



FROM THEN ON, IT WAS MURDER...

A year of sunshine and showers, both personal and vocational, was epitomised by the latter-day Clayson and the Argonauts' first provincial engagement - at Hitchin's Club 85 early in July. It was supposed to be a recital by Clayson alone. It was decided, however, that it might be interesting if the group chanced its arm at a venue patronised principally by teenagers for whose parents (and, possibly, grandparents) we are at most a half-remembered name from antiquity - and that, rather than thunderous huzzahs, Clayson and the Argonauts were likely to be mounting the boards to an unsettling hush from curiosity-seekers with only the faintest notion of the music they'd paid to hear.

Therefore, we went on cold and worked hard with the result that an ensemble with not a musician under fifty seemed to go down a storm - although there was a tacit sense of wonderment that the old boys still had it in them. Later, I learnt too of mitherings from some who'd been expecting me to play the fool on my own: the type for whom information that a favoured artist's most recent concert was just like the one before is praise indeed. In parenthesis, our final encore was a rough-and-ready "Arnold Layne", probably the last public rendering of a Syd Barrett composition prior to his demise before the week was out.

What should have been a smooth two-vehicle drive back from Hitchin was blighted by a bumper-to-bumper seize-up of late night traffic from the slip road onto the M25 to the blessed relief of, depending where you were sitting, the exit to go cross-country via Aylesbury or seeing it through to the M4. Into the bargain, one of the crew was spectacularly sick out of a passenger window to the amused jeers of a car-load of cowboys in the the 'fast' lane.

In the teeth of sat-navs, in-house programmable PA desks and emoting through a cordless microphone at Club 85, memories of how ghastly it had sometimes been in the old days came flooding back that day - as they had to a lesser degree several weeks earlier when Clayson and the Argonauts appeared at the 100 Club for the first time since 1977. Two days before, we'd been suddenly bereft of both a van and driver. After a lot of stomach-knotting running round in circles, a plumber pal of Pete Cox lent us something maybe one oil-change away from the breaker's yard, and Paul Critchfield from Pete's pub-rock outfit stepped in to nose it through the labyrinths of congestion-charged London during the rush hour. Furthermore, Alan Barwise, obliged to travel separately, was delayed to the point

where

John Harries, once drummer with The Stowaways - a Stockport beat group of the mid-1960s, in case you're wondering where you'd heard the name - assembled the kit as best he could, and had commenced sound checking it when Barwise dashed in at the eleventh hour.

As for the show itself, we snatched a Pyrrhic victory from the jaws of what ought to have been unqualified triumph. It wasn't easy. We were advantaged by the still-resonating aftershock of the comeback at the Metro - just a stone's throw away - in December; a laudatory preview in that afternoon's Evening Standard, and a 'weekend starts here' Friday night spot at the heart of the bustling consumers' paradise that is the West End - as Jack Hilton and his Orchestra reminded our forebears, "Life Begins At Oxford Circus". Yet the 100 Club was just about half-full and the promoter lost his shirt. Nevertheless, my accomplices and I came belligerently alive when the lights hit us, and we advanced with the grace of fencing masters on a set that, if anything, was wilder than the homecoming bash at Reading's South Street arts centre in January.

That had been the Hastings to the Metro's Stamford Bridge. Admittedly, it helped that a near-capacity house wanted to like us, and that an almost palpable wave of goodwill washed over us for simply existing once more. A kind of committed gaiety from an increasingly more uproarious mob lent an inspirational framework to the spooning out of a just-sufficiently ramshackle lucidity throughout the entire hour-plus-encores. Casually-strewn errors were brushed aside like matchsticks as the onlookers willed us on, worrying when we flagged, cheering when we rallied, and glowing when, by the time we left 'em wanting more, we'd long been home and dry.

During my lonely ritual before the dressing room mirror, I'd worried that some Argonauts were such over-familiar figures around the town that it would be like being led forth, glistening with embarrassment, to sing to your aunties at one of those 'musical evenings' that preceded television. It wasn't quite that, but, nonetheless, aspects of my past life flashed literally in front of me. At the left lip of the stage stood Jane, now a respected matriarch, but what my own mother would have derided as a 'camp follower' of the group way back when. To the right was Kev, who I've known since infant school, with his two children. Afterwards, Ted, a fellow Farnborough Grammar drop-out, wormed his way backstage to pay respects.

Others I hadn't seen for ages were there too, among them Nick Garvey, former mainstay of The Motors - and, forsaking his usual Saturday night at his local in Hendon, Tony Dangerfield. While I had encountered him initially as bass player with Lord Sutch's Savages, he has been a recording artist in his own right since 1964. However, new product in recent years has been as infrequent as my own, and his latest album, The Rebel's Got Soul, in the shops that month, could easily be his last.

