



THE ARGOSY 2009

One of the highlights - if not the highlight of a professionally erratic twelve months was a run of theatre dates as opening act for (and on keyboards with) Mungo Jerry. This was traceable to late spring when Ray Dorset, the group's mainstay, figurehead, and eminence grise - and a friend of many years standing - rang me with the proposition from an airport sur le continent. 'Do you want to think about it?', he asked. No, I didn't.

My experience of consecutive engagements at venues with tiered seating, usherettes and backstage mirrors bordered by light bulbs has been limited. The last time was probably in Holland as one of Dave Berry's Cruisers in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, I reacted to each 'five minutes, Mr. Clayson!' rap on the dressing room door like a sprinter to a starting pistol. My mind clicking into performance mode was almost audible as, in the wake of a build-up by Ray-as-interlocutor, I slapped a high-five with him, and walked the same tightrope as I have for decades before every type and size of audience.

An abiding memory of the first stop in the wilds of Middlesex, however, is of freezing corridors; a harrowing soundcheck that left us with just one vocal microphone, and a presentation that, owing to some by-law or other, had to be condensed into two hours and done with by 10 p.m. Yet the next night - at Milton Keynes's plush Stables - owned by British jazz behemoths Johnny Dankworth and Cleo Laine - was all but faultless. There were non-ironic yells for 'more!' when I finished, and an ear-stinging standing ovation after Mungo Jerry quit the boards when a ferocious 'Nutbush City Limits' closed a set in which the most low-down blues had hit as intrinsically hard as 'In The Summertime', 'Lady Rose' and all the other raggedly carefree singalongs that caused a different Dorset-penned smash to run through my head each consecutive day.

In this hybrid of an updated Dust Bowl jug band and my own astonishing pre-Argonauts Billy and the Conquerors, the exhilaration of the impromptu was prized more than anything as boring as technical precision by a retinue of two drummers, two bass players (electric and upright), a guitarist and, if you count me, two keyboard players, all under the metaphorical baton of the gifted Dorset, lead singer, guitarist, mouth-organist, kazoo-blower and maintainer of a bedrock pulse via foot-stomping on a customised percussion appliance.

As saturnine, lean and charismatic as in his pop icon prime, he 'read' the crowd with unerring accuracy and rewound time by generating the sweaty, invigorating intensity that had lifted Mungo off the runway in 1970 when, as a last-minute attraction at a huge Bank Holiday weekend spectacular in the Midlands, they'd held their own against the likes of Traffic, Family, Steppenwolf, Black Sabbath and The Grateful

Dead. Nearly fortyyears on, as enchanting in its way was Ray's willingness to natter with fans, pose for photographs and sign merchandise from both the lip of the stage during the intermission and afterwards in the foyer.

The rest of the troupe were most amiable - talented too. It turned out, for example, that Phil, the sound engineer, had composed an anthem for Portsmouth football club - while tour manager James Dorset is guiding Newrising, a Guildford trio who, on the evidence of a new album, *Awake From Slumber*, are true masters of what his press package describes as 'acoustic groove'.

At the Stables, a certain Paul Hancox, sometime sticksman with manifold Brumbeat ensembles, The Mindbenders and a mid-1970s Mungo, joined in on a few numbers behind the kit of an amazing gentleman called Bruce Brand, who I've known and admired since 1986 when, in his Chatham attic, he and Wreckless Eric were teasing out what I hoped would become my second LP by aiming at the home-made passion of the eponymous album by their Len Bright Combo. By then, Bruce was a battle-hardened veteran of a Medway Towns scene that was as self-contained after its fashion as Merseybeat. It has since spread like bubonic plague and become clotted in such cultural hubs as the Dirty Water and the nearby Toerag studio with its anachronistic valve apparatus and compressors based on those of Joe Meek. Groups are queueing up to book sessions there. Its console boffin, Liam Watson was once in Bruce's present outfit, The Masonics, with whom many 'garage' entities of similarly agreeably retrogressive bent might be genealogically connected if Pete Frame gets round to devising a Rock Family Tree of same.

