy Kirby to Ivan Martin Jirous, a legend of the post-war dissident movement in his native Czechoslovakia. My saddest duty in this respect was encapsulating in six hundred words the sixty-eight years on this planet of Bob Brunning, who I knew vaguely, but liked (see the article [here](#)).

The same was true of Jet Harris. On the strength of having conducted the last ever major interview with him (for *Guitar & Bass* magazine), I was invited to his funeral at Basingstoke crematorium in February, a crowded and star-studded send-off. Among mourners were Bruce Welch, Marty Wilde, Terry Dene, Clem Cattini, Tich (from Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich) and Colin Pryce-Jones of The Rapiers. However, the service was marred by a eulogy lasting *thirty-five* unforgiving minutes.

A further incidental memory of 2011 is the formation of a most unlikely mutual admiration society with Bob Downes, the seventy-something titan of British jazz-rock, whose budget-priced *Deep Down Heavy* LP was on a par with the Che Guevara poster as a fixture in sock-smelling university hostel rooms. He's still going strong too - his command of flute, saxophones and related reed instruments as frightening as ever it was.

There was also an encounter with the charming Miss Sheila Staefel, an almost-but-not-quite treasure of British showbiz (and former wife of Harry H. Corbett, an up-and-coming classical thespian before he became forever Young Steptoe). Her unghosted - autobiography *When Sheila Met Harry* landed on my doormat a fortnight later - and proved a most absorbing read. Certainly, it was a reminder that the cream doesn't necessarily come to the top in showbusiness, particularly if, like Sheila, you're dogged by what she calls her 'anti-success mechanism' that undermined a career that left the runway in 1966 via BBC television's satirical *The Frost Report*, and touched down three years ago when gathering infirmity forced apparent retirement.

Throwing in the towel too, Y Teapot Piws delivered a last hurrah in Penrhyndeudraeth Memorial Hall last May - and I wish truly that domestic circumstances had permitted me to make the five hundred mile round trip to honour an outfit who, as far as I'm concerned, are where Welsh language pop begins and ends. The Welsh Beatles? I can't think of any other entity deserving of that title.

To my chagrin, I was also unable to get to a Troggs' bash at Cambridge Corn Exchange on the 8th of April - Reg Presley's first public appearance since suffering a near-fatal stroke the previous summer.

He had a bit-part in a dream I had only last week. I was diving off a cliff into the sea, but as I neared the water, it became millions of squirming cats. However, just before I hit the surface, everything changed, and I was at a kind of party in the assembly hall of my old infant school - and Reg, Gail Zappa and Pete Frame were among the guests. Outside, instead of the asphalt playground, there was a lake of blancmange into which my Dad, Charlton Heston and someone I didn't recognise were digging with great earnestness.