

**‘.....by turns absurd and entrancing, if you’re prepared to stay on the bus, it makes for an exhilarating ride.....’**



The current popularity of the ukulele is such that it's overtaking the recorder as an instrument taught in primary schools - though the question remains: what's going to catch on next? Nose-flutes? Zithers? Musical saws? Maybe it's because the learning process of stringed instruments is much more logical than those that require blowing. One day when I was about sixteen, my father - an auctioneer - brought home an oboe that hadn't reached its reserve price. During the hours I spent attempting vainly to get to grips with it, no matter how many holes I covered, it usually emitted the same note - if any note at all - and the unpredictable harmonics jarred my teeth.

Since then, all woodwind players have been worthy of my unconditional admiration. The first one I ever knew personally was John Harries, who I met in 1972 when I answered his advertisement on a college notice board for anyone interested in forming a group. Those interested had to convene at a given time in the common room of his girlfriend's hall of residence. He held the door ajar for a motley bunch that included me with my worn-out six-string, Alan Barwise yet without his drum kit, an all-fingers-going acoustic guitarist, a girl with a Paul Simon songbook - and a bass player *sans* amplifier. I shall draw a veil over the subsequent proceedings - except to say that John was the only person to come out of it with any credit, principally by an instantly accepted respect for his instinctive command of the woodwind family by means that I suspect even he didn't fully understand.

I'm mentioning all this because a clarinet was central to the first mainstream classical recital I have attended for ages. This took place at Reading's Rising Sun Arts Centre one Saturday lunchtime in November, and starred Amy Gibb, who also honks saxophone in various soul, blues and jazz bands, and in an entity called The Vegan All-Stars.

Teenage years spent furrowing her brow and pursing her lips over Mozart while other girls were at the disco paid off for Amy in a scintillating hour - just long enough - that covered a waterfront from the dramatic to the contemplative, whether scorings of bucolic folk dance by Bartok, a Poulenc sonata or a florid encore of 'I Got Rhythm'. As a technical accomplishment, it wasn't flawless. Yet the entire experience beat, say, fidgeting through endless centuries of Brahms' *German Requiem*, one of the set-works in one summer term's academic tournaments, at Guildford Civic Hall during my ignominious career at Farnborough Grammar School.

Then as now, pop music - especially British beat - was far more meaningful to me than Brahms as I traced a guitar in the vapour of the kitchen window and wondered why Mum and Dad had been deaf to my desperate entreaties to be spared Evensong so that I wouldn't miss The Dave Clark Five's early slot on the Royal Variety Show in 1965. An overt anti-pop domestic policy manifested itself too in my parents' decision that I was not to receive records for birthday or Christmas gifts - at least not from them. When my grandmother gave me a record token once, Mum warned me not to waste it on 'rubbish'. What *shall* I buy then?

'Shakespeare's speeches,' she said, or, more vaguely, 'classical music.' I spent it on a Yardbirds LP.

Not so much *the* Yardbirds as a Yardbirds appeared after the intermission of what was bruited as The Ultimate Rhythm And Blues at Oxford's New Theatre last February. The first half, however, was more fun - with Peter Barton, singer and bass player with The Animals, second only to Dave Berry as its brightest luminary. Among highlights that had everyone on rapturous feet were Peter's 'Hold Me' with Maggie Bell - whose Glaswegian ebullience is an acquired taste - and, backed by The Animals and pedal steel virtuoso Brian Wood, the charismatic Dave's lone baritone breaking into 'The Crying Game', the only major concession to his chartbusting past.

While The Yardbirds dispensed an electrifying half-hour, there wasn't time for any of their customary extended improvisations ('rave-ups'), and Top Topham, Eric Clapton's predecessor in 1963 - and, as far as I'm concerned, just as eloquent on the fretboard - was underemployed, either shaking maracas or fretting chords beneath second guitarist Ben King's takes on the famous solos in 'Heart Full Of Soul', 'Shapes Of Things' *et al.*

The Zombies, however, found room for Rod Argent to stretch out at length on organ during 'Hold Your Head Up', the million-seller by his eponymous outfit formed after the sundering of the original Zombies. Moreover, Colin Blunstone's breathy tenor was as enthralling as always, most conspicuously at the apocalyptic cadence of 'Say You Don't Mind' - and when the inevitable 'She's Not There' closed a thoroughly diverting entertainment that no-one whose adolescence was soundtracked by 1960s pop - or, indeed, anyone who ever wondered what all the fuss was about - should've missed.