As he had on the preceding evenings, Bruce, wavering between anxiety and fraternal pride, watched me from the wings when the trek wound down on a showery Friday at the art-deco Tivoli in Wimbourne Minster - which was attended most significantly by my old mate Stuart Booth, commissioning editor of *Call Up The Groups!* and, in 1995, *Beat Merchants* - and Sandy Newman from *Marmalade*. He considered my antics beneath the proscenium 'bizarre', though, despite (or because of) more uncalculated errors than usual, I went down even better than I had in Milton Keynes. Indeed, the entire week-long episode left me so raring to go that I wanted the tour with Mungo to go on forever.

An apposite prelude to this expedition took place on a mild February night at the Kenton theatre in Henley-on-Thames where, likewise, I paved the way for Sgt. Pepper's Only Dart Board Band, a tribute that imagines what The Beatles might have been like had they not downed tools as a working band in 1966. Certainly, the Dart Board fellows can, with practiced ease, make the most serious-minded adult regress into a teenage Beatlemaniac, dance in the aisles and maybe wave about acclamatory flickers of cigarette lighter.

My part in this came about through Martin Dimery, the 'John Lennon' character (who also pulled strings to procure me a headlining late afternoon slot at July's Frome Festival). My Beatle-associated books guaranteed at least polite attention, but I was able to do more than simply go the distance in Henley, encoring with an accommodating 'Tomorrow Never Knows' that I managed to segue into 'Hold Tight!' - a salaam to Dave Dee, whose passing the previous month had made the BBC television evening news (and was the subject of a Clayson obituary - thankfully, untouched by any fancy sub-editing - in *The Guardian*).

'It's very hard to categorise you,' smiled Martin, 'although I kept hearing folk in the melodies, prog-rock in the arrangements, and occasional punk in the delivery. The point is - it's very much your style, and I can see why you have dedicated followers.' You may say that I have too - for down the twilit alleyway alongside the Kenton, I was accosted and presented with a single rose by a pair of ladies whose forty-something maturity was no distraction, very much the opposite, from their abundant charms.

This scintillating evening mitigated, I suppose, upsets rooted mainly

in promoters losing their nerve. While I didn't mind the cancellation of a bleak midwinter booking with the Argonauts in a jive hive on the Somerset-Devon border, far outside its closest town, I was annoyed when compelled at short notice to pull out of a well-paid engagement before gourmets in a most exclusive rural auberge in the olde-worlde heart of Hollywood-on-Thames. Later, Wreckless Eric and Amy Rigby suffered the same circumstance (and, by the way, I'm half-expecting to fly to their place in France before Christmas to complete A Windmill Too Far).

Then there was the south coast appearance with the Argonauts that was marred by the raspings of a Rod Stewart impersonator and his accompanists' muffled thunder on a lower floor. Much more infuriating, however, had been a three hundred-mile round trip into Wales for one of the final solo recitals of 2008. All the elements were in place for a healthy walk-up: local newspaper coverage, a half-hour interview two days before on BBC Radio Wales, posters plastered everywhere - and a strong support act in another amigo from way back, Terry Clarke, a singer-songwriter in the grand tradition with James Dean-sque cheekbones and restless eyes. Three years ago, he moved to the region after a sojourn in Scotland, but Terry remains as eternally West Berkshire as Eric Burdon is eternally Geordie.

After the soundcheck passed without incident, the auditorium - up three flights of stairs - was still otherwise deserted at nine o' clock, and Terry and I gazed out onto a film noir-ish street, cold, rain-sodden and burnished with neon. Now and then, the odd pedestrian shuffled by. A hour later, nothing had changed - so the two of us, lonesome anti-heroes, narcissistic and defeatist like Cagney and Bogart, voiced our concern to the boyo in charge, and decided to dismantle and load our gear. When a solitary mister rolled up after the pubs had shut, it was too much effort to start again. That, as they often say, is showbusiness.