The same may apply to the next disc by Alan Franks and Patty Vetta, one of the two other acts that night. Nonetheless, they provided most diverting entertainment - as did Fran Wood, despite her multi-instrumental partner, Paul Critchfield being poleaxed with 'flu. A trouper of 'the show must go on' persuasion, Fran came close to stealing it with a bravura and totally a capella twenty minutes.

The morning after, Dermot, a gentleman who'd flown over from Belfast - as he had exactly three years earlier for a Clayson solo booking in Liverpool (see Argosy 2004) - had arranged to discuss with me about the feasibility of the group touring Ireland. That trail seems to have gone cold, while another had been impassible from the onset. See, this geezer from Dunstable expressed interest in overseeing a Clayson and the Argonauts album of totally new material, and persuaded me to talk about this further in the state-of-the-art studio attached to his house, where, so he said, he's just completed the soundtrack to some Hollywood movie.

He said too that he'd listened hard to Sunset On A Legend when spinning it both at home

and in his Volvo for weeks. I asked him slyly what he thought of 'Aetheria', an item that wasn't actually on it. Yes, he said, he liked that one very much. Next, he spieled in top gear for a long while about how the album he was going to make with us could sell millions. Rather than hawking it round record companies, he'd release it himself. To hell with their short-sightedness and their cloth-eared ignorance! Then he broached the subject of his financial outlay and, to my profound surprise, ours too - for studio time, his services as engineer and co-producer plus assorted sundries. There were six of us in the band, right? Well, the tracks would be down in - what? - three weeks - which at his calculated £2,000 a week would work out at only a thousand quid per man, wouldn't it?

Ten minutes later, I was turning an enraged steering-wheel as I screeched towards the hated M25. Why do I never learn? As I chronicled in Call Up The Groups!, Martin Murray, simpering, bespectacled ex-rhythm guitarist with The Honeycombs, invited me to his Middlesex home to 'chat about a recording contract'. To my disgust, this involved an 'investment fee' too. A week later, I stumbled upon 'Have I The Right' in my record collection. I scratched a rude word on it with a screwdriver and, taking it into the back garden, sent it soaring like a discus over the rooftops into the endless blue. Experience, therefore, is behaving childishly on recognising mistakes when they occur again.

Five and a half decades on this planet, however, has taught me not to get uptight when individual Argonauts undertake projects outside the group, notably the unit fronted by Nina Lane, Alan Barwise's jazz-singing wife, which contained so many of 'my' musicians that they were introduced at an outdoor concert in July as 'Nina and the Argonauts'. I am also sufficiently battle-hardened to be dispassionate about personnel changes. Just before rehearsals got underway for the 100 Club, Andy Taylor was replaced by Andy Lavery, who I'd first met when we were flung together in an amalgam put together for a village fete a few years ago. More accustomed to Strip The Willows and Roger De Coverleys at barn dances (and accompanying an Elvis Presley impersonator), what on Earth is he doing with the likes of us? Perhaps it's wise not to probe too deeply because Andy has proved to have an enthusiastic talent far above the ordinary as a keyboard player and when joining Pete and I on vocal harmonies.

The next one out was Garry Jones. While he's a difficult yardstick for any bass guitarist, the vacancy has been filled most competently by the ubiquitous Paul Critchfield - although, his fretboard skills apart, Paul's onstage 'image' is the inverse of his predecessor's one of depravity and ill-health. By bilious coincidence, infirmity has informed Garry's life to the extent that he has just endured a twelve-hour operation that has, hopefully, put an end to the cancer that was diagnosed in August, and will allow him to finish the promising album that he has been recording, on and off, from about the beginning of the century.

On paper, my own solo career, post-Clayson and the Argonauts reformation, may be seen, I suppose, to parallel in microcosm that of Rod Stewart when he and The Faces were the Woodstock Nation's very own Brian Poole and the Tremeloes. On the recording front, Wreckless Eric and I spent three days avant-gardening with three Clayson creations in his studio in Norwich shortly before he moved to France. More passive occurrences have embraced my half-minute pontificating about The Beach Boys in a repeat of The 100 Greatest Albums on Channel Four (see Argosy 2005) in October, and an unconfirmed report that 'The Moonlight Skater' has been covered by the winner of the Indonesian version of Pop Idol. All that has surfaced from a telephone call to the Performing Rights Society about this matter is that obtaining royalty payments from certain territories in the Orient is akin to squeezing blood out of a stone.

