

*'I sloughed off a desire to struggle through the enveloping superciliousness before me...'*



During my 'imperial' period in the late 1970s, a West End agency ensured an itinerary that involved almost every-night-a-gig for nigh on three years, and imagined that two hundred miles was just a few inches on a map. Indeed, one night we finished an engagement in London and hurled the gear into the van as the last major sixth was still reverberating. Several hours later, we were on the night ferry from Anglesey to Waterford to begin a tour of Ireland the following evening at some college in Galway.

That was when my youthful metabolism could stand pressures that my sixty-eight-year-old self is beginning to find onerous - as instanced when, professionally, 2019 began sourly on the final Saturday in January with a bastard of a gig, the worst one I've ever undertaken in nearly half-a-century as a musical entertainer. The soundcheck was OK and the engineer competent, but prior to the performance, someone switched off one of my two keyboards briefly (thus messing up all the programming) and also pressed its transposition button inadvertently - so that it was a full tone sharper than the other one.

In the teeth of dim stage lighting and my habit of not wearing everyday spectacles on the boards, I noticed and was able to rectify the more vital auto-rhythms and instrumental voicings - but the disparities between the keyboard tonalities didn't become evident until both were used during the second number.

The sonic horror that resulted and the correlated loss of momentum when the blokes at the console bounded on to try to help didn't matter to most of those present at a venue where admission was free and which resembled an ornate underpass with a saloon and dungeon-like recesses. The floor space in front of me was almost completely empty - though, further back were a mixture of Clayson fans and curiosity-seekers. Otherwise, most customers thronged the bar, jollyng themselves up before the nightclubs opened later in the evening. Battling their babble, I turned swiftly into a background noise - with my singing, playing and continuity of no more consequence than the gibberings of some idiot relation at a family gathering.

Thus I found myself dealing with a crowd principally more interested in getting inebriated or pursuing romance than my recital. Moreover, what had now become unsolvable, even worsening, technical problems made it impossible for me to merely go the distance in a coldly accomplished manner as, reportedly, performance poet John Hegley, the other artist on the bill, managed. On announcing 'I can't do this anymore!', I quit the stage, and was deaf to both roundabout persuasion and then naked pleas from staff to go back on for the rest of the scheduled time, no matter how petulantly I did so.

At least this fiasco actually took place - unlike not so much a tour as a 'tourette' of the most faraway region of the West Country in autumn by *Clayson Sings Chanson* (i.e. me and keyboard player Andy Lavery), supported by Rob Boughton, a former Argonaut who, on the strength of his recent *Short Stories, Tall Tales* album, would be my choice for 2019 if I was one of those rock journalists who, from the mid-1960s onwards, put forward someone-or-other as the 'Bob Dylan' of a particular year.

The *Clayson Sings Chanson* expedition with him, however, has been held at arm's length because of promoters panicking over slow advance ticket sales during what is known as the 'low season'. Nevertheless, if or when the dates are rescheduled, Cornwall may experience what the Kino-Teatr in a suburb of Hastings did in June where we detonated a show after a mandated opening act had the audacity to clear off immediately after his slot - which was, in any case, rendered retrospectively nondescript, chased as it was by a far better-received pre-intermission set by Andy alone.

For me, the evening was notable too for the renewal of face-to-face acquaintance with Jack Irving, a drummer who, like me, loomed large in the legend of David 'Screaming Lord' Sutch, the finest Prime Minister we never had - and Faith Brooker, once in my backing chorale, The Apples of Discord (sometimes The Furies) named from Jason-and-the-Argonauts-connected Greek mythology. She is now prominent in Rattlebag, a formidable *a capella* quintet trading mostly in overhauls (and, in some instances, virtual rewrites) of traditional songs.

This booking took place a fortnight before the unleashing of a ten-inch vinyl single by the Argonauts and I. Its chief selling point is a remake of forty-year-old 'Sol Nova' (from *What A Difference A Decade Made*) - which came about after that Clayson solo performance last August at the Putney Half-Moon where I was approached afterwards by Ross Hannan to whom John 'Johnny Spoons' Roberts had introduced me seven years ago at a house concert in Wokingham starring a veteran Californian folk-rocker. Ross said he wanted to release 'Sol Nova', the item with which I'd encored, on his Hookah label (see <https://www.hookah.org.uk/>). While I was civil enough to him, I'm sufficiently battle-hardened by the business to expect nothing and be pleasantly surprised if it turned out otherwise - and it did!

