

## ARGOSY 2016

...even now, I can scarcely believe that it happened...

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**'A good half of my life is spent in a world of imagination. How else could I cope?'**



The first of several extraordinary episodes this year was centred on my father's demise at the age of 91, and the birth of a second grandson – who Jack and Donna chose to call 'Stanley' - the night before the funeral in a woodland burial site near Dorchester.

My Dad's life was as shaped by the Second World War as mine was by the Swinging Sixties – because, just before Christmas 1942, The War Office, perturbed about the stalemate the British army had reached against the Axis powers, sent for Gordon Clayson. He never rose above the rank of sergeant, but a 'Mentioned In Dispatches' - symbolised by a oak leaf on one of his medals - was earned for hurling a grenade on point of explosion away from a crowded training area.

Shortly after D-Day, Gordon – still a teenager - lost his right leg below the knee, and all but died of this and other wounds in the battle of Villers-Bocage, an action that concluded with his incarceration in a prisoner-of-war camp until liberation via the might of US General 'Blood And Guts' Patton.

His old job as an auctioneer for Flashman & Co., a big furniture store in Dover, Kent, was waiting for him, following a hero's return to the Crown, the pub his parents ran in Eythorne, a village a few bus stops from the cross-Channel port that had been half-blown out of existence by the Luftwaffe.

In 1946, Rosemary Peacock, fresh from school, joined Flashman's as a secretary, and eventually she and Gordon started 'walking out' together.

Reader, she married him – and they were to conform to an established pattern of graduating onwards and upwards to a home that was an improvement on the one before, particularly after the family uprooted far inland to Fleet, a north Hampshire satellite town of Aldershot.

My father was able to park his company car without restriction along Fleet's then-sleepy high street where stood the offices and auction rooms of Alfred Pearson & Son Estate Agents - in which he was to become a partner in 1964. He surfaced too as something of