

She got the wrong end of the stick, but the stick still existed.



*'Winds of the world, give answer!
They are whimpering to and fro -
And what should they know of England
Who only England know?'*
-The English Flag, Rudyard Kipling.

The previous century started, arguably, not on New Year's Day 1900 but 22 January 1901 when Queen Victoria, the personification of an age, died in the arms of her grandson, the Kaiser. Thus, as far as I'm concerned, 2013 left a mordant runway with the demise of Reg Presley on the 4th of February.

Long before I was appointed official biography of The Troggs (*Rock's Wild Things: The Troggs Files* [Helter Skelter, 2000] with Jacqueline Ryan), I entered Reg's orbit in October 1985 at an extravaganza entitled *Heroes And Villains* at London's Dominion Theatre, perhaps the most pivotal event to nudge the 1960s revival out of neutral. It had, however, been long underway when I reeled into Dave Berry's dressing room in a flustered state after sunset had found me on the M4's hard shoulder, howling at the moon because of an overcharging alternator of a vehicle about one oil change away from the breaker's yard. A sympathetic Dave steered me into licensed premises where Ronnie Bond, The Troggs' drummer, was holding court.

As a result, my recollections of the next few hours are now necessarily vague, but when roaming the backstage wastes of the Dominion, I passed a dozen famous faces along a single staircase; stood in the wings beside some stout cove who strode onstage to

metamorphose into Chris Farlowe - and exchanged platitudes with a preoccupied Reg Presley.

Though it didn't seem like it at the time, this turned out to be one of those Momentous Encounters as an era that had once seemed almost as bygone as that bracketed by Hitler's suicide and 'Rock Around The Clock', became faraway no more. This was exemplified by my employment as boffin-at-the-high-school-hop shortly after the publication of my first book, *Call Up The Groups!: The Golden Age Of British Beat, 1962-1967* (Blandford, 1985). An unsolicited letter arrived enquiring whether I'd be interested in running a course entitled *The Sounds Of The Sixties* at a Watford adult education centre. This spurred me to seek similar work, and I amassed an itinerary stretching months and then years ahead. Those enrolling included both pensioners and those for whom 'With A Girl Like You' - The Troggs' only domestic Number One - predated consciousness.

Among *bona fide* 1960s icons invited as guest speakers was Reg, whose seminar in an austere cream-painted classroom at Swindon College on 24 April 1987 had an odd repercussion when Nora, a very intense student in her mid-forties, had rung me from her Cirencester home that afternoon to ask if I could retrieve the butts of any cigarettes he might smoke. She wanted to keep them, she explained, as a joy forever, having become completely hooked on The Troggs in 1967 when the *Trogglodynamite* LP soundtracked her first bout of snogging.

I more than responded to her request by mailing her the *Silk Cut* fag-ends with which Reg had filled my car's ash tray when I drove him to Swindon that evening as well as those he got through during his talk. A freelance journalist scooped the story for a local newspaper, and the following week, the now defunct *Today* national daily picked up on it.

During the journey back to Andover after the lecture, Reg and I spoke of many things including the fog warning system he'd invented - which became operational on Heathrow airport runways the day after his patent ran out. He told me about this with some bitterness. Though I have forgotten precise details, Reg also outlined an intriguing idea for reclaiming desert regions.

When I dropped him off at his Andover home, he presented me with his and Suzi Quatro's just-released vinyl duet of 'Wild Thing', a gift that seemed of more intrinsic worth than his stubs - but the last thing I remember thinking before I fell asleep that night was that I'd never walked in Nora's shoes, so what the hell did I know?

There wasn't space for this and other personal reflections in my obituary for Reg in *The Independent* (see <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/reg-presley-singer-with-the-troggs-whose-song-love-is-all-around-sold-millions-of-records-8482302.html>), but all sorts of stories flew up and down among the chatter of mourners who filed out to the strains of 'Love Is All Around' and were present at the wake after his star-studded send-off in Basingstoke, a most affecting occasion, beginning when the surviving Troggs plus road crew carried the coffin into the chapel.

