

**BY CONTRAST
TO THIS JOYOUSNESS,
THERE'D BEEN A
BASTARD OF A GIG
BACK IN BRIGHTON**



As well as being bracketed by inclement weather, 2010 started and finished in Gaul, either geographically or vocationally. See, a presentation entitled *Clayson Sings Brel* is in rehearsal for dates in the New Year, scheduled to tie-in with a new edition of my Brel biography ([see](#)). The show will be me and Andy Lavery, the Argonauts' keyboard player, delivering a selection of *chansons* – not just by Brel – as well as two or three of my own creations in that vein plus excursions into curious but correlated realms – such as 'Un Grand Sommeil Noir, the Verlaine poem to music by Edgard Varèse, that was recorded during the first sessions – in midsummer 2008 - for what's now to be titled either *A Windmill Too Far* or *Dover Soul*.

Since then, Wreckless Eric in his office as producer has been returning to this project periodically as Bluebeard's wife to the forbidden door. He'd ring from France to, say, clarify the arrangement of one of my dodgier demos or play an interpretation of another down the receiver. He'd also improved upon what had been done already - adding, for example, blood-and-thunder white noise to 'Cressida', and wheeling in Ian Button from Death In Vegas to splatter drums over 'Teenage Runaway'. Moreover, last January, I breezed into Eric's studio as if I'd last been there only yesterday, as though my direct involvement with the album hadn't been put on ice for eighteen months.

'Ice' is a crucial word here. Hours before I landed in Limoges airport, Eric and Amy's heating system had exploded in a haze of smoke, shrapnel and powdered plaster. A drama soundtracked by the discordant threnody of fire engine and police squad car had prefaced the dull understanding that, owing to the *mañana* pace of life in rural Aquitaine, Arctic conditions were to prevail *chez* Goulden until the middle of the week, i.e. throughout most of my stay. Like the Graeae crones of Greek myth, sharing just a single eye between them, one functional heater was lugged from room to room during this small eternity of chill temperatures, seething east winds and the constant threat of snow.

If nothing else, the cold kept us alert, even one who'd been motoring along a moonlit M25 to catch the day's only flight from Stansted. Though fiery-eyed when afternoon became evening, I'd fingered a stately mellotron linked to a Vox Continental over the bass, keyboards and acoustic guitars that Eric had prepared earlier, and was harmonising with my own lead vocal on 'The Old Dover Road', a

haunting of my south-east Kent genesis, to Eric's satisfaction - and my own by the time I lay in bed, as rigid as a stone crusader on a tomb.

Enduring recollections of the rest of the expedition are a remake of 'Un Grand Sommeil Noir' - and the vexation and cross-purpose that subsided to brusquely affectionate reconciliation over his reconstruction of the coda to 'I Hear Voices', in and out of the Clayson repertoire for the past five years. The consequent emoting of this opus was honed to razor-sharp piquancy - though steely professionalism informed my overdubbing of mellotron to pre-recorded accompaniment that hinged on the auto-rhythm from an electric piano I'd found in a skip fifteen years ago. Via means peculiar to himself, Eric had isolated this from the demo - and thus confirmed an opinion that he's a genius with sound.

In similar manner, a quasi-military beat from an ancient (and faulty) two-tier organ was the bedrock of 'The Refugees', started from scratch after breakfast and interrupted only by a tea-and-biscuits visit from friends who'd just heard about Sunday's emergency. They were still around when Eric and I were continuing with 'The Refugees', too preoccupied to care any more than a chimpanzee in the jungle does about what humans peering through binoculars think about its behaviour.

Ours included a piano solo that contrived to marry the salient idiosyncrasies of Russ Conway and Cecil Taylor; four-to-the-bar guitar chord-chopping, and a principal riff that was repeated over a play-out, an idea that had become fixed after more and more musical trimmings had been discarded, and direction and outcome began shining through with appositely sepia-tinged clarity.

'The Refugees' might stand as one of *A Windmill Too Far/Dover Soul's* many highlights, but, to paraphrase Mandy Rice-Davies once more, I would say that, wouldn't I? It's not easy to be entirely objective either about Amy and Eric's latest offering, *Two-Way Family Favourites* – eleven revivals and covers, famous and obscure - as I was present during the short-listing and correlated run-throughs of such as a downhome and sofa-ed go at 'You Tore Me Down' a simply-expressed melancholia by The Flamin' Groovies - whose original 1979 single I've never heard.

Needless to say, this has been the track I've spun most, but gaining ground are interpretations of 'Ballad Of Easy Rider', 'Silver Shirt' - from the portfolio of Eric's Stiff label mates, Plummet Airlines - and the title song of The Who's *Endless Wire* album. With Amy to the fore, there's also an astonishing 'Fernando'. Some may regard this go at Abba's 1976 Number One as a bit of a send-up, but I'm not one of them. I'm OK too about an 'In My Room', which, while retaining the downbeat mood, escapes the orbit of The Beach Boys through an arrangement instanced by a daringly abrupt tacit. Crucially, *Two-Way Family Favourites* may remain, for many, one of the artists' most cherished releases.