A comparable non-event was being an eleventh-hour addition to the bill of some so-called festival within the distant drone of Gatwick airport. So it was that my car's engine died in a desolate field where stood a few Portaloos and a small stage open to the summer sky, and with no all-purpose back-line - meaning that it was overcrowded with inanimate objects. The 'hospitality area' consisted of just a patch of grass cordoned off with police tape. Into the bargain, the PA system was worryingly silent, and the weather was murderously humid. Towards the close of the afternoon, there was still nothing happening apart from the moan of bass feedback beneath someone one-two-ing into a crackling microphone. A guitarist with a once-chartbusting 1980s group asked, 'Alan, you don't really want to do this, do you? We don't either, but we've already been paid.'

Just over a fortnight after this exercise in futility, a concert in the basement of a restaurant in Brighton kind off summed up this first seven-twelfths of 2009. Only two advance tickets had been sold, albeit to Clayson devotees who'd acquired nearly every record on which I'd so much as breathed. So in self-conscious fashion, I took off on the time-honoured flight peculiar to myself, but over the course of the next hour, diners from above, who couldn't help but hear, infiltrated downstairs (without paying), and it was quite a full house by the end. Some of the gatecrashers pushed their e-mail addresses on me ('When are you playing next?', 'How come I've never heard of you before?'), and bought some product. The underside of it was that I got flashed by a speed camera when leaving the city.

While the Frome Festival recital was heralded by publicity beyond just a mass mail-out and a paragraph in a brochure, I exuded similar apprehension when, through latticed windows dim with grime, I could have been observed laying out my clutter of cables, amplifiers, instruments and, well, 'devices' in what might have been some religious institute early in the last century.

At the reckoning, I stood my ground in front of about forty paying customers so determined to get their money's worth that I was obliged to enter the realms of an 'unprepared' final encore, i.e.

last year's Club 85 medley of 'Shakin' All Over', 'The End' and 'Gloria' (who is now 'taking a time machine to my century' and then 'a flying saucer to my galaxy' ad infinitum), replete with trading call-and-responses with a crowd that contained webmaster Kevin and his younger daughters.

This party-piece was, however, not included when the 'director' who shot 2008's return to the Metro convinced me that he ought to immortalise likewise my solo act. Conditions hadn't been satisfactory when he'd attempted it at the Thunderbolt in Bristol last autumn, but what about doing it directly to camera in an empty building? In the first instance, he pondered an outer London dive he knew with pocked gilt mirrors, peeling padded wallpaper and imitation velvet curtains, holey at the bottoms as if mice had been at them. He settled, however, on an August morning in the more Brechtian surroundings of the starkly monochrome Studio Theatre in Bracknell's South Hill Park arts complex. Despite losing impetus - owing to retakes and pauses to change film cartridges, adjust lenses, locate extraneous noises et al - I brazened it out, endeavouring not to be too clinically 'professional' in the absence of the audience presence that I needed like Jesus did at Calvary.

A DVD of this was scheduled for release in time for the Mungo Jerry tourette, but has remained in the vaults, perhaps to amass myth as Joe Meek's I Hear A New World and The Troggs Tape did. Maybe it's just as well - because there might have been a revenue-draining clash with Kissing Spell's belated unleashing in October of Aetheria: Alan Clayson And The Argonauts In Concert.

With little fanfare, the DVD reached the shops too late for a launch night that served too as a half-filled memorial concert for Screaming Lord Sutch (and I can scarcely credit that it's been ten years since his apparent suicide). This took place at the Boom-Boom, a club attached to Sutton United soccer stadium, and was advertised as a double-header with what's left of his Lordship's Savages (containing drummer Jack Irving from my days with them, and Nick Simper, once of The Flowerpot Men and Deep Purple). In parenthesis, I was invited to the Monster Raving Loony annual conference in September, but went no further than putting my head round the door. My feelings about the organisation are veiled thinly in both a 2010 feature about David Sutch in Mojo, and a story of historical counter-factual nature that Kevin may have filed already somewhere on the web-site.