A second funeral that same month was for Nick Bird, a former Clayson and the Argonauts road manager - and a talented musician - who died unexpectedly during a routine operation at the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Though we hadn't spoken for a few years, I would have picked up, even mid-sentence, where I left off with a most supportive friend. As mentioned during a poignant eulogy by Hugh Crabtree, mainstay of Feast Of Fiddles, Nick had been at the wheel in June 1978 during the car chase after a midnight matinee in Canning Town - reported in the *New Musical Express* and *SOUNDS* - which was traceable to a gang of parochial bruisers, slit-eyed with lager, watching like lynxes as the van was loaded, and itching to start something.

Distressing details will have to wait for my autobiography, but this can't: in early autumn, I delivered a Clayson solo recital at a venue up north. The day before, the promoter rang to say that the Arts Council had refused him a grant, and would I mind being paid on the drip, beginning with an amount on the night. As I lurched offstage, however, he spoke of having neither cash nor cheque book, but he'd start sending it soon. That was many weeks ago, and I haven't yet received anything, and all the tedious litigational resources have been mobilised. It's not the principal, it's the money.

Perhaps the non-appearance of any of the fee was 'karma' for much regional publicity - notably, a slot the day before on BBC Radio Humberside - a smooth journey to and from the New Adelphi in Hull, and the performance itself being both well-received and bereft of technical problems. Indeed, I'm almost inclined to anticipate this in future by, say, deliberately leaving an amplifier behind or breaking a couple of strings the second the master-of-ceremonies announces me.

A press commentator at this spectacular got the wrong end of the stick, but the stick still existed (see www.thisisull.com/music10/adelphi/502383694_michelle_clayson_04oct13.html). The same may be said of belatedly discovered coverage

(ape.uk.net/forum/index.php?showtopic=1043) in *Apehouse*, an XTC fanzine, of when I preceded John Cooper Clarke at the Cellars in Southsea in 2011): *'Incredible support act. A chap called Alan Clayson. He looked mad as a hatter and although we were not aware what his act was he produced a 60's psychedelic take on the John Shuttleworth type act with a keyboard he found in a skip 25 years ago and a tape recorder. For the first song we laughed at him till we got the joke and then we laughed with him - he was brilliant.'*

I was also portrayed as 'mad as a hatter' by some woman on an Internet 'forum' devoted to the Sheffield-based singing songwriter Richard Hawley (www.richardhawleyforum.co.uk). Then there was the writer of an article for the January/February edition of *Rock 'N' Reel* (R2), who, prior to mailing it to the editor, made the mistake of sending me a draft for any - subsequently mostly unheeded - adjustments I'd like to make - and a bloke on Facebook who called me 'One of Our Legendary Nutter Gurus'.



Such infernal impudence has been mitigated, nevertheless, by the unexpected exhumation of a critique (<http://www.scip.org.uk/pog/archive.htm>) from the same period (*'...his set was so cosmic, it actually blew my mind...a genuine genius'...*) - and a glowing career overview (http://www.siiye.co.uk/E15/PAGE_181.html) published in *Caught In The Act*, another on-line journal, the brainchild of music archivist Geoff Wall - and Brian Hinton (described by bard and occultist psychogeographer [!] Iain Sinclair as 'the Screaming Lord Sutch of the poetry world'). When reading it, however, please note that it wasn't 'The Taster' by Clayson and the Argonauts that spent a fortnight in the Belgian Top Twenty in 1978, but

its 'Landwaster' B-side (because a radio presenter in the Netherlands started spinning it by mistake).

Rave reviews of *One Dover Soul* are still falling thick and fast. One of the most flattering was that which accompanied its clamber into a Top Twelve compiled by Gary 'Pig' Gold (<http://popdiggers.com/garys-2012-top-twelve>), nestling uneasily among latest albums by the disparate likes of Bob Dylan, The Beach Boys, Pete Townsend and Chris Richard and his Subtractors (no, I'd never heard of them either). Of as much inherent value in its way was the following framed testimonial from 'Legs' Larry Smith (which is now on the wall above my piano): *'He sings the spoken word - verse versus verse - oblivious to everything except his glorious self'*.