Four months later, I was present too - on press accreditation, mind - as I'd been the previous autumn at another so-called 'farewell' concert at the Royal Albert Hall by Charles Aznavour - though this time, I think he meant it. The set-list was exactly the same, he slipped off his jacket to reveal the same patterned braces he wore in 2013 - and he spat out every word of 'She' (which he probably hates as much perhaps Chuck Berry did 'My Ding A Ling') - but there was no doubting the passion of his delivery elsewhere (even if he relied on a teleprompter much of the time). The audience thought so too on the strength of a foot-stomping ovation that only fizzled out a full ten minutes after the payout to his 'Emmenez-Moi' finale - by which time, his limo was probably halfway back to the hotel.

My seat was mere yards from the stage, close enough to meet his eyes when he glanced fleetingly in my direction. Doubtlessly, you'll think I'm being a little silly, but I believe, however erroneously, that a telepathic message was projected from him to me. 'I understand you and you understand me,' it read, 'We know each other in a secret way as victims of the same artistic passion'. In parenthesis, it paralleled a sensation when my nineteen-year-old self saw The Mothers Of Invention at the London Coliseum in 1970, and imagined that Frank Zappa did the same. Perhaps it's to do with 'star quality', making you feel, just for that split-second, that you were the sole person on the planet that was important to him - before having an equivalent effect on someone else.

There was room for the inclusion of a number by Aznavour when *Clayson Sings Chanson* returned to the Stormy Monday in Barnes in April, the Cellars-at-Eastney on a Thursday in May and on a Saturday night only a fortnight ago at the Rising Sun, which was filmed for a purpose as yet undecided, and where I was billed flatteringly as 'a performer without equal'. Into the bargain, the event accommodated the public debut of Argojazz (briefly, The Post-Modern Jazz Quartet), which, if derived chiefly from within the ranks of the Argonauts, has more to do, appropriately, with what you might have heard in the Blue Note, Hot Club and like Parisian night spots via their embrace of music from Gershwin and Duke Ellington through to Chet Baker (notably 'Autumn Leaves' - with its original French lyrics by Jacques Prévert), Sonny Rollins - and John Martyn. Containing Alan Barwise and John Harries, it took me back to college and, formed after the foreseeable disaster that was the session in the common room, The John Harries Band to whom I offered unsought advice, and served gladly as unpaid 'road manager' on the few occasions when someone was needed to help carry equipment, say not 'one-two one-two testing' but sing a prelude 'weeeeeell' - as if for a twelve-bar rocker - in microphones provided for John's horn and

continuity, and stand in the wings holding another sax in readiness for the bit where he earned a smattering of applause mid-number for blowing two horns at once, just like Roland Kirk. It gave me a sense of belonging, though I tended to be treated as a bit of a joke, sometimes the whole of a joke.

For approximately two minutes in *Clayson Sings Chanson*, this has been self-inflicted via me trying not to radiate too much of a notion that I too was aware of the very ridiculousness of performing a recent addition to the repertoire, namely 'Dominique' by The Singing Nun, the melody of which had lingered in my head for maddening weeks on end, *circa* 1964. We're also incorporating more of those compositions of mine that blend most seamlessly in the gamut of acted-out emotions - from baffled wistfulness to fist-clenched aggression - that inform the basic concept of the presentation.

Of my solo activities, *One Dover Soul* shifted *just* sufficient copies to warrant a follow-up, which I'll be recording Joe Meek-style with the Argonauts in bass player Paul Critchfield's studio. As for stage appearances on my own in 2014, two brought me back into the orbit of Wild Willy Barrett (to whom I hadn't spoken since about 1979), both with and without erstwhile partner John Otway. The first of these - back at the Cellars - was memorable for an *après*-soundcheck conversation about whether a plumber should receive a royalty every time a toilet he has installed is flushed.

Then there was Guy Fawkes Night with Wild Willy Barrett's French Connection at an auditorium in central Reading whose million-pound renovation necessitated a lengthy closure prior to the lavish party - white wine please: red gives me heartburn - that signalled its relaunch last April. Nevertheless, Willy and I each wished they might have spent some of that money on the onstage monitors - which were so unsatisfactory that the fingering of my keyboards and guitar was guided by sight more than sound, and Willy was complaining openly and cut his ensemble's performance short. This problem was mitigated fractionally for me by the first sighting of a new star in Aurora Colson, the French Connection's featured singer - and unexpectedly abundant turnover of merchandise to 'young people', who wondered why they'd never heard of me before, though I wasn't sure how to take one of them comparing me to Syd Barrett.

It was, however, *mostly* folk of a 'certain age' in attendance when I undertook my maiden house concert - which came at the behest of Joy Bells, who was responsible for the rave review that came in the aftershock of Clayson and the Argonauts' inaugural bash at the Beehive ('a cultural Oasis in the desert of the Swindon scene') in 2012. See <http://greenmanbsp.wordpress.com/2012/11/27/alan-clayson-and-the-argonauts-at-the-beehive-23rd-november/>.

I was thus up-close-and personal in Joy's open-plan front room before cramped but appreciative onlookers, one of whom is pictured with me below.



