

# ALAN CLAYSON'S ARGOSY 2001

Harry, my younger son, served as road manager during a one-nighter in Oxford in June, earning every penny when we were obliged to park several hundred yards from the venue - which was upstairs along one of these twisting back-alleys that catacomb the city. Into the bargain, there were three support acts on that all overran. Thus, my set shrank progressively with each unforgiving minute, and I was editing it even as I took the stage. Halfway through a given number, I was having to think ahead and decide whether or not to leave the next one out.



Among Clayson concerts of late, this was the least personally gratifying. One of the most memorable - ever - took place at the Eel Pie R&B Club in Twickenham one Wednesday night in January. The displayed review from [Blues Matters](#) (complete with spelling errors) summarized what happened fairly well.

The crux of the matter was doing something I swore I'd never do, i.e. front a group again. It consisted of me, Dick Taylor, Fran Wood on backing vocals and various blowing and percussion instruments, and, on piano, Brian Hinton, quite a well-known music author, for whom this was his maiden stage appearance.

It was another one of many situations in which I have walked a tightrope between being lynched and receiving a standing ovation. The audience was split between dismayed patrons - including the leader of the resident band - some of them shouting out, 'When you gonna do some blues?!' and worse, and a transfixed younger element; several of whom pressed their e-mail addresses on me after a sort of extemporized encore medley of 'Midnight To Six', 'Gloria', Jim Morrison's talking bit from 'The End' and 'Shakin' All Over'. My new-found friends were full of 'That was fantastic! When are you playing next?!' I coined a bit on the merchandising too.

A few weeks later, Dick and I slew 'em for the wrong reasons when opening for Tom Robinson at the Bread And Roses, a theatre in Clapham. First, the soundcheck (from which Dick was absent, stuck on the M25) bore hardly any relationship to what was heard by listeners that included Jim McCarty, Wreckless Eric and Robert Boughton, an ex-Argonaut who hadn't seen me on the boards since 1977. Next, everything else that could go wrong did. I won't go into distressing details, but it was the musical equivalent of Tommy Cooper (late UK conjuror-cum-comedian) messing up all his tricks - except in our case it wasn't deliberate.

The best that could be said was that it was entertaining. Eric reckoned so too, and volunteered his services as accompanying guitarist when Dick couldn't manage a booking in April at the Komedia Kabaret Klub in Brighton - where Eric lives now after a decade in France. When I introduced this local-boy-made-good towards the close of our half-hour spot, the place exploded, and I kicked off the next opus with extremely mixed feelings.

Because we'd been rehearsing round his flat - in a district of Brighton known parochially as 'Vaseline Valley' (don't ask) - since eleven that morning, the show was somehow over for me when I stepped onstage, and kind of went on automatic. Nevertheless, we went the distance,

and some of the customers turned up the following Monday at Cabaract, a similar extravaganza in *saaarf* London. On the way there, I was both pleased and confused at seeing posters with my image (from the front cover of *Soiree*) and the legend 'Brel - Sutch - Clayson' across the top. These had been plastered liberally within a ten mile radius of the venue. The net result was a crowd of about forty, but all very committed. They were bawling for a second encore when the landlord burst into the dressing room to demand that I move my car. When I returned, they were still yelling for more. This incident summed up my performing career very well.

The only other spectacular of note was manipulating the keyboards and singing some of the numbers - including a version of 'Cherry Cherry Coupe' by The Beach Boys - in The Near-Death Experience, an ensemble of four out of five ex-members of Turnpike, my first 'proper' group. This was put together by Mic Dover, the guitarist, to climax his fiftieth birthday party in March. It took place in the same university hall where almost exactly thirty years earlier, I had been astounded to end up in the bedsit of a dashing blue-stockings undergraduate several years my senior whom I had judged initially to be way out of my league. In the long term, she was - because one condition of our antics in her room continuing was that under no circumstances was I ever to address her in public. One day I did and was dumped without ceremony.

There was, however, no such tang of complicity in those aspects of the past that flashed before me at Mic's knees-up. There were a lot of now middle-aged faces from college and elsewhere at a companionable and boozy occasion of coded hilarity, catching up and mutual nostalgia - with some of the old days seeming to belong to a previous existence. Although it doesn't look that way in the consequent video, I also thoroughly enjoyed being an ordinary geezer in a group (rather than chief show-off) for the first time since the last time I was ever one of Screaming Lord Sutch's Savages (at a wedding reception in Peterborough four years earlier).

The overall effect of the NDE on film is that of a one-night-only reformation of a long-disbanded 1960s garage band for whom the summit of a short career had been a mere handful of gigs. Then most of the personnel made a proper go of their day jobs, marriages and/or academic studies, instead of yearning for any more glamorous alternative that might emerge, however indirectly, from the next feedback-ridden, drum-thudding evening. Come to think of it, that was, more or less, what it was anyway.