Next up, a certain Spweasel - who appears to be a singing composer from Texas - caught 'Forest De Winter Kit-Kat' on *you tube*, motivating him to write, *'I first listened to this shortly after it was uploaded, and have had it shuttling in and out of my conscious mind ever since. At the moment it's one of my all-time favorite pieces of music. I actually recognized Clayson's voice from various rock-docs'*.

The August 2013 edition of *Bucketfull Of Brains* was fulsome with praise too:-

Alan Clayson

***One Dover Soul* Southern Domestic**

Alan Clayson is perhaps best known either as leader of legendary cult band Clayson & The Argonauts, or as author of many music books on artists from Jacques Brel to The Yardbirds. Here, he returns with his first album in many a moon, this time under the direction of fellow maverick Wreckless Eric.

This is a characteristically strange record that's impossible to pigeonhole, but it's also consistently inventive and thoroughly enjoyable. Brel's influence makes itself felt on a number of unfashionably wordy, melodramatic numbers. 'Ug The Caveman' veers dangerously close to novelty territory and features something which sounds suspiciously like a wobble-board, but it's a fun piece about a "death disc" DJ who enjoys scaring the punters before returning home to a mundane existence after each gig. Among the highlights are the apocalyptic 'Refugees', with its military drumbeat, psychedelic breakdown and unexpectedly rousing chorus, and 'Church Crookham Memorial Hall 1966', a nostalgic tale of romance at a village disco.

With Wreckless Eric's rare ability to utilise vintage equipment to great effect, this sounds (in a good way) like it was recorded in about 1968. It also sounds like nothing else you've ever heard and makes a convincing case for Clayson as not only one of English pop's great eccentrics, but as one of its true originals too.

This dripped from the pen of Martin Dowsing, who is to Hungry Dog Brand as David Tibet is to Current 93. Yet, rather than intone as Tibet does, Martin sings in a manner akin to that of Wreckless Eric (who took pragmatic interest during the Brand's genesis). In parenthesis, Eric's Len Bright Combo reformed for, ostensibly, just one engagement at the Lexington in *norf* London on December 6th. He was fronting them when I first met him in the mid-1980s. Cultivating a comically seedy image and the artistic approach of a backdated beat group, they scorned a proper studio to create the home-made passion of a maiden long-player that cost next to nothing to record on antiquated electronic paraphernalia assembled in the attic of drummer Bruce Brand - who was with Mungo Jerry when I was on the 'tourette' in 2009.

In August, I caught the mercurial Bruce at the Hideaway Festival on a site half-hidden by woodland and set amid rustic calm near Henley-on-Thames. He was beating the skins for Hipbone Slim and the Kneetremblers, a hugely entertaining and utterly English rockabilly trio fronted by singing guitarist Sir Bald Diddley, whose antics embraced charging into an ecstatic mob, clambering astride speaker cabinets and rolling on his back as if he had a wasp in his pants.

During the latter half of 2013 too, I attended - on press and like accreditation, mind - more concerts than I have over the past decade. On the final Monday of November, for instance, it was Bill Wyman's Rhythm Kings at the Barbican after I was commissioned to dispense not so much an after-dinner as a *during*-dinner speech on the life and times of Dick Taylor's replacement as Rolling Stones bass player - for those who'd paid extra too for champagne and *canapés* in a private functions room and, shortly before the soundcheck, the descent into their privileged midst of seventy-seven-year-old Bill himself - to whom I spoke briefly about aspects of archaeology, one of his many interests - to the degree that he's patented a type of metal-detector and co-written a book, *Treasure Islands: Britain's History Uncovered* (The History Press, 2005).

The show itself was OK after an unambitious fashion - with the old Stone and drummer Graham Broad - most renowned perhaps for his contribution to the theme tune to the *East Enders* TV soap-opera - ministering unobtrusively to overall effect behind a combo that included pianist Geraint Watkins - who proved no slouch either as a singer or, during one lengthy introduction, comedian - and guest vocalists Maria Muldaur and Simply Red's Mick Hucknall (who reminded me facially of Charlie Drake). A culmination of what had gone before rather than an extension of the limits of the avant-garde, it was a *pot-pourri* of classic rock, rhythm-and-blues, soul and all manner of further ingredients in North America's pop cauldron.