The most public outcomes of a mid-week show in May at the Twelve Bar Club (within walking distance of both the bustling consumer's paradises centred on Oxford Street and the back-alleys that spread from Soho Square) was someone complimented me on my driving by sticking a note on the windscreen that read 'PARKING FINE' - and a review by Nick West, co-editor of *Bucketfull Of Brains*, for the summer edition of *Rock 'N' Reel* (R2).

.....  
**ALAN CLAYSON**

**12 Bar Club, London**

Alan Clayson has a long pedigree stretching back to the 70s and Clayson & The Argonauts. For a period they successfully negotiated the transitions of punk times, while retaining many aspects of what came before. Kin to figures such as Peter Hamill, Robert John Godfrey, and Robyn Hitchcock, Clayson's survived the years since as writer (and regular R2 contributor), performer, and tireless self-promoter.

Resembling a mad scientist crossed with a French onion-seller, his opening remarks address renal colic and artistic vulnerability, before he engages with some hastily departing audience members, and kicks off his set with 'I Hear Voices' from the recent

Wreckless Eric-produced *One Dover Soul* album. He'll alternate selections from it with older material.

Self-accompanied on a "Micky Mouse synthesiser" and a keyboard he "found in a skip over thirty years ago", along with an electric twelve-string, he affects the role of chansonnier, beat merchant, and cut-rate Van Der Graaf Generator. Interspersed with a series of unverifiable tales come his take on 'Perfidia', the mediaeval narrative 'Landwaster' allegedly written for folk-rockers Turnpike, and the upbeat space-opera excerpt 'Sol Nova'. By turns absurd and entrancing, if you're prepared to stay on the bus it makes for an exhilarating ride.

Nick West

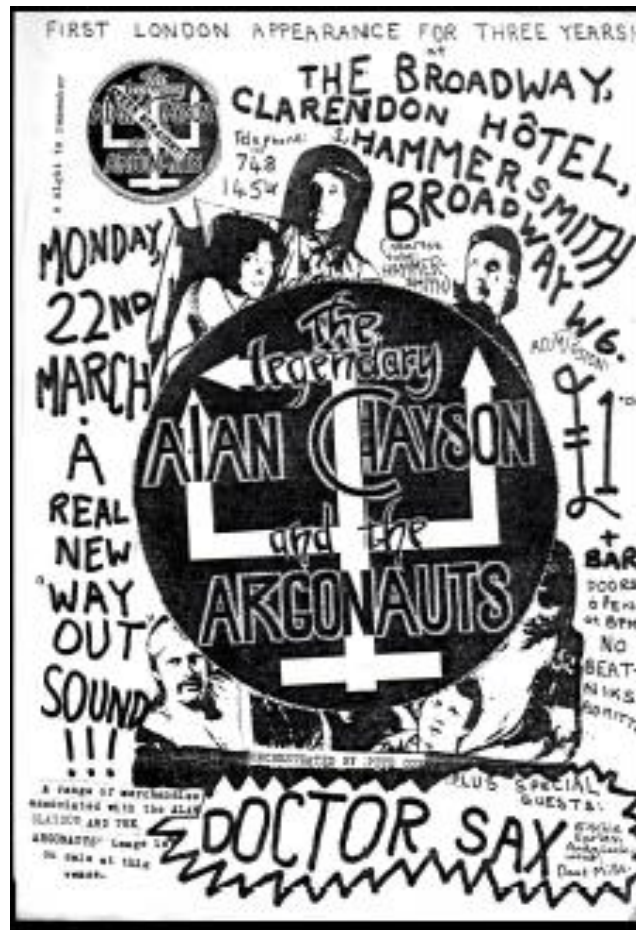
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Opening for me there was Martin Dowsing's Hungry Dog Brand - while poet Richard Earls did so at the Frome Festival in July. When first I encountered Richard in the late 1970s, he was a clerk at the bank where I accumulated recurring overdrafts in Cemetery Junction, which, thanks to a movie named after and set in it, has surfaced as the most



renowned suburb of the Berkshire county town reckoned by makers of television documentaries to be the most 'average' in Britain. I was then living *la vie bohème* in the district at 36, Cumberland Road, a crowded and semi-derelict storm-centre of Reading rock - and the antics that busied the rooms there what might have seemed to a detached observer to be like a cross between *The Young Ones*, *Satyricon* and *I Love Lucy*.