Turnout at other Clayson and the Argonauts extravaganzas since 2008 have veered from a spaced-out thirty or so at Winchester's Tower Arts Centre to overflowing in an atmosphere of near-hysterical gaiety back at the Cellars in Southsea, where we've always gone down well - as we have at Hitchin's Club 85, though numbers were down when we worked there again on the 28th of February, the late Garry Jones's fifty-fifth birthday.

Garry was there in spirit when, for the first occasion since our second coming in 2005, the group delivered a homecoming spectacular in Reading. On this September Friday, it was almost-but-not-quite packed-out, and, as is becoming flatteringly common, embraced parties from distant reaches of the kingdom, even the planet. Moreover, as well as those who used to follow us as long ago as the 1970s, there was a most gratifying wave of teenagers and twenty-somethings. Word had obviously got around. Fortunately, therefore, it was one of the more inspired performances the latter-day Clayson and the Argonauts has ever given - and it was so too when I brought the group to the Thunderbolt as a thankfully storming finale to that particular season of shows. Certainly, it confirmed belief that Pete Cox and I are leading what might be the finest line-up of Argonauts from any period of our existence - though, with regard to the visuals, I'm contemplating toning down the eye-shadow and mascara, having perused some pantomime dame-esque photographs from Bristol (and Frome), courtesy of Pete Rowe.

These days, we've replaced a few of the ancient stand-bys with items that we've never dared on the boards before, and a brace of compositions fresh

off the assembly line - although you wouldn't be able to tell from a [review](#) that surfaced on the Internet shortly before we retraced our steps to the 100 Club to share the bill with Man, venerable prog-rockers traceable to The Bystanders, The Eyes Of Blue and further South Wales beat combos. There were isolated pockets there just for us, but we were perceived as a rather funny-tasting hors d'oeuvre for Man, an amalgam of near-original personnel and the sons of retired members. They were a kindly-disposed bunch, who let us use enough of their gear so that the bulkiest items we needed to take were Andy Lavery's keyboards and Graham Bartholomew's electronic drums.

Generally, musical activities have been more intriguing than literary ones of late. Best-selling Backbeat resonates still, notably when a lecture by me was part of the package when it was screened mid-week last July at the behest of the proprietor of 'Bournebeat', a music memorabilia-themed hotel, focussed on a jaw-dropping exhibition, principally from venues local to Bournemouth, of posters, photos, autographed instruments, videos and gold discs - with the main emphasis on beat groups and psychedelic times past.

As a reflection of a less excited and excitable present, only around twenty bothered with Backbeat, even though the function was free and supplemented by The Prairie Dogs, an ensemble that, state-of-the-art equipment aside, might have been lifted by Tardis from the Star-Club, circa 1962. They were fronted by Garry Lewis, formerly of both The Stukas - whose name I recalled from the London pub-rock scene - and Farnborough Grammar School during my six years there, though our paths never crossed.

When it was all but over, Sandy Newman with celebrity photographer Ian Munro hove into view, and I elected to sleep off the ensuing conversation at the Bournebeat rather than risk driving home. In reciprocation, I turned up like a bad penny when, under the aegis of Ian plus Ricky West from The Tremeloes - with whom I have been exchanging dirty jokes by e-mail for quite a while - Marmalade were starring in a promotional video hinged on Golden Years, a long overdue Newman solo album - on which nearly every note has been hand-tooled by the man himself in the privacy of his own purpose-built complex.

Other recent fave raves are Paul Critchfield's Mercury Blues Band, formed by the Argonauts' multi-talented bass player, who made a stunning stage debut over summer - and 'Chaidil Mi Raoir Air An Airigh' by Alyth McCormack, caught by simple accident on BBC Radio Nan Gaidheal. So vastly attractive was it that, on procuring People Like Me, the correlated album, I couldn't let a waking hour go by without a dose of 'Chaidil Mi Raoir Air An Airigh' - but I couldn't not notice that a companion track, 'A Mhairread Og', lived in a riff reminiscent of 'Shakin' All Over'.