Yet such unpretentious if derivative sounds were pleasant enough listening, especially in comparison to yet another introspective young adult clutching an acoustic six-string in direct descent from Melanie, James Taylor and other mannered post-Woodstock singing songwriters who used to vie with jazz-fusion and pomp-rock to be on the turntable in sock-smelling college hostel rooms long ago and far away. Beaming a small, sad smile every now and then, one of these kicked off a show at the Brighton Dome for which I'd also received complimentary tickets - in this case through the office of Steve Winwood in the light of my authorship of his official biography being ratified at last after much e-mail to-ing and fro-ing between the parties concerned.

With a discography spanning half-a-century, it would have been impossible for Steve to do all my specific favourites, even if he was a 'medley' kind of guy. Instead, what he called 'mixed vintage' covered a waterfront from the 'Keep On Running' finale to 'At Times We Do Forget' from 2008's *Nine Lives*, all arranged to embrace much thrilling extemporisation and the idiosyncrasies of percussion-heavy four world class players accompanying the boss on organ - pumping bass notes on foot pedals as well fingering the keyboard - or occupying stage-centre on guitar for, say, Traffic's 'Dear Mr. Fantasy' (the first of two encores) and, on 'Back In The High Life Again', all-fingers-going mandolin. Yet, however important the others were to overall musical effect, the show was, of course, all about Steve for whom Mother Nature has been kind, decisively with regard to his singing which remains as adept and as piquant as it ever was. In short, he was everything I hoped he'd be.

Not so much *The Yardbirds* as a Yardbirds - drumming mainstay Jim McCarty and three young blokes - were much how I *expected* rather than hoped at Twickenham Stadium's St. George's Suite during a friendly, downhome celebration, courtesy of the town's Eel Pie Club (see www.eelpieclub.com) of half-a-century since the group's first rehearsal. Present then was Top Topham, Eric Clapton's predecessor - and, to me, just as eloquent on the fretboard - who was among the old campaigners who put in an appearance with what now might be described as the Thinking Man's Swinging Sixties nostalgia act.

Hardly in the realm of pop at all, however, was much of Frank Zappa's *200 Motels*, part of the Southbank Centre's year-long *The Rest is Noise* salutation to twentieth century music. At the Royal Festival Hall on Tuesday 29th of October, this long-awaited and full-scale

British premiere was by the BBC Concert Orchestra, The Southbank Sinfonia, The London Voices and a rock group containing Scott Thunes and Joe 'Vaultmeister' Travers from the *Zappa Plays Zappa* revue at the Roundhouse last November.

With Gail Zappa, conductor Jurjen Hempel and Gillian Moore, the Southbank's Head of Classical Music, Scott and Joe had chaired a forum in the auditorium an hour before the show - during which Joe recognised my shock of white hair in the gallery and pointed me out to listeners. That was my cue to take Inese backstage afterwards to introduce her to Scott, Joe, Gail, Diva and further of 'my friends the stars', and be invited to a post-concert *soirée* - during which I was interviewed for a forthcoming DVD.

The panel discussion had been preceded by a playlet centred on Tony Guilfoyle - from Channel Four's *Father Ted* - as Frank, complete with straggly black wig and dagger beard. It concerned the breach-of-contract suit decades ago at the Old Bailey against the Crown, who'd forced the cancellation of the first intended staging of *200 Motels* at the Royal Albert Hall. This was on grounds of sexual content that has since been 'surpassed many times over on any of the current rap albums that are major economic successes', reflected Frank shortly before his passing in 1993. Indeed, as I wrote in the concert's programme notes (extracts from which were quoted in *The Times Literary Supplement*, no less), any potential for moral opprobrium within his *cause célèbre* was 'actually no more pronounced than it would be in, say, 1987's *Resurrection* opera by Peter Maxwell Davies - in which the central figure's phallus metamorphoses into a machine gun, directed at the audience'.