In those days, Richard was moonlighting as mouth-organist in The Downbeats, an R&B outfit that had shrunk to a duo named Doctor Sax by 1982 on the occasion detailed in the poster below:-



At Frome, he was bordering a well-received realm inhabited by John Cooper Clarke and those rapid fire *vers libre* readings that were prevalent in beatnik circles in the late 1950s - early 1960s - but with an in-built element peculiar to himself. A clip from my own contribution to the evening - 'bridging the gap brilliantly between prog-rock and punk' gasped a local web-site - may be viewed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAMGZqihfaY>. Moreover, someone was immortalizing me on camera-phone at the auditorium attached to Putney's Half-Moon pub, emoting 'On The Street Where You Live' to my own vamping on an electric piano as a special request on the seventieth birthday of Clayson and the Argonauts' former co-manager, Clive Stanhope, who, earlier, had enacted a revealing 'Desert Island Discs' scenario. As an indication of the parochial nature of the British music industry scene, Keith Grant of The Downliners Sect and I froze in mutual recognition at this event - and it transpired that he and Clive play golf together.

Further figures from the past reared up with the Clayson and the Argonauts bookings that stressed my relative omnipresence on the boards in and around Reading during 2014. At the Rising Sun again on Friday 2nd May, we were preceded by the *ad hoc* Ufton Nerve's Ramshackle Unstrung Band, what would have been deemed a Reading 'supergroup' once upon a time, containing as it did John Townshend of El Seven (and Movita), Steve Rolfe

from The Lost Weekend and the celebrated Denny Mills, alias Mr. Lordy Self-Righteous, Scatman PX and more besides - and a fellow tenant of 36, Cumberland Road.



Both Denny and I have probably worked at the Rising Sun more times than anywhere else in the region. If nothing else, the sound system is painstakingly clear; the staff friendly and prompt payers, and the tables-and chairs intimacy entirely appropriate for such as *Clayson Sings Chanson* if not Clayson and the Argonauts.

Yet there's no stage or, indeed, anything to frame the act - and not much in the way of *son-et- lumière* either. Nevertheless, the Rising Sun - like the Cellars - has an intangible something else that has facilitated the hosting of more inventive adventure than any other of Reading's many citadels of culture. It might almost be an Arts Laboratory lifted by time machine from the mid-1960s. There appears to be nothing it won't try, irrespective of popularity or financial reward (though, in June, there was a fund-raising art auction in which two examples of my calligraphy were sold).

A few streets away in South Street Arts Centre, however, sales figures and bums-on-seats are as much arbiters of excellence as artistic worth. It was there on an October Saturday that Beatles tribute band Sgt. Pepper's Only Dart Board Band and Clayson and the Argonauts - a tribute band to ourselves - undertook a double-header sub-titled 'an evening of psychedelia'. Even I wasn't so arrogant to imagine that my group could follow a solid hour or so of Beatles hits from their post-*Revolver* 'classical' period - so we went on first, despite

being portrayed in the *Windsor Observer* as 'being to Reading what The Beatles are to Liverpool'.

Yet audience size and response was only moderate - particular when compared to our comeback at the Beehive in Whitsun, a complete triumph on the evidence of the bedlam that we could hear back in the upstairs dressing room that prompted an unscripted third encore.



By contrast, the monk in me - as opposed to the onstage show-off - has continued to haunt the backstairs of literature in quietude. The Frank Zappa biography is leaving the runway at last. Pending too is my authorised life of Steve Winwood - which should be on course after he's recovered from his North American tour.

Other than that, it's been the customary reviews, obituaries articles and so forth, one of which entailed me coming up against someone in a position of minor editorial authority on a daily newspaper, who was both an ignoramus and one of the most spectacularly insolent creatures I've ever encountered. Fortunately for him, I was more amused than angry.

It was, however, a delight to interview Rosemary Squires for a feature in *Vintage Rock*. She was the singing voice behind ancient ITV commercials, notably for Fry's Turkish Delight and Skol lager - plus, most strikingly, mild, green Fairy Liquid's ubiquitous 'Hands That Do Dishes'.

For the same publication, I served likewise Cherry Wainer, 'the female Liberace', who pumped an upholstered Hammond organ in Lord Rockingham's XI, and, with her grinning vibrancy and ping-pong eyes, was singled out for solo stardom on *Oh Boy!*, arguably, British television's most atmospheric pop spectacular. As it turned out, I was Cherry's last interviewer - because she passed away weeks later, and was the subject of one of my obituaries (see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11263698/Cherry-Wainer-obituary.html>).

