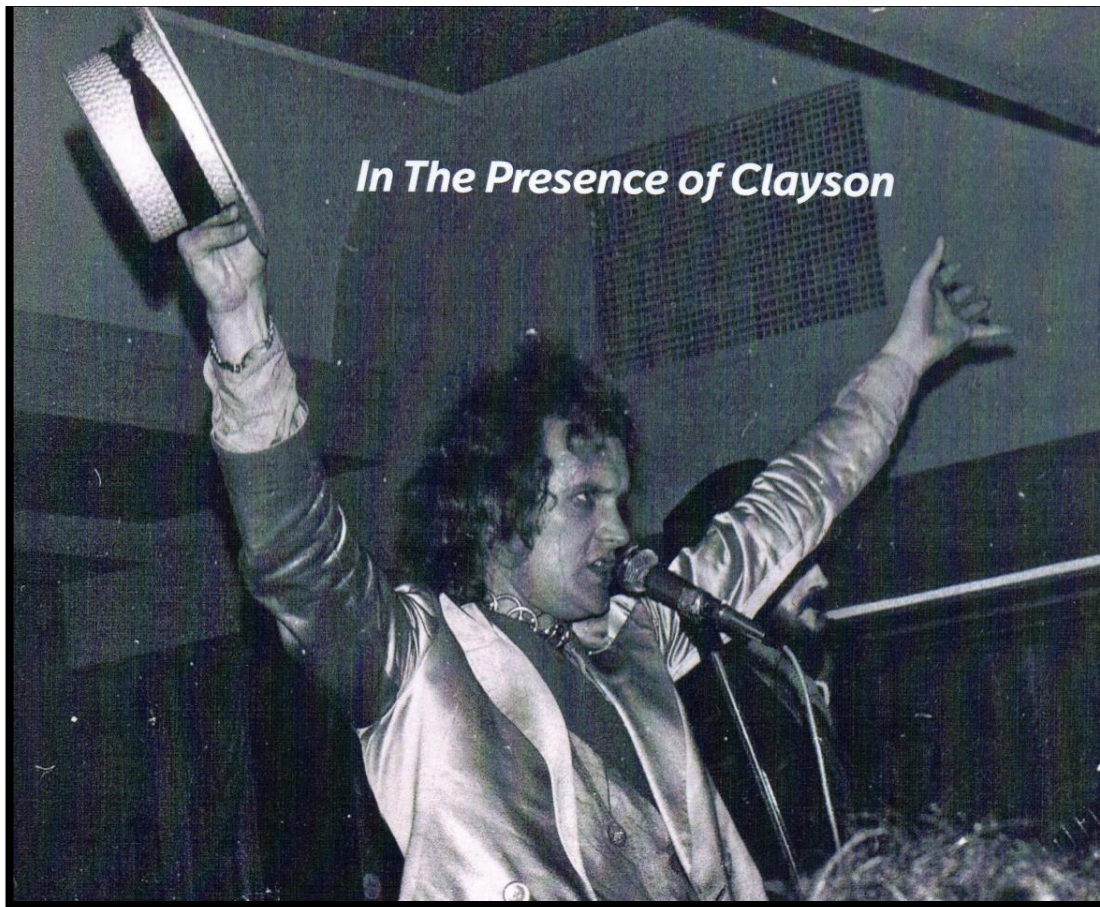


'That was the most surreal thing I've ever seen!'



TOTALLY ROCKER: from 1976 when I was twenty-five (photo and its caption by John Ellerby)

On New Year's Day 2023, Henry, another Clayson grandchild, was prised into the world, courtesy of younger son Harry's girlfriend, a German volcanologist named Margret. Now approaching his first birthday, he's standing up, forming words and imitating animals, particularly hissing like a snake.

A few weeks after Henry's arrival came the funeral of my cousin Marion's husband Alan Vause at a crematorium near Canterbury - which required an overnight stay in a hotel. This allowed me, nevertheless, a haunting of my genesis in a sub-division of Kent known as the 'Lathe of St. Augustine'- for the first time since 1986 during the hours before embarking from the East Cliff ferry terminal in Dover for a 'tourette' of Holland in my office as keyboard-player with Dave Berry and the Cruisers.