Musically, Zappa's pre-eminence in breaching the abyss between highbrow and lowbrow, pop and 'classical', catchy melody and unhumable dissonance, 'real' singing and rock 'n' roll hollering was never more conspicuous to those ticket-holders within a capacity crowd, once biased against one or the other. Me? I let *200 Motels* envelope me as it veered from the most rip-roaring and stratospheric ferment to dovetailed subtleties, whether surreal 'I Have Seen The Pleated Gazelle' with its *Pierrot Lunaire*-esque suspension of tonality to the playground interaction between would-be groupies and the two rock 'n' roll clowns for whom the high point of the day wasn't always the spell on the boards, but the winding-down afterwards and its associated escapades.

One of the groupies was played by Diva Zappa, who was bathed in an intangible aureole of charisma throughout. Another conspicuous luminary was Claron McFadden, the *bel canto* soprano who so adroitly tackled the most obliquely chromatic sections of the work's thirteen suites that a fractional widening of vibrato was as loaded as her most anguished cry.

Generally, what was less a performance than an experience was hailed with unanimous enthusiasm, though this may not have been entirely unconditional by either the Festival Hall's concert regulars or the curiosity-seekers with scarcely the haziest notion of what they'd paid to hear. A handful walked out before the finale - but maybe they didn't want to miss the last train home.

The following Sunday, Inese and I only just caught ours after a Bryan Ferry extravaganza at Oxford's New Theatre. I hadn't seen him on the boards since 1972 when Roxy Music warmed up for Alice Cooper at Wembley Pool Arena. Those who anticipated taking their Ferry medicine neat in 2013 would have been disconcerted by a performance starting with his formally-attired horn section plus double-bass, banjo and drums, running through selections from his catalogue in the manner of a pre-war dance band, commensurate with last year's *The Jazz Age* album. This prefaced the Great Man's entrance in flowery smoking jacket with his backing chorale (who were to kick off the second half with an energetic Charleston). However, four songs in, the bass player switched to an electric model, a guitarist plugged in, a younger second drummer thwacked a snare, and the show went sonically technicolor.

The sound, however, was blurred monochrome in the infamously echo-blighted Royal Albert Hall for what was probably the final British concert by *eighty-nine*-year-old Charles Aznavour, who wasn't merely 'marvellous for his age', but was marvellous in absolute terms. He used but one prop - a white rag - when acting out his 'La Bohème' signature tune. This was then tossed into the front rows, sparking off a riveting diversion when a young lady and

an elderly gentleman fought for it like cat-and-dog. Then there was one more number before the legendary *chansonnier* waved and vanished into the wings. *Bravo, Charles - et adieu!*

By contrast to Aznavour's full house, *Clayson Sings Chanson* pulled just half-a-dozen at Bom-Bane's in Brighton in midsummer. Nevertheless, we've been booked for The Brighton & Hove French Circle's centenary in 2015, and there was a pleasing mid-week turn-out for our second appearance at the Frome Festival - which provoked the piece below:-

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Frome Festival Reviews:

Clayson Sings Chanson,
reviewed by Andrew Shackleton

Jacques Brel found worldwide recognition for his literate, thoughtful, and theatrical songs.

Alan Clayson inhabits a similar world, where torment and tragedy are etched upon each word and in the furrow of his brow.

To call the show a homage to Brel, even though a large part contains Clayson's own interpretations, would be missing the point. At times sounding like Scott Walker, Howard Devoto and possibly more appropriately David Tibet, Clayson takes the spirit of Brel and imbibes it with a drop of English eccentricity.

The evening started with Clayson talking to the audience, setting the scene, before exiting stage right to get into character. And get into character he certainly did, his theatrical delivery and wild staring eyes pierced through the small but appreciative audience. The repertoire of French Nouvelle Chanson, mostly in English, included songs by Jacques Brel, Charles Aznavour, Scott Walker and also some of Clayson's own compositions, which sounded completely at home alongside the legends he was covering. Aply assisted by Andy Lavery on keyboards, Clayson makes each song his own; living, breathing and feeling each word.

A passion that is sadly lacking in many of today's technical and image obsessed bands.

It was packed out at Reading's Rising Sun Arts Centre for another Chanson spectacular - and for Clayson and the Argonauts' return both in our own right on the 5th of April and as part of the establishment's *Here Comes The Sun* gala in August - which was captured very evocatively on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dz94sqmdQR4&feature=youtu.be>.