Of like antiquity to this Johnny Kidd and the Pirates magnum opus is 'She's The One For Me' by The Aquatones, a staple of the Clayson and the Argonauts repertoire at the beginning - and I was delighted to establish contact with Dave Goddard, vocalist and creative pivot of both the 'classic' Aquatones and that now on the US nostalgia circuit, to the degree of us mulling over a 'twinning' of our two groups - sort of 'hands across the ocean' (or, if you prefer. 'hands across the generations').

The jury's still out, however, about the present-day Aquatones' 2001 remake of 'She's The One For Me', largely because the 1958 version has been roosting in my head since I stumbled upon the 78 rpm pressing long, long ago in an Aldershot junk shop, and span subsequently to dust. A tape of a hitherto-unissued (and too fast) 'She's The One For Me' from 1977 by the Argonauts and I (with backing chorale attributed to 'The Argotones') wasn't up to the fighting weight of the prototype either, and had been corroding gently in a dark and lonely corner of my attic until the exchange of e-mails with Dave. Yet I'm pleased to report that he enjoyed the mailed copy sufficiently to express a desire to 'sit in' with us should any of our engagements coincide with his proposed visit to Europe in 2010.

Emerging from the same era, if half a world away, Jet Harris was under my scrutiny in an article commissioned for a forthcoming edition of Guitar & Bass magazine. Though seventy years old and not in the best of health, he proved a game and articulate interviewee. While a slight underlying bitterness peeped out when the topic of Cliff Richard and the Shadows' current reunion without him was raised, he was looking forward to hitting the road again in his own right next spring.

Among further encounters of this kidney were respective chats with Jack Bruce and Mick Taylor - each conquering debilities not unrelated to unquiet journeys to late middle age - and Bruce Foxton and Rick Buckler, the blokes in The Jam who weren't Paul Weller. I'd spoken to them last over a quarter of a century ago when The Jam and Clayson and the Argonauts had warmed up at the 100 Club for Stripjack, a quartet that vanished immediately from the pages of history.

During Clayson and the Argonauts' seemingly final showdown in 1986 at the Putney Half-Moon, Ralph McTell had been drinking at the bar, but this didn't appear to be of great vocational import for him when I was talking him through his saga for, again, Guitar & Bass. It ought to be mentioned that, prior to changing his surname in honour of Blind Willie, he'd been Ralph May, and had come from the same district of Kent as Phil May of The Pretty Things. However, he assured me that they weren't even distant cousins.

Unquestionably, the most remarkable situation of this kind in which I found myself was a nouvelle cuisine lunch in a restaurant off Covent Garden with Gail Zappa, widow of Frank, and Diva, their younger daughter. On an adjacent table sat [Meera Syal](#) and what looked like her parents.

A month earlier, I'd interviewed Gail on behalf of Record Collector, and then mailed her my Edgard Varese tome - for, insofar as Frank ever had a boyhood hero, it was this most adventurous of modern classical composers. Impressed, Gail suggested we meet when next she came to England - which was sooner than I might have expected when her eldest child Dweazil's Zappa Plays Zappa revue reached Europe in July.

Gail sorted out gratis tickets for me at the Bristol stop of Zappa Plays Zappa during the meal. She was absolutely charming - and over dessert and then a foray round nearby shops, we debated the feasibility of me penning a life of Frank. Before the week was out, I'd come up with a working title - Project X (after a piece on the sixth Zappa album, 1969's Uncle Meat), and started prodding the nerves of an array of interested publishers, who are, nevertheless, proceeding with majestic slowness.

In order to understand the magnitude of my rendezvous with Gail, you need to know that, on a second ever trip to the capital not under adult supervision, my fifteen-year-old self had been taken aback that an entire window of Oxford Street's vast HMV store bloomed with the splendour of the macabre sleeve of The Mothers Of Invention's maiden LP, 1966's Freak Out!. From listening to it in one of those isolation booths that such outlets had in those days, the impact of Zappa and his Mothers was to ripple across the next seven years of my life - and Project X might be the biography that I have been destined to write.