Dick Taylor and I exchanged persecution complexes about this when he and I were not so much preparing for as agreeing philosophically about a floor spot in May at a private function in Woodstock (Oxfordshire). As well as the customary Pretty Things and Clayson numbers, we catered for the most senior persons present with 'Sweeney Todd The Barber', a music hall opus from the glory days of Empire, complete with acted-out monologue, that had been my longest party-piece with Billy and the Conquerors and during Clayson and the

Some old rocker cornered me afterwards, kept addressing me as 'Phil' and requested my autograph on a serviette - which I signed 'Don't Bring Me Down, Trev! All the best! Phil May'. More conspicuous an incident was one matronly guest, bold with booze, kissing me full on the mouth and informing her husband loudly that she wanted to have my babies. A propos nothing in particular too, Inese and I - and Jack and Donna - were to spend part of September in Dick's home town of Ventnor where I bumped into Glen Matlock of The Sex Pistols. During the ensuing dialogue, I was flattered to be told that he owns my Jacques Brel biography.

Both these mild ego-massages and the hot weather were months away when 2006 commenced on a note of post-Yuletide acidity with me going the distance with Wreckless Eric on backing guitar in a dingy auditorium connected to the Amersham Arms in New Cross in London's twilight zone. Outside it was below freezing and there was something good on television, but around forty-five souls rolled up for me and a support act called Paul The Girl.

It was grim work, especially as I detected an air of menace as my allotted time on the boards progressed in a haze of distorted PA sound and virtually silent onstage monitors. Eric perceived it too, and, for devilment, slammed a drawn-out, feedback-freighted and tinnitus-inducing dischord in reply to some incomprehensible heckling. From then on, it was murder.

Neither did I much delight in the prospect of topping the bill in March at the Muse, a venue along Portobello Road, when it turned out to be a galley-style cafe with a small playing area-cum-art workshop facing the toilets at the back. Assessing the situation, I chose to go on first as cutlery clattered on plate and non-dining music lovers started to block the entrances to the Ladies and Gents. I recall little about this evening today, apart from a chat afterwards with 'Legs' Larry Smith who was there with a mate.

Something else that was more a duty than a joy was a fleeting appearance, singing to my electric guitar, at a fiftieth birthday knees-up a few weeks later. Once again, I elected to start the proceedings - so that, depending on what sort of party it was, I could either relax and enjoy it or leave after a decent interval. So I walked my artistic tightrope via a medley based loosely on 'Shakin' All Over' and 'Johnny Remember Me'. Overall, I provoked bemusement from a majority who preferred the normal, sensible music that came when I was done, i.e. blues, a whole lotta soul and a bloke who copied Jimi Hendrix. I didn't stop long.

I was also glad to see the back of the Farm, a country club that seemed to be dying on its feet on the rural outskirts of Skegness. It has all the tell-tale signs of having known more prosperous times, not least of which was the despondent forbearance of Kate, the otherwise most charming bookings manager. Nevertheless, if blatant nepotism had procured him the gig, the Farm cradled the maiden performance of a new star, namely Harry Clayson, co-lead vocalist and chief show-off with Mangasm (see www.mangasm.co.uk). God, I was proud of him - though, because of the nature of titles such as 'Keep Your Fingers Out Of My Girlfriend' and 'The Sex Robot' (with Harry costumed as same), it was fortunate that his grandparents weren't within earshot.

Before they'd even left the building, there was some thinking aloud from Kate about re-booking Mangasm - and, to my astonishment, considering the small crowd I'd pulled, me too. So began the Great Clayson-Otway Catastrophe.

Kate second-billed me to my old friend and rival John Otway in July. Yet, as the date loomed nearer, neither he nor I had received one solitary word about fees, accommodation or sound check times from the Farm, which did not deign either to respond to numerous gradually more urgent e-mails and AnsaFone messages. A conversation with John concluded with the resolve to share transport and equipment, and approach the engagement as a dadaist concept, letting ourselves be pushed in whatever direction fate and Kate ordained.

Then, just after I'd loaded my gear that humid morning into a vehicle that was likely to become a mobile oven on the long road to 'Skeg Vegas', it was by the merest chance that I checked my in-box - and there was an e-mail just in from the Farm - in which 'this weekend is fast turning into a farce' was a key sentence (see [CORRESPONDENCE](#) for full text). It's not necessary to go into further distressing detail, but the upshot was that Otway and I decided not to bother. Thus, for the first - and, let's hope, last - time in my life, I blew out a gig.

All these depressing experiences faded later that summer. The wheels of the universe came together at Brighton's Joogleberry Playhouse where I headlined over three other cabaret performers - including Robb Johnson. He was, albeit in a markedly different way, as hard an act to follow as Mangasm. In the wings, I felt distinctly uneasy as I watched him slaying 'em with his stirring songs of love and protest, and his show-stopping '6B Go Swimming'. Yet perhaps this was the spur that lurched me into a performance that balanced technical accuracy - by my standards anyway - and the exhilaration of the impromptu., delivering, say, 'The Last Show On Earth' without embroidering its in-built elegance - or inserting a spoken passage into 'The Ham' that would have alarmed its co-writer, Charles Aznavour.