So it was that Inese and I found ourselves in a Dover much changed since then. Most immediate was traffic flushed along a one-way system - and subject to zealous parking-ticketing, which is why we weren't able to stop long outside 122, Union Road, my birthplace within a suburb of mostly poky dwellings fanning out from the vast and pungent gasworks on both sides of this thoroughfare - whose name was changed to Coome Valley



Road in the late 1960s. A consequent letter my mother wrote to the *Dover Express* concluded with a paraphrasing of a line from *Romeo And Juliet*: 'A road by any other name would smell as sweet'.

The gasworks have long gone - and surrounding residential streets have been swallowed by office blocks and factories. The terrace containing No. 122, however, remains intact - but for how much longer? With that in mind, I posed for a commemorative photo – as I did *en route* to the funeral the following morning when we stopped off at the home of Tim Fagan, who'd been my partner-in-crime during the foundation of Billy and the Conquerors; had facilitated my recruitment into the string section of the incomparable Portsmouth Sinfonia, and was prominent in the simultaneous assembly of Average Joe and the Men in the Street, who absorbed the Conquerors' ramshackle grandeur - as did Clayson and the Argonauts, the more enduring amalgamation that left the starting blocks in 1976.



Outside Number 122



In funereal garb next to Tim Fagan

From that period too, Inese and I received visitations from overseas during spring and summer by Sue Pegg, who'd served Clayson and the Argonauts as van driver and multi-functionalist at various points – and who, apart from paler hair, has changed little, bringing the words 'Dorian' and 'Gray' to mind. The same is true of former Conqueror, Man-in-the-Street and Argonaut Paul Tucker, who rolled up from Australia – as did Mic Dover from New Zealand, with whom we ate lunch at the Bell in Stanford Dingley, a place-name that brought to mind a diverting way of occupying long car journeys in England, i.e. taking note of two-word towns, villages and other locations, and imagining them as names of type-casted stage actors. Here are some examples:-

- Appleby Magna: monocle-wearing aristocrat
- Ashby Puerorum: third citizen
- Beaples Barton: village idiot/fall guy/figure of fun
- Beastcroft Laithe: ill-favoured underling
- Boothby Graffoe: dim-witted clergyman - preferably with a speech impediment
- Bovey Tracey: town gossip
- Budleigh Salterton: irascible army, air force or navy commander (retired)
- Burton Pendarwine: male romantic lead
- Carlton Scroop: spiv/wide boy/conman/dodgy geezer
- Cherry Willingham: harlot with a heart of gold
- Claxby Pluckacre: any character with fewer than six lines
- Compton Wynyates: 'with it' youth club supervisor in a cardigan
- Dolly Roggin: sporting old maid who says things like 'ripping', 'I say!' and 'right-ho!'
- Gorsty Knoll: proletarian matriarch with a name like 'Ada' or 'Gert'
- Gosberton Risegate: scruffy artistic type
- Hartley Wintney: best friend in whom the hero can always confide

Kingston Bagpuize; shyster lawyer
 Leake Commonside: bystander
 Longbridge Deverill: steady, pipe-smoking older man
 Maeve Ridgecrest: comical old woman
 Maulds Meaburn: severe primary school teacher
 Moreton Pinkney: rebellious teenager
 Nately Scures: excitable foreigner
 Newton Burgoland: heavy drinking journalist
 Peatling Parva: female juvenile lead
 Quadring Eaudike: dangerous thirty-something anti-hero
 Stanford Dingley: one of the 'idle rich'
 Teasley Mead: wise-cracking sidekick
 Turnby Woodside: *hello-hello-hello* police officer
 Ufton Nervet: hard-talking detective
 Upton Snodsbury: earnest young curate with implied halitosis and damp handshake
 Wicken Bonhunt: chirpy Cockney ragamuffin
 Wilmelow Tump: victim

My professional travels over the past year have included battling through the London rush-hour on an autumn Tuesday to join on a bill put together by John Roberts' Barking Spider promotion company at the Putney Half-Moon's auditorium. Proceedings also embraced Greg Douglass, another one of these rock veterans traceable to mid-1960s San Francisco. Indeed, he was in Hot Tuna (Jefferson Airplane off-shoot) and, more famously, The Steve Miller Band - whose catalogue was a foremost repertory source throughout a set that made most impact on me for its inclusion of 'Apache' heralded by a preamble in which Douglass acknowledged the surprising influence of Hank B. Marvin, whose Shadows made no significant ripple in the USA.