Our bit commences at 3' 40". Chronologically, while cited as 'old school rock' in the *Evening Post* and, in contradiction, 'experimental performers' in the *Reading Chronicle*, we attracted an across-the-board section of a promenading multitude, some of whom mouthed the words of yet-unrecorded 'The Local Mister Strange' as accurately as selections from *Sunset On A Legend* and *One Dover Soul*.

That the ravages of age don't seem to matter as much as they did was evident too when Clayson-on-his-own opened once again for, respectively, Sonja Kristina's *Curved Air* in London and *It's A Beautiful Day* in Chichester - though I went the distance for Sonja with a scheduled forty-five minutes marred by nearly everything that could go wrong doing so, triggering amused cheers rather than standing ovations, and being entertaining for the 'wrong' reasons. I quite like creating the impression that everything could fall to bits at any given moment - as Wreckless Eric once remarked, 'an Alan Clayson set is like watching something breaking down in front of you' - but this was a true 'I don't want to do this anymore' moment. Nonetheless, I'd got my nerve back sufficiently by Chichester for onlookers to be less certain which way they were meant to take it - and, as implied, topping the bill on Humberside was even more gratifying (apart from its persisting financial aftermath).

In support at the New Adelphi was singing keyboard player Graham Graham Beck [*sic*], who dared a new composition as well as reinventions of Yardbirds and Kate Bush items and excerpts from his *A Bathful Of Nasturtiums* album, which, along with the *By Charing Cross Station* EP by Aural Candy, is my fave rave of 2013. Graham was at the city's art college at the same time as Wreckless Eric with whom he formed Ruby and the Takeaways. When the group sundered, Eric achieved qualified pop fame while Graham continued to waver and spring between music and painting.

He'd need a powerful incentive to travel that far south, but Graham could go down well at Swindon's Beehive, which accommodates musical events and exhibitions by local artists - and whose man-of-affairs Andy Mercer rebooked *Clayson Sings Chanson* and *Clayson-and-the-Argonauts* (with a set that included 'With A Girl Like You' as a *salaam* to Reg) for consecutive autumn evenings. For me, this was rather like being an actor in two different

plays, but the clientele - containing many of the same people - on both nights were most receptive. If nothing else, we seem to be as enormous after a word-of-mouth persuasion in Swindon now as we were back in Reading, *circa* 1976, just before we took on the world.

Mike Read, national TV and radio presenter and showbusiness jack-of-all-trades, who has been among those who has championed me both then and, on and off, over the years since, presided over a *Tribute To Geoff Goddard* - the subject of my first ever *Guardian* obituary - at the University Of Reading Students Union in May. If Joe Meek was the mind of RGM, its soul was surely the remarkable Goddard, the in-house composer who, in 1964, withdrew into a relative anonymity. A plaque was unveiled on the wall of the university catering department where he worked for the two decades prior to his death in 2000 - and the concert in his honour took place the following evening featured footage of Geoff on piano with 'Johnny Remember Me', his 1961 chart-topper for John Leyton, in the style of Rachmaninoff, and a recording of him singing 'Yesterday's Heroes', written with Mike, who introduced spots by John Leyton and, also looming large in the Goddard legend, Mike Berry, both in sound shape for fellows in their seventies - although Leyton's approach to pitch was unorthodox at times.

If with nothing current to plug, I was interviewed by Mike on his afternoon programme on BBC Radio Berkshire in August - too late for *Here Comes The Sun*, too distant for the then-forthcoming show in Hull - about my life, my soul, my torment... Unmentioned was the following visitation of Clayson paranoia: increasingly nowadays, when you create anything - music, literature, art, you name it - for public consumption, some organisation or other makes contact with the promptness of a vulture to say you owe it money.

Despite this, I shall leave you with the opportunity to investigate <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zrUd6DFuj0>, which is a demo of a composition that satisfies as many qualifications of a Yuletide Number One as 'The Moonlight Skater' - though, to paraphrase Mandy Rice-Davies, I would say that, wouldn't I? Yet my new-found fan Spweasel thinks it 'beautiful for Christmas season, and for all seasons for any newborn or soon-to-be-born. Or any one at all'.