*Within the crowd was Nick Pynn, Arthur Brown's musical director, who, with his 'constant companion' Jane Bom-Bane, has just opened a restaurant a few streets away (see www.bom-banes.co.uk). He presented me with his 2003 solo album, *Afterplanesman*, *Rotator* by himself and Jane, and *Round-A-Way Wrong Songs* by Jane alone. Selections from all these were included in their set when we were both afloat on the Battersea Barge in 2005 (see [Argosy 2005](#)).*

*Two older showbiz friends, one of them dead, were celebrated in respective 'nights of honour' in Swansea and Twickenham. The most overwhelming was that of Dewi Pws, Welsh media personality and soap-opera character - and former mainstay of Y Tepot Piws, whose Alun Huws rang me about this segment of August's National Eisteddfod (Eisteddfod Cymru). Thus I took my seat next to Gwenol, Alun's missus, at an extravaganza that, it has to be said, didn't re-conjure the magic of Y Tebot Piws at the Faenol (see [Argosy 2002](#)), and utilised my time borderline interestingly in that every utterance from the vast pavilion stage was in Welsh, and there was a preponderance of comedy - which mean that I sat stone-faced while all around me were overcome with side-splitting mirth. When at last it was over, among those with whom I fraternised was Heather Jones, a former luminary of *Disc A Dawn*, and still*

discernible as the timorous beauty who I'd buttonholed when she played a Berkshire folk club in 1971, and thrust fifteen shillings into her hand, begging her to buy me the Tepot Piws EP containing 'Yr Hogyn Pren' (see [Argosy 2001](#)), available only in Wales.

*Closer to home, Carlo Little was a spectral presence at his memorial concert in Twickenham's York House in March (where I'd attended Alan Franks' wedding reception the previous Saturday). I had contributed a rare hardback *The Quiet One* to the charity auction, and had been asked to introduce some of the performers - which included The Downliners Sect, Vince Eager, Ray from The Nashville Teens (who is nearing seventy, but looks thirty years younger), Wee Willie Harris (who doesn't) and some elderly Tiller Girls (!) in all their plumed, glittery-thighed, Sunday Night At The London Palladium finery.*

Changeovers and over-running precluded my active hand in this spectacular, not that I minded because it was fun hanging around in the Green Room with its buffet, periodic woomph of starstruck flashbulbs and, in the light of the tragedy to come, an abiding memory of Art Wood, his head thrown back with laughter during the coded hilarity and mutual nostalgia concerning moments when... How could anyone have known that Art had only eight more months to go before a combination of pneumonia and prostate cancer took him?

Another show at which I was a spectator took place a fortnight after the Skegness fiasco and also had John Otway as a central figure. He was starring with Manchester bard John Cooper-

Clarke at the Crooked Billet in Nettlebed. Both were much more than anyone who hadn't seen much of them since the 1980s might have imagined them being nowadays - which means that each remains a thoroughly diverting entertainer, certainly a damn sight more entertaining to me than The Be Good Tanyas at Basingstoke's Anvil complex in November. I was there because Kathryn Williams (see Argosy 2004) put my name on the door. Her opening slot was remarkable for an intriguing new composition, 'Museum Of The Sea', and another in which she contrives by means of electronic gadgetry to transform herself into a vocal quartet. The ways and means cannot be described succinctly - and you're advised to check out Kath in a context other than warming up for The Be Good Tanyas, who I anticipated - wrongly - inhabiting the same stylistic area as Fascinating Aida or Girl Talk. Instead, there was nothing remotely funny or camp about a Canadian trio who 'rely on faith to negotiate a world that breaks their hearts,' it says here. That stated, I will add no further remark.

Much more my bag was the Solid Silver Sixties Show that reached the Swan in High Wycombe last April. Closing the first half, Dave Dee, Dozy, Beaky, Mick and Tich slipped in - and I'm not joking - the most moving 'Stairway To Heaven' I've ever heard. There was also much vicarious pleasure too in P.J. Proby's reading of 'American Trilogy', not to mention 'Maria', the 'Hold Me' finale and a 'Somewhere' that, thanks to the aeons of vocal extremities that have passed since, didn't seem anywhere as twisted as it was on the 1964 single. Finally, while ol' P.J. is more Falstaff than Flamineo these days, he's still the proverbial 'pop singer who can really sing'.

If not in the same league, the same could be said of Wayne Fontana and Gerry Marsden, who topped and tailed the programme, their continuity working up almost as much applause as their hits. Indeed, Wayne especially could make a living solely as a Bernard Manning-esque comedian - though, as with all the veterans on the bill, running through his best-loved songs to receptive houses on a financially-successful round-Britain tour isn't a bad place to be as eternity beckons.