Greg's turn was, wrote the celebrated impresario, disc-jockey and wordsmith Pete Feenstra, 'neatly levered in by the inimitable astrological eclectic elegance of Alan Clayson'. Yeah...well ...everything that could go wrong did – not least because of dim stage lighting that made it difficult to manipulate the auto-rhythms and sound menu on the keyboards, read the labels of pre-recorded tapes, and avoid pressing the 'transpose' button'. Moreover, I was so traumatized by the pig's ear made of 'KX54 WVVL', a requiem for my Vauxhall Corsa after the failure of a new thermostat to stay its demise had brought me almost to tears, that 'world premiere' came close to meaning 'final performance'. Well before the close of my ordained forty-five minutes, I was pondering the exit strategy. Yet, albeit for all the wrong reasons, I went the distance – to the degree that a chanting of 'One Alan Clayson! There's only one Alan Clayson! to the tune of 'Guantanamo' accompanied me as I stumbled off – and there was a waylaying by a woman aged at least eighty to tell me my performance was 'the most surreal thing I've ever seen!' before begging to be included in a photograph with me, John and Pete.

Whatever it was, I didn't enjoy it – and when the darkening of my headlights signaled one more deliverance from the treadmill of the road, it was becoming more and more tempting to bid farewell to what then seemed an increasingly more intolerable existence. All such thoughts vanished, however, the following month when *Clayson Sings Chanson* returned to the Isle of Wight for a recital on a



(left to right) John Roberts, 'surreal' old woman, me and Pete Feestra

Monday evening at the Medina Bookshop on Cowes high street. An enthusiastic full house of maybe thirty was eating putty out of the palm of my hand – and for Andy Lavery's opening solo slot – as they had in July when, with Rob Boughton in support, we headlined once again at Reading's Rising Sun Arts Centre. Get a load of this review in the *Henley Standard*:-

Singer possessed true spirit of chanson in mesmerising performance

ALAN CLAYSON is a singer and author with a long and distinguished career in the music business.

There was a bohemian atmosphere at the Rising Sun Arts Centre as the audience gathered to enjoy an opportunity to delve into the fascinating genre of the chanson, with songs performed in both English and French.

Clayson, who has written a biography of legendary chanteur Jacques Brel, delivered a short introduction to the chanson, a quintessentially French style, but adapted by many other singers to suit a more English sensibility. Then Andy Lavery and Rob Boughton,

Review

Clayson Sings Chanson
The Rising Sun Arts Centre,
Reading
Saturday, July 8

long-term associates of Alan Clayson, each delivered a short set.

In the second half of the show, Clayson, accompanied by keyboard player Lavery, stepped up to the microphone with his dramatic renditions of a well-chosen programme of songs, some very dark in tone, others more lyrical. A song like Jacques Brel's *Next* covers

hard-hitting themes of depravity, disease and death and required Clayson to act as well as sing.

Clayson's own compositions are heavily influenced by the chanson genre. *If I've Lost You* and many others captivated the audience.

Clayson fully exploited his performance skills in his impassioned delivery of Scott Walker's *Girls From the Streets*, but then made us laugh with Stanley Holloway's *Sweeney Todd the Barber*, with its music hall feel.

We returned to the sombre again with Brel's *My Death*, followed by perhaps my favourite song from the programme, Clayson's gentle *Long-*

Awaited One, anticipating the birth of a child.

The programme continued with numbers from Roxy Music and Charles Aznavour, to culminate in *The Impossible Dream* from *Man of La Mancha*, a song favoured and translated by Brel. This made a very impressive curtain call.

As a presenter, Clayson is funny, affable and engaging. As a performer, he is totally commanding, singing as if possessed by the spirit of the chanson. This was a mesmerising show: I could have been in a café in the back streets of Montmartre.