I said as much in *Rock 'N' Reel* (R2), the receptacle for a lot of my critiques nowadays – though *Record Collector* accommodated respective reviews of Ray Davies and Jethro Tull on mid-week, mid-tour stops in middle England in front of middle-aged ticket-holders. Other than that, I've been taking up my quill for a lengthy Screaming Lord Sutch retrospective in *Mojo*, and the usual sleeve notes (with a preponderance of pre-1960 film and TV themes) and articles for specialist periodicals like *Guitar & Bass and Rhythm*, based on conversations with their subjects. Recently, these have addressed the careers of Bobby Elliott and Tony Hicks (his brother-in-law) of a still-operational Hollies, Mick Avory from a disbanded Kinks, Clem Cattini, Dweezil Zappa and sometime Sex Pistol Glen Matlock.

Among obituaries has been one with personal resonance, namely that of Crispian St. Peters for *The Independent*, two days after his death on the 8th of June. Breaking a silence of more than a decade of gathering infirmity – spent principally in mental institutions in north-west Kent – he'd resumed housebound communication via telephone and, in handwriting that had become larger and more spidery, by letter. With a fortnight to go, he left a rather eschatological Ansafone message about how he'd 'had his time and didn't do too badly'. Indeed, he didn't – and, by coincidence, a latter-day St. Peters item, 'Food For Thought', had been on automatic replay in the car throughout the week prior to his passing, alternating with a 1990 overhaul of 'The Pied Piper' in a voice drained of 1966's buoyant optimism.

Not long after I nutshelled Crispian's life in its pages, I received another commission from *The*

Independent. In the wake of the discovery of fifty thousand-odd Romano-British coins in a Somerset meadow, I penned a piece about Marcus Aurelius Mauseous Valerius Carausius, the first emperor to govern the province without the authority of Rome, albeit like a hybrid of Al Capone, Idi Amin and Long John Silver ([see](#)). He'd been central to a thesis for my degree back in nineteen-seventy-forget-about-it. Since then, my interest in Carausius has been maintained – to the extent that 'AUGGG', a composition I still perform, concerns this much overlooked historical figure.

Likewise, the topicality of Joann Sfar's *Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)* movie prompted approaches for my perspective. Amongst these were commentary for Swiss radio – and a reading from my *Serge Gainsbourg: A View From The Exterior* book (Sanctuary, 1998) in a Watford Oxfam, organised by John Harries Junior, offspring of the illustrious saxophonist with Clayson and the Argonauts, whose appearances since that with Man at the 100 Club in autumn 2009 may be counted on the fingers of a V-sign.

The most poignant of these was at the Cellar Bar within Bracknell's South Hill Park complex. This elicited much regional media coverage, most conspicuously an e-mail interview for that mighty Cerberus the *Wokingham Times*, and a general emphasis on the Cellar Bar being to us 'what the Cavern is to The Beatles' (*Henley Standard*) in that we were omnipresent there at point of lift-off, circa 1976. Supported by Mussikismo – under the metaphorical baton of Mark Chapman, director of the *Aetheria* DVD – the night was tinged with nostalgia, not so much in musical content, but for the turn-out of many of our old fans.

These - and new ones – were, however, in short supply when we returned to Bristol's Thunderbolt one drizzling evening in October. Certainly, numbers were perceptibly down compared to the previous occasion. On the evidence of falling attendances for many other acts and the closure of too many venues, soon to include, apparently, the 100 Club – which looms large in the Clayson and the Argonauts legend – blame appears to lie with the Recession and what one Thunderbolt pundit called 'the new Saturday night' of tension-freighted TV talent contests like *Strictly Come Dancing* and *The X Factor*. Nevertheless, *Clayson Sings Brel* is to surface there on the 5th of January.

With regard to 2010 engagements by Clayson alone, we must hark back to February for, firstly, a performance before a dozen one Tuesday in Bom-Bane's, the basement where I'd kicked off in front of an initial audience of two eleven months earlier (see *Argosy* 2009). Next up was when my sister Mary got me to sing at our parents' diamond wedding anniversary – specifically, 'The Twelfth Of Never' (*their* song) to my own electric piano accompaniment. Fortunately, I was able to do so without affectation, even if I'd derived it from a YouTube version by Elvis-in-Vegas.

Another private function at which I shone was the sixtieth birthday party of John Roberts, supremo of Barking Spider, a concert promotion company with whom I've had dealings. This took place at Southsea's RMA tavern, whose landlord booked me in the spot to headline there before the month was out at the urging of John, who'd already contracted me to open for It's A Beautiful Day and Barry Melton (once of Country Joe and the Fish) for the two London dates of their summer tour of Europe. Both attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd, and I proved a palatable *hors d'oeuvre* for these counterculture veterans from California, whose publicity paraphernalia was striking for period graphics that were as potent an evocation of their period of maximum impact as those of Toulouse-Lautrec of the Belle Époque.