It was decided to fill remaining needle-time with 'Run Kalwinder' (from *Sunset On A Legend*) and 'The Refugees' (*This Cannot Go On...*) - plus the 1979 'Sol Nova' after we'd recorded the new version (with a hitherto unheard monologue) at Blue Rocket studio in much the same Joe Meek-esque way as the tracks on our last long-player. As it was with Meek's million-selling 'Telstar' - the quintessential British instrumental - for The Tornados, the required space-rock atmosphere was conjured up. It embraces a libretto that led one critic to conclude 'there's a whole movie in that song'. If so, the fundamental plot hinges on the rare occasion when a bright object will appear without warning in the night sky. This might be a *sol nova* - a star that, via a side-action of radio activity, has mutated suddenly into a celestial behemoth, swallowing and destroying all the planets

in its orbit - and their inhabitants. If you get round to listening to our expression of this horror, please try not to faint.

Among scattered spins on the airwaves for 'Sol Nova' were more than one on Kennet Radio via presenter Brian Harrington and when I was interviewed by no less than Tony Blackburn on BBC Radio Berkshire. Conspicuous among reviews was *Rock 'N' Reel's* 'an extraordinary *Antiques Roadshow* blend of Brinsley Schwarz [!] and early Roxy Music'. There was also coverage of the official launch back at the Putney Half-Moon, courtesy of Pete Sargeant of *Just Listen To This* (see <https://justlistentothis.co.uk/live-reviews/>) who, bless him, turned up looking gravely ill (which he was).

Pete wrote of 'the individual character of the ensemble and moreover its material imbues shows with an electricity that few veteran crews can match... so some sort of alchemical teamwork brings a contemporary potency, sparks of excitement, crackling solo instrumental runs – not least Clayson's occasional harp forays ! – plus moments of pastoral reflection. This show is an adventure, subject matter all over the place but taking in very local and even global conflicts and dilemmas in equal measure.

'Pete Cox's punchy guitar work recalls Hugh Cornwell or The Only Ones and will dispel any high-falutin' posturing. The sax and flute forays have an edgy beauty, the bass lines are deep and never over-embellished. The drumming observes the vital dynamics these tunes demand whilst the keyboard excursions skip from eerie fairground waltz runs to steady but melodic chording. No cobwebs on this ensemble. Catch them when you can'.

Yeah...well...we reheated the soufflé last month at the more intimate Rising Sun Arts Centre in Reading for an audience dignified by the presence of 'Legs' Larry Smith from The Bonzo Dog Band - and Rob, a Londoner who 'felt like the winner of one of those "see your favourite band live in your very own living room" competitions!'. He works at the Palace of Westminster, and offered us a guided tour of the Houses of Commons and Lords after the dust of the General Election has settled. In parenthesisisisis, here's a possible solution to the present national chaos. Let's provoke a war with a country that has an attractive and effective political system. Then we surrender immediately and unconditionally so that the 'victor' can take over our administrative and economic procedures.

More generalised media exposure has included part two of a lengthy cross-examination (by Gary 'Pig' Gold) concerning my life, my soul, my torment in the summer edition of *Vulcher* (<https://www.facebook.com/Vulcher>) - and in another US periodical, *Music Web Express (MWE)* which harked back to my involvement with Dave Berry's *Hostage To The Beat* LP and described *This Cannot Go On...* as 'among the top esoteric rock CDs of 2018' and me as 'a hero of the underground UK pop-rock scene'. See

<http://www.mwe3.com/archive/pastfeature/featureMusicRevWinter2019.htm> for the full report.

A backroom legend of the British music industry was my mate Chris Phipps, who died suddenly in August. Time was when he was to the fore as a disc-jockey and host of Radio Birmingham pop shows and *Look! Hear!*, a youth-targeted TV magazine peculiar to the area in the early 1980s. Next, he uprooted to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, initially as a power on *The Tube* prior to overseeing television documentaries such *Motor City Music Years* and 1996's *Bob Marley: Time Will Tell*.

Chris's *Namedropper!* memoirs were published last year.

Making the transition a fortnight after Chris was Ray Pinfold, former drummer with Dave Berry and the Cruisers - and, apart from Dave, the group member to whom I was closest. You'll read all about Ray if or when my autobiography is published - as you will of Kenny Lynch, departed this very month, with whom I had mostly professional dealings.