Susan Creed



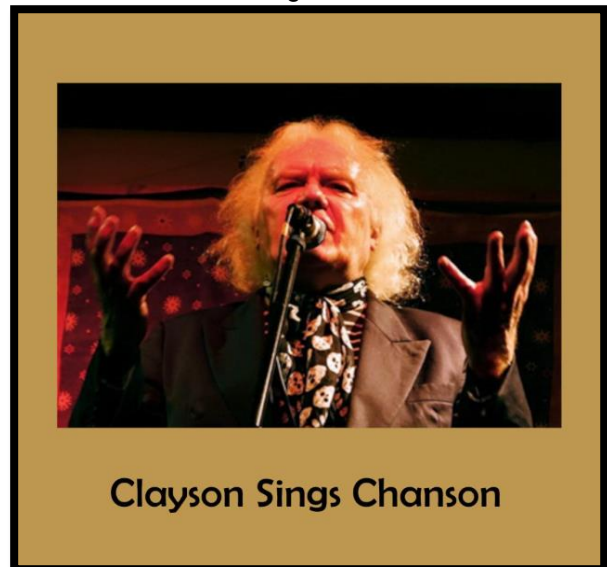
Commanding: Alan Clayson sang in English and French, covering songs that tackled harsh themes, such as disease and death

This took place when Andy and I were in the midst of sessions for an album germane to the

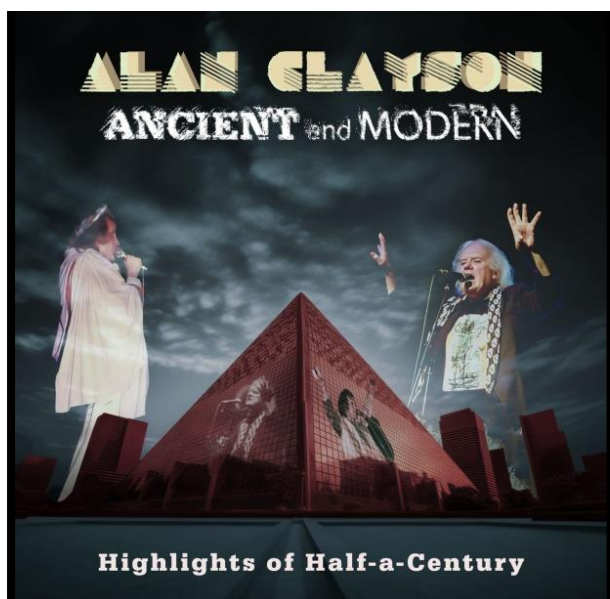
presentation. Though this is to be released in the New Year, there's been talk of it since 2011 when *Clayson Sings Chanson* glided off the runway in the first instance to tie-in with an edition of my *Jacques Brel: La Vie Bohème*, the only English language biography of the great Belgian *chansonnier*. It's since entered an independent orbit - for, as well as works by Brel, Charles Aznavour, Scott Walker and other exponents, Clayson originals blend seamlessly into the repertoire, and we venture into curious but connected realms, ranging from Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich's 'Last Night In Soho' - sung absolutely straight - to 'Un Grand Sommeil Noir', verse by an French symbolist poet Paul Verlaine (1844-1896) set to music by Edgard Varèse. That one really rocks! By contrast, you'll hear too 'Sweeney Todd The Barber' - which I used to

do with Clayson and the Argonauts, but hadn't unveiled in public for a quarter of a century. In parenthesisisisisisisis, Andy Lavery's maiden solo album, *Twilight*, was issued in autumn - the work of one who, during battle-hardening decades before and after uprooting from Strathclyde to southern England in the early 1970s, busked on the Côte d'Azur; backed an Elvis Presley impersonator; served with various cèilidh outfits; co-founded Scotch Measure - who were signed to the eminent Topic Records - and, most relevant to this discussion, proved capable of hushing the most boisterous folk club like a mass-bell in Madrid with songs like those filling *Twilight*. See <https://andylavery.weebly.com/twilight.html> for further information.