While I exchanged hardly a syllable with Barry, cordial dressing room encounters with David and Linda LaFlamme, mainstays of It's A Beautiful Day, embraced their flattering reflection that I'd go down a storm in their native San Francisco, and me recalling catching the group at 1971's rain-drenched Bath



Festival of Blues and Progressive Music – a forerunner of Glastonbury – after a girlfriend and I hitch-hiked across three counties to squat half-a-mile away from where It's A Beautiful Day, Pink Floyd, Fairport Convention, Led Zeppelin, The Mothers Of Invention, Steppenwolf, Johnny Winter, Canned Heat and all the rest of them were matchstick figures, oblivious to megawatt distortion moaning in the wind, and the muddy squalor that was the lot of their onlookers.

Fundamentally, I'm probably as much of a twit now as I was then, having consented to do a turn for *Lennon At 70*, a memorial concert for a fellow who, for me, had mutated from a hero into a kind of cosmic wally. Yet, no matter how pathetic his life during its final decade or so, I'd been as shocked as everybody else by a slaying that resonates still in the very devising of such a spectacular as occurred at The Castle, an auditorium in Golder's Green, north-west London.

It was standing-room-only by the time top-of-the-bill Sgt. Pepper's Only Darts Club Band walked on an hour after a Clayson set consisting of a guitar-driven 'Cry Baby Cry' segueing (as it does on the 'White Album') into 'Revolution 9', the first ever in-concert rendition of this particular ditty. However, aware that a strong element within the throng weren't likely to be especially fond of stuff of that nature, I steered it into a vaguely singalong 'Tomorrow Never Knows' following three succinct minutes of loaded dialogue underpinned by programmed keyboard *arpeggios*, a tape loop and Inese's pre-recorded 'Number Nine' intonations at twenty-second intervals (punctuated by an unscripted 'Alan, why do you want me to keep saying this?'). A few customers walked out – one of them pausing to bawl a rude word at me – but otherwise it went down sufficiently well for Martin Dimery to invite me to give 'em 'I Am The Walrus' (complete with the recitation from *King Lear*) during his Dart Board Band's finale.

By contrast to this joyousness, there'd been a bastard of a gig back in Brighton. Filling me with foreboding as I pulled up at the venue – a room above a pub - was a poster advertising a recital by *Adam Clayson*. Next, it transpired that the combo who'd appeared the previous night had destroyed the house equipment and their following had wrecked the place. Would I mind playing downstairs with free admission? Yes, I bloody well would - and roundabout persuasion from the harassed bloke in charge - and Harry, my younger son, serving as road manager - gave way to naked pleas. Defiance, hesitation, defiance again and grudging acceptance chased across my countenance, though, even as I mounted the boards, there was no guarantee that I wasn't going to bolt at the last second.

Well, it was dreadful. Though there was a knot of Clayson consumers around the front, I was a background noise to everyone else, battling against a cobbled-together PA system that made every utterance like a railway station announcement. Disconcerted by a howl of laughter from some distant table of drinkers during the fourth number in - a ballad - I stopped mid-verse, and, unaided by the useless microphones, made a stand with my guitar at the lip of the stage, and, with fingers finding the over-familiar chord changes, gave 'em throat-lacerating blasts of 'Twenty Flight Rock', 'Shakin' All Over' and further classic rock. Watching a clock among the optics behind the bar, I went the ordained forty-minute distance to a suddenly more attentive crowd.

On stumbling off, I noticed banknotes being counted into Harry's hand. God, I was proud of him. While I was up there, he'd cornered the promoter and, after complaining about the sound, had concluded the discussion with 'The bottom line is that Alan gets paid as agreed.' Six foot eight inches in height and broad of shoulder, Harry doesn't argue and expects the same.

The *karma* for this fiasco was, I suppose, a triumphant return to Dimbola Lodge in the Isle of Wight's Freshwater Bay to headline a Friday 'At Home' peopled with local poets, folk singers and instrumentalists - among them the celebrated Brian Hinton on grand piano. A week later, I was back on the island at Newport's Quay Arts Centre to give a lecture on 'Fatality In The Popular Song' (i.e. death discs) for music students at Platform One, a college under the aegis of the charming and efficient Carol Matlock, wife of the Sex Pistol but not lost in his shadow - very much the opposite.

Supplemented by various audio-visual aids - and the presence of Twinkle during the intermission - the overall effect was as entertaining as it was educational - though I was surprised that hardly any of the students had heard of Twinkle or Jacques Brel, let alone the more contemporary likes of Wreckless Eric and Sinéad O'Connor.

At the last public event worthy of remark this year, however, quite a few listeners seemed to know as much as me during my participation in *Zappa At The Roundhouse*, a three-day celebration of what was shortly to be the late Frank's seventieth birthday ([see](#)). Described in the programme as the 'official biographer', my main duty was to act in a sort of David Dimbleby capacity during a *Question Time*-type discussion with Jeff Simmons - who was with the Mothers at the 1971 Bath Festival – and Scott Thunes, second-in-command throughout Frank's troubled final tour. An excerpt from this chat-show is viewable via ([see](#)), and I was pleased to note that Andrew Greenaway, curator of a prominent Zappa web-site ([see](#)), thought me 'an entertaining orator'. but an unfiled incident that the years left to me will never erase arose when devotees were milling around afterwards. A youth aged about twenty sat down and unscrewed an artificial leg to be autographed. I cannot go on...