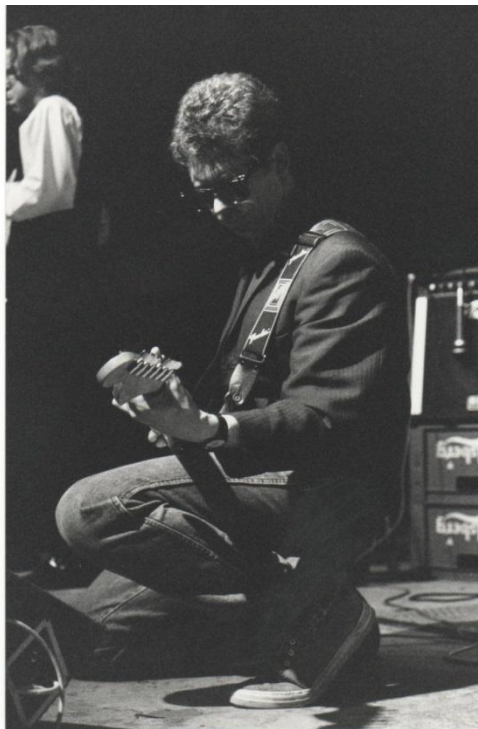
Others were for Jack Bruce - and Felix Dennis, a co-editor of 'underground' periodical *Oz* with Jim Anderson, Felix Dennis and Richard Neville. In 1969, they surrendered Number 28 (the notorious 'Schoolkids' edition) to teenagers - of which I was one as the contributor of three articles, published previously in *The South Briton*, the magazine I edited when, ostensibly, studying at Farnborough Technical College. During the month when 'my' *Oz* could be bought at the newsagent near Aldershot bus station, I gave it some showbiz at college, albeit after a guarded fashion because there'd be hell to pay if my parents heard about it. For the same reason, I got rid of my copy like a spy who'd memorised and eaten a top-secret document, and worked as a farm hand in Worcestershire, thereby making myself unavailable on the paranoia-fuelled presumption that I was to be subpoena-ed to testify



during the Old Bailey trial that culminated with 'guilty' verdicts for Felix, Neville and Anderson, and their issue with regulation convict garb and all-off haircuts. Nonetheless, I joined and then, with my claim of complicity in the 'Schoolkids Oz' half-believed, lead a protest march of about twelve people through Worcester's main shopping thoroughfares - and up and down department store escalators until cautioned by a constable. Reaction to our demonstration was of dull watchfulness, apart from a dotard fulminating about 'filth!' and coughing yellow phlegm on someone's shoe. Before returning to Fleet a fortnight later, I wrote to Richard Neville in Wandsworth Prison, and was thrilled when he took the trouble to reply, counselling me to 'stay tuned in and react according to the situation'.

As you may know, Oz began in Australia - where, in January 1965, Neville experienced The Rolling Stones at Sydney's Agricultural Hall where 'seeing Mick Jagger felt like seeing part of myself - as if the Stones and I, and all our mates, belonged to a secret tribe' (*Hippie Hippie Shake* by R. Neville, Bloomsbury, 1995). In the wake of the announcement in spring that the Stones were to resume touring, beginning with dates Down Under, I was required to speak about this on Australian breakfast television by satellite very late one night.

This was accomplished with vague trepidation as I'd endured another kidney stone episode two days before - which hadn't resolved, and I was fearful of being suddenly bent like a hairpin and crying out for an ambulance 'live' in front of several million viewers. By the merest chance, I'd been in accident-and-emergency in the same hospital where, so it transpired, fifty-seven-year-old Rob Rose was losing a fast battle with throat cancer. He was a respected singing guitarist, well-known too for his sharp dress sense (and a grin that just about slew me). See <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/12/rob-rose-obituary> for my summary of his life and career.



The funeral was standing room only - and was conspicuous for recordings of Rob when he was in The Romantix and Chain Gang (including a tremendous version of Curtis Mayfield's 'Move On Up').

'It hurts me to think I'll never see him again' was the sentiment of a eulogy by an Ashmead Comprehensive classmate - and one that rippled most poignantly across the congregation.

When a pupil there, Rob had honed much of his musical skill under the tutelage of the art teacher, Roger Barnes, who was gone not long after Rob - taken by a brain tumour. It



took a long while to come to terms with Roger's fate as he was an old mate from way back. You can read about him on <http://www.getreading.co.uk/news/tributes-paid-twford-musician-roger-7710819> and <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/aug/26/roger-wyndham-barnes-obituary>



*Roger and I having a 'normal' conversation, circa 1996*

So many friends have vanished of late. News just in is the loss of Alun 'Spardun' Huws of Y Tepot Piws. As heavy coverage in the principality's media has revealed, he was a colossus of Welsh rock. Alun was also one of the kindest souls alive, instanced when he presented me with his T-shirt, manufactured specifically for the combo's breathtaking reunion at 2003's Faenol Festival, curated by Bryn Terfel, in Gwynedd, worthy of filming for a prime-time BBC Wales TV documentary - into which I was roped in to gush about how I'd come to be 'their biggest English fan'.



*Y Tepot Piws and me at the Faenol (Alun Huws wears the blue jerkin).*

## Sbardun and me on Facebook

This would be Alan Clayson



— with [Alan Clayson](#).

[John Townsend](#), [Richard Earls](#), [Alun Sbardun Huws](#) and [10 others](#) like this.