The big news for this year, however, is that just prior to you receiving this missive, *Ancient And Modern: Highlights of Half A Century* was unleashed on CD and via the Internet by Think Like A Key who are based in Texas (see <https://www.thinklikeakey.com/artist/337642-alan-clayson>). It addresses



Clayson Sings Chanson



both my solo output as well as selections by Clayson and the Argonauts from what I regard as our 'imperial' period in the late 1970s to records that amassed critical if not commercial acclaim after the issue in 2005 of the two-CD *Sunset On A Legend* retrospective that motivated the reformation of the group. Perhaps a *greatest hits/best of* collection ought to come after the 'plane crash or assassination! Furthermore, when Roger Houdaille, Think Like A Key's supremo expressed interest in issuing it, I was bemused with a Groucho Marx-esque 'I wouldn't join any club that would have me as a member' attitude. Nevertheless, here is a trailer for *ANCIENT AND MODERN*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PDwAvUOiz4U>

Neither on disc nor on the boards, however, are not so much 'songs' as 'things' such as 'Craig And Rachel' (about an occurrence that combined Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* with some film noir B-feature when I was working in the States about a quarter of a century ago) – and *Life Without Me* concerning the onslaught of age, a matter that came into sharp focus back in January with the unexpected passing of Jeff Beck, a candidate for my *fave rave* among British - and perhaps global – guitarists.

I encountered Jeff on two occasions during the 1990s. The second of these was at Jim McCarty's fiftieth birthday party at the 100 Club - where he passed me a plate of sandwiches and I said, 'Thank you', an exchange I have since made out to be less fleeting. Some listeners were excited enough to demand, word for word, my exaggeration of both this and further details of the star-studded event where I'd felt vaguely out of my depth the moment I descended into that familiar basement and passed maybe a dozen rock legends on the way to the bar.

That was a few years after I'd found myself at the Pegasus pub in Marlowe Bottom between Henley and High Wycombe. I was there thanks to Les Payne, a deeply mature rock 'n' roller who still dreamt of Hitting The Big Time one day, ringing out of the blue to ask me to review his performance there. It was like the Black Hole of Calcutta, and, as my head was exploding with 'flu, I only stayed for about half the opening act. Nonetheless, who should be merging into the shadows past the footlights, but Jeff Beck, squiring a youngish paramour (a romance to be front-paged in one of the tabloids)? Brushing against him as I muscled towards the Pegasus exit, I discovered that I had nothing to say beyond some duck-billed platitude - probably along the lines of 'Hey, I really dig your playing!', which I had since 1966 when I was unwittingly transferring my cultural fealty to The Yardbirds, even as I was still haemorrhaging money on records by The Dave Clark Five, who'd become my favourite group simply because a Boy Scout patrol leader I admired told me they were his.

Then came the season when issued contemporaneously with the nadir that was the Five's 'Tabitha Twitchit' – which filled me with a sort of appalled amazement that they'd had the audacity to insert a recycling of the *thump-thump* hook of 'Glad All Over', their only UK Number One - The Yardbirds' psychedelic 'Happenings Ten Years Time Ago' was characterized by a juddering riff riding roughshod over oscillations, police sirens and shards of speech.

This first post-Five strain of vinyl addiction would peak twice that year - when I incited a doubtful acquaintance called Nicholas to aid me in the distraction theft of 'Mr. Zero', a solo single by Keith Relf - but I had to have that, just as I had to have The Yardbirds' eponymous LP (known unofficially as 'Roger The Engineer' after the drawing on its front cover) when it turned up on a deletion rack. Twelve-inch vinyl albums were not impossible to steal, but I chose instead impassioned haggling with the woman behind the counter, who let me have it for fifteen shillings, most of a week's newspaper round, thus allowing me take it home and spin it until it was dust: sometimes concentrating only on, say, the drumming, the lead guitar and then just the lyrics. Next, I might play it at the wrong speeds - or backwards if my Dansette record-player could be rigged up to do so.

Nowadays, my recreational listening is limited - and for much of the time, I prefer silence. Otherwise, I click on BBC Radio Three in the car; endeavour to find 'hmmm, that's interesting' replay-pressing if head-scratching moments in music in which a still, small voice had asked 'How could

anyone like this stuff?'- or spin records that epitomized certain eras in my life, over and over again, often in a state of puzzlement about why they still electrify me.