It was the same with Pauline Sutcliffe, sister of fated 'Fifth Beatle' Stuart, who passed on this autumn. With her, I was responsible for the tie-in book to 1994's Oscar-nominated *Backbeat*, the bio-pic centred on Stuart, John Lennon and the former's German girlfriend, Astrid Kirchherr. Our brief was to cover Stuart's entire existence rather than the final two years outlined in the film. Broadly speaking, Pauline provided first-hand insight and much privileged information, while I

attended to the literary donkey-work. Our working relationship wasn't all smiles, but the saga was traced as accurately and as adequately as anyone might reasonably expect.

Later, she was the co-author (with Geoffrey Guiliano) of a subjective re-write in which she sexualized John and Stuart's friendship, and maintained that their mere scuffle in the movie was actually a full-blooded assault that climaxed with Sutcliffe sustaining a kick in the head which 'was what eventually led to Stuart's death'. This was a contradiction of both the film and our book - which blamed some thugs who set upon Stuart outside some Liverpool pub. Furthermore, Pauline and I decided that his demise could have been caused by too much speed. Significantly too perhaps was that, though she lived only five miles away, Pauline didn't bother with the concert I did with Alfredo Merat on Long Island in 2016.

Maybe you can appreciate, therefore, why I was saddened more by the passing of Scott Walker, having been a fan since the late 1960s. Partly it was the thing of wonder that was his golden brown baritone, but most of the appeal was that, by contrast to most Anglo-Saxon pop, there was as much emphasis on lyrics as melody and chord structure. Moreover, the first original 'songs' I ever wrote were not unlike the more unfathomable aspects of Walker during his post-millennium *The Drift-Bish Bosch* period. *Circa* 1968, I intended to deliver a couple of them - standing up and singing to my own slammed and crotch-level rhythm guitar accompaniment - when daring a floor spot at Fleet Folk Club, intruding upon an evening of blacksmith's daughters, chunky knitwear, high-velocity nylon-stringed intricacies, 'Mister Froggie Went A-Courting', a couple of blokes with beards finger-in-the-earholing 'The Wild Rover', a Joan Baez impersonator and some seated twerp emoting the 'Johnny B Goode' of the genre, Ralph McTell's 'Streets Of London' - which the audience heard no more than a sailor hears the sea, but clapped politely all the same.

I was not well-received, and, when my opening item expired, I sloughed off a desire to struggle through the enveloping superciliousness before me, never to enter the premises again, and was preparing to pile into a Chuck Berry number out of *go-fuck-yourself* devilment when the *compère* swept on, bereft of his customary fatuous affability, and, rolling his eyes heavenwards, thanked me for my 'performance' and brought on the next act - another couple of blokes with beards.

So I trudged home where *Scott*, *Scott 2*, *Scott 3* and *Scott 4* would be almost as much turntable fixtures as *The Mothers Of Invention* - which brings me round to the Frank Zappa biography, which is happening at last after nearly ten years of messing about - and it has to be finished by next June. So far, progress has been slow-but-steady. In connection with this, Inese and I were on the guest list for *The Bizarre World Of Frank Zappa* - featuring Frank-as hologram - at the London Palladium in May. Nothing I can say can do succinct justice to an eye-stretching audio-visual experience framed by what *many* may consider a 'dream team' of personnel from the late Mother Superior's latter-day outfits plus virtuoso drummer Joe Travers - though, as intended, the digitally-resurrected singing, speaking and fretboard-plucking Frank stole the show.

Further literary news is that, before the Zappa contract was finalised, I'd resumed my memoirs - which have now reached the mid-1980s. Also, a company called Endeavour Media are systematically making various books of mine available in digital form.

I was flattered when Tim Craven, founder in 2014 of the Arborealists, told me he'd read three of them when Inese and I met him and other painters at such an exhibition in June. We were there at the invitation of art historian Peter Davies - for whom I'd scribed programme notes for 2007's *Sharing A View* event on the Isle of Wight.

Other than that, there's not much else to report beyond the purchase of another Vauxhall Corsa after a new thermostat ceased holding the demise of the last one at arm's length. All the same, this brought out a huge sentimental streak in me - to the degree that I was almost overcome with melancholy when the truck arrived to carry KX54 WVL off to the breaker's yard.

On that morose note, I shall close.