On a higher plane entirely was The Pretty Things' sensational exhumation of *S.F. Sorrow* at the Royal Festival Hall in October. With a deceptively subdued Arthur Brown delivering the narrative, it sustained a recurring mood, but taken separately, 'Baron Saturday' (with Dick on lead vocals), 'Private Sorrow' - complete with sitar - 'Loneliest Person' - with Phil May as a Medway delta Donovan - and most other excerpts stand tall today. One or two haven't weathered so well, but a world at large cannot justify remaining deaf to *SF Sorrow* if it still listens to lesser works like *Tommy* and, as far as I'm concerned, *Sgt. Pepper*.

Words are starting to fail me, so I'll leave this particular topic with the statement that *S.F. Sorrow* was everything I hoped it would be from the muted buzz as the house-lights dimmed to the encores of 'Rosalyn', Arthur Brown in his flaming helmet whipping up the mob with 'Fire' - and even 'Route 66', which generally has the impact of a feather on concrete under other circumstances.

Further interesting recitals I have attended of late include Wreckless Eric with his Southern Domestic at the Dirty Water club in *norf* London, and The Yardbirds and Downliners Sect in Twickenham's town hall, marred only by various fabulous nobodies piling onstage to 'jam' at the drop of a hat. This was exemplified by some leather-trouserred, pouting dingbat from Cactus - once big in the States, I understand, but unable to get arrested at home - just clapping the off-beat into a microphone.

More my bag than this crass ego-massage was Dave Dee, Dozy, a Beaky, a Mick and Tich at the Oxford Apollo. Despite being diagnosed with cancer and turning sixty recently, Dave Dee

had everyone on their feet for the big finish after he and the lads had cranked out wall-to-wall smashes, complete with 'Bend It' balalaika, 'Save Me' timbales and 'Xanadu' whiplash.

I realize that the bulk of this epistle has been about me either performing myself or being present at the performances of colleagues. However, my income still hinges principally on the day-to-day mundanities of sitting hunched in front of a word-processor. From that source has flowed all the usual stuff plus a feature entitled 'The Joe Meek Curse' for the *Independent-On-Sunday* and an interview in September with Gene Pitney (stranded with a cold in a London hotel by occurrences in New York, but trying hard to ooze charm). I've also found a publisher at last for my *Yarbirds* biography (authorized by the present-day edition) - which will be in the shops late in 2002. Also, either out or on the way are three CD 'talking books' I have scripted, each read by some drawing *act-or*.

In parenthesis, a bona-fide Clayson record release is scheduled for March, namely two tracks - including 'The Last Show On Earth' (about Sutch, and produced by Wreckless Eric - on *English Chanson*, a 'various artists' collection that I'll only believe exists when it's in my hand. When it does, it will be possible to read all about it on my web-site ([www.alanclayson.com](http://www.alanclayson.com)), now six weeks old.

Back on the literary trail, a piece on the ailing George Harrison for *Guitar* magazine tied in neatly with the issue of third (and updated) editions of my George and Ringo biographies this autumn. The publicity excursions also involved a contribution to *Biography*, a series on ABC TV (US) - and two hours one afternoon on BBC Radio Wales with Tim Rose and a native outfit named Songdog. For me however, the most important repercussion of this visit to Cardiff was that it sucked me into the orbit of Alun Huws, once a lynchpin of Y Tebot Piws.

He presented me with a copy of their *Y Gore A'R Gwaetha O'R (The Best And The Worst Of...)* CD retrospective, an *oeuvre integrale* that represents a vista of pop only available to English-language consumers who caught those editions of *Disc A Dawn*, a BBC Wales series that was broadcast during lonely afternoon hours on English television. That's how I discovered Y Tepot Piws ('The Purple Teapot') when I was poleaxed with hepatitis in 1970. Their debut single, 'Yr Hogyn Pren', had the same effect on me as perhaps 'She Loves You' may have done a few years earlier on a teenager in Stockholm or Tokyo, i.e. I understood not a word of what was being sung, but was swept away emotionally and by the group's sense of fun. Thus I went to great lengths to acquire their eponymous debut EP on Wren Records. Forget about the likes of Tom Jones, Amen Corner and Catatonia, Y Tebot Piws were taff-rock in its purest and finest form.

I reviewed *Y Gore A'R Gwaetha O'R* for Record Collector as a displacement activity. As Baudelaire reminds us, 'No task is a long one but the task on which one dare not start'. That's not exactly true with a new biography commissioned by Sanctuary Publishing. I've completed the research for 'Edgard Varese' - about Frank Zappa's boyhood hero, and the missing link between Stravinsky and John Cage. Moreover, the advance on signature has fluttered onto the doormat, but I've surprised everyone by completing long overdue household chores and similar non-urgent tasks: anything to put off what I'm supposed to be doing. Nonetheless, morbid fascination brings me to my piles of notes several times a day like Bluebeard's wife to the forbidden door.

As you may gather, the evil hour when I have to begin actually writing *Edgard Varese* can be held at arm's length no more, so the time has come to bring this to an abrupt