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[Rob Espinosa](#) Love this man!! We had the pleasure of co-billing with Alan a number of times when we toured with It's a Beautiful Day in 2011 and 2013. He's just bonkers..... and has great shirts

[23 May at 08:26](#) · [Unlike](#) · [2](#)

[Valerie Ann Folkles](#) Thankfully not changed much over the years:)

[23 May at 11:25](#) · [Unlike](#) · [1](#)

[Alun Sbardun Huws](#) In the zone there Alan.

[23 May at 12:48](#) · [Unlike](#) · [2](#)

[Bridgette Robeson](#) You look 'wonderfully insane'...

[13 August at 16:30](#) · [Unlike](#) · [1](#)

Before Rob, Roger and Alun had been the death of Mike Robinson, who'd been behind the console at London's Paris Theatre during Clayson and the Argonauts *In Concert* slot on BBC Radio One in 1977. He was to be renowned in a wider world as the producer three years later of a British Number One for Splodgenessabounds. Around the turn of the next decade, he pulled strings to procure and oversee free-of-charge sessions that resulted in 'The Landlocked Sailor' and 'Run Kalwinder' on *Sunset On A Legend*. The degree to which he'd become a pal for life was epitomized more insidiously by neither of us having to apologise for lengthy telephone silences. That was why, wondering why he hadn't sent a Christmas card in 2013, I knew nothing about his sudden demise the preceding September until long after he was found dead in his Maida Vale flat.

Before any black cloud comes down further, perhaps it's time to lighten up with this:-

[www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10152739632827622&set=vb.672837621&type=2&theatre](http://www.facebook.com/video.php?v=10152739632827622&set=vb.672837621&type=2&theatre)

. It's the most useless every invented; so much so that I have to get one.

Also, if you've got a minute, take a look at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rilePPXbaNA>.

Precisely one minute into 'Song Of The Shrimp' (from *Girls! Girls! Girls!*), a split-second facial expression seems to capture Elvis Presley's true feelings about the song: 'What cruel fate chose me, the rock 'n' roll messiah, to get involved with crap like this?'

Finally, a US publication called *Ugly Things* commissioned me to write a series of brief articles concerning aspects of my musical (if that is the word) life. Here's the third and most recent of these:-

# Titans of Trash

## The Story of Billy & the Conquerors • by Alan Clayson

**O**n a mild December evening of hollyconings, mistletoe and Timex commercials, hissing cymbals and suspicious finger-clicks *à la* *Hill Side Story* were almost perceptible as the funeral convoy of cars and mini-vans containing Billy & the Conquerors bumped off the high street onto a parking lot next to a community centre which became Wokingham Heavy Rock Club every Friday throughout the early 1970s. Besides a *shit* response that they weren't suitable for the club's regular clientele, the promoter—a with-it vicar—couldn't recall booking them. He suspected they'd gate-crashed. Nevertheless, for motives not quite comprehensible, he found himself handing over ten pounds to the fellow in charge—a gooch-eyed shockhead in wrinkle-pickers, thigh-bagging orange jeans, thick makeup, collarless shirt, purple choker and weave-stripped blazer with plastic poinsettia buttons—as the group's fee for an unwanted "special guests" of the billed attraction, Millstone Grit.

You knew where you were with a power trio like them, but this shower—who seemed to be all over the building—included three guitarists, bass, piano, sax, flute, French horn, violin, a percussion battery of congas and two drummers, and a vocal troupe underpinning a queue of four lead singers with 'lool' bassman rumbles—"warrers"—in-seise falsetto and much caterwauling in *heaven*. During the soundcheck, some Conquerors seemed to be playing the numbers for the first time as evidenced by strings of bum notes and blown riffs, clashing sheet-lightning chords and apocalyptic cadences amid howled dissonance.

Showtime more than lived up to the preliminaries. Hitting all their instruments at once at a *rococo* "Right!" Billy & the Conquerors smashed a sickening dissonant festering a quarter of a minute. After a split-second respite, they torpedoed into what less than 0.2% of the assembled populace recognized as "Lord Rockingham Meets the Monster" from 1959, its unison melody line being carried by melodica, sax and screeching kazoo. Within moments of this opening onslaught, one outraged heavy metallurgist had to be restrained from slamming



call ones as far back as the 1920s—anything to keep the ghostly "Woodstock Generation" present with its Melania, David Cassidy, "superidemen," GLPs and bridges over troubled waters at arm's length. We also visited jumble sales, hearts pounding in anticipation when squeezing between hags blocking access to piles of scratched 78s and 45s, and scaffold LPs on a white elephant stall. From such seamy scenes "Little Star" by The Elegants, The Robulars' *Acrobatics* EP "The Village Jazz Band" novelty footnote from Billy Hill & His Boys, Eric's *Chorus* by Stanley Holloway sorts alone, "Chaquita" by the Dave Clarke Five and the sheet music to "Still I'm Sad" with the Vandicans' teeth blacked-in, "Woolly" by the Proty Things surfaced in an otherwise dull mixture at a Methodist church fete, and I nearly had kittens when the rarest Kinks track, the B-side "You Do Something To Me," was uncovered a week later in a *Help The Aged* shop.

Such an expedition might be followed by an enthralling evening of solely B-sides or singles spun at 33 rpm—whereby the Small Faces, say, sounded just like Howlin' Wolf—before our record sessions evolved into attempts by Tim and I—and others sucked into the vortex—at approximating the outmoded sounds ourselves. During these fun and games, we trailed over suitable scenes for a hypothetical group, and it was drummer Alan Barwise who suggested "[King] Billy and the Conquerors."

So we came to be a tolerable if laughable part of the local college's cultural furniture. With personnel

his flat through a PA speaker. Nevertheless, so rapidly was a grotesque camaraderie accumulated between the group and its mismatched audience that potentially ugly moments were bypassed as Billy & the Conquerors themselves managed to convey the impression that they too were aware of both their own and the overall situation's absurdity.

At least it wasn't weak. Following an interminable encore—a ludicrous medley that stacked up "Que Sera Sera," "Hound Dog," "Fanny John," "Woolly Bully" and "let-me-hear-you-say-yeah" soul man dialogue—the set fell to bits with another protracted soler and wild applause. Billy & the Conquerors had realised once again their highly-strung artistic lightness without a safety net. "A cacophonous cross between 1925, 1963 and 1975," that nighty Carbertus the Wokingham *Times* would write, "I can honestly say I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT IN MY LIFE!"

This was also the only occasion the ensemble had ventured outside the security of the higher education establishments in and around

Reading from whence we'd fermented after I found myself seeking the particular company of a certain Tim Figan, who when studying at an art school in Bournemouth, had scraped acquaintance with founder members of the incomparable Portsmouth Sinfonia—musicians with unorthodox command of their instruments and a repertoire of the bits everyone knows from the classics. Certainly, they seemed like my sort of people.

Tim was an exception to my rule that all unusually handsome blokes are pompous narcissists—for he was content generally to be a passive listener as I gave my imagination its rambling, arm-waving head when we cut lectures to scour neighbouring towns for bazaars bearing the sign "junk," "second-hand" or "bric-a-brac" in an obsessive search for artifacts from musi-



Above: Mic Dover and John Whitaker.  
Top center: Alan Clayson.

Billy & the Conquerors, ca. 1972.  
L to R: Mic Dover (electric guitar), Alan Clayson (at microphone), Alan Barwise (drums), Mary Smallcombe (violin) plus others.

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Ugly Things

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Alan Clayson (guitar),  
Tim Fagan (at microphone),  
Mary Smallcombe (violin),  
John Harries (sax) and others.

oscillating from eight to twenty-four, some members were recruited literal minutes before a recital, merely because they happened to be holding an instrument, wearing a particular garment or just because I liked some facet of their personality or physique. See, being *fuhrer* of the Conquerors also lent theoretical license to approach those with a different set of hormones to mine, who welcomed the excuse to publicly and indelicately frolic about beneath spotlights in titillating clothing under the alibi of harmless student fun.

Moreover, though the hopeless, the hopeful and the just plain starstruck clamored to join, imagine my surprise when saxophonist John Harries and guitarist Andy Pegg, both respected parochial jazzers

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At times, the mob almost took over—almost but not quite because I guarded Billy's stardom with the passionate venom of a six-year-old with a new bike until the close of 1974's academic year when gangs began breaking up, empires started crumbling and Billy & the Conquerors proved too good to last. No one thought in terms of "making it," hit records or "Billy-mania"—plus, of course, Billy didn't exist—or did he? What had made his retirement inevitable was the formation of Clayson & the Argonauts, who were to absorb much of the Conquerors' ramshackle grandeur—and as long as Clayson survives as an entertainer, so will the mythical Billy. •

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If the above isn't legible, here's a plain-text version:-

*Titans Of Trash: The Story Of Billy And The Conquerors*  
by Alan Clayson

*On a mild December evening of homecomings, mistletoe and Timex commercials, hissing cymbals and suspensory finger-clicks à la West Side Story were almost perceptible as the*



funereal convoy of cars and mini-vans containing Billy and the Conquerors bumped off the high street onto a parking lot next to a community centre which became Wokingham Heavy Rock Club every Friday throughout the early 1970s. Besides a gut response that they weren't suitable for the club's regular clientele, the promoter - a with-it vicar - couldn't recollect booking them. He suspected they'd gatecrashed. Nevertheless, for motives not quite comprehensible, he found himself handing over ten pounds to the fellow in charge - a gotch-eyed shockhead in winkle-pickers, thigh-hugging orange jeans, thick make-up, collarless shirt, purple choker and mauve-striped blazer with plastic poinsettia buttonhole - as the group's fee as unwanted "special guests" of the billed attraction, Millstone Grit.

You knew where you were with a power trio like them, but this shower - who seemed to be all over the building - included three guitarists, bass, piano, sax, flute, French horn, violin, a percussion battery of congas and two drummers, and a vocal troupe underpinning a queue of four lead singers with 'fool' bassman rumble - 'wurrrrr' - insane falsetto and much caterwauling in between. During the soundcheck, some Conquerors seemed to be playing the numbers for the first time as evidenced by strings of bum notes and blown riffs, clashing sheet-lightning chords and apocalyptic cadences amid bawled directives.

Showtime more than lived up to the preliminaries. Hitting all their instruments at once at a staccato 'Right!', Billy and the Conquerors smashed a sickening dischord lasting a quarter of a minute. After a split-second respite, they torpedoed into what less than 0.5% of the assembled populous recognised as 'Lord Rockingham Meets The Monster' from 1959, its unison melody line being carried by melodica, sax and screeching kazoos. Within moments of this opening onslaught, one outraged heavy metallurgist had to be restrained from slamming his fist through a PA speaker. Nevertheless, so rapidly was a grotesque camaraderie accumulated between the group and its mismatched audience that potentially ugly moments were bypassed as Billy and the Conquerors themselves managed to convey the impression that they too were aware of both their own and the overall situation's absurdity.

At least it wasn't weak. Following an interminable encore - a ludicrous medley that stacked up 'Que Sera Sera', 'Hound Dog', 'Farmer John', 'Woolly Bully' and let-me-hear-you-say-yeah soulman dialogue - the set fell to bits with another protracted noise and wild applause. Billy and the Conquerors had walked once again their highly-strung artistic tightrope without a safety net. 'A cacophonous cross between 1955, 1965 and 1975,' that mighty Cerberus the Wokingham Times would write, 'I can honestly say I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT IN MY LIFE!!!'

This was also the only occasion the ensemble had ventured outside the security of the higher education establishments in and around Reading from whence we'd fermented after I found myself seeking the particular company of a certain Tim Fagan, who when studying at an art school in Folkestone, had scraped acquaintance with founder members of the incomparable Portsmouth Sinfonia - musicians with unorthodox command of their instruments and a repertoire of the bits everyone knows from the classics. Certainly, they seemed like my sort of people.

Tim was an exception to my rule then that all unusually handsome blokes are pompous narcissists - for he was content generally to be a passive listener as I gave my imagination its ranting, arm-waving head when we cut lectures to scour neighbouring towns for bazaars bearing the sign 'junk', 'second-hand' or 'bric-a-brac' in an obsessive search for artefacts from musical eras as far back as the 1920s - anything to keep the ghastly 'Woodstock Generation' present with its Melanies, David Cassidys, 'supersidemen', ELPs and bridges over troubled waters at arm's length. We also visited jumble sales, hearts pounding in anticipation when squeezing between hags blocking access to piles of scratched 78s and 45s, and scuffed LPs on a white elephant stall. From such sources came 'Little Star' by The Elegants, The Fabulous Fleerekkers EP, 'The Village Jazz Band' novelty foxtrot from Billy Hill and his Boys, 'Ere's 'Olloway by Stanley Holloway sans sleeve, 'Chaquita' by The Dave Clarke Five and the sheet music to 'Still I'm Sad' with The Yardbirds' teeth blacked-in. 'Rosalyn' by The Pretty Things surfaced in an otherwise dull mixture at a Methodist church

fete, and I nearly had kittens when the rarest Kinks track, the B-side 'You Do Something To Me', was uncovered a week later in a Help The Aged shop.

Such an expedition might be followed perhaps by an enthralling evening of solely B-sides or singles spun at 33 rpm - whereby The Small Faces, say, sounded just like Howlin' Wolf - before our record sessions evolved into attempts by Tim and I - and others sucked into the vortex - at approximating the outmoded sounds ourselves. During these fun and games, we mulled over suitable names for a hypothetical group - and it was drummer Alan Barwise who suggested '(King) Billy and the Conquerors'.

So we came to be a tolerable if laughable part of the local colleges' cultural furniture. With personnel oscillating from eight to twenty-four, some members were recruited literal minutes before a recital, merely because they happened to be holding an instrument, wearing a particular garment or just because I liked some facet of their personality or physique. See, being fuehrer of the Conquerors also lent theoretical licence to approach those with a different set of hormones to mine, who welcomed the excuse to publicly and indelicately frolic about beneath spotlights in titillating clothing under the alibi of harmless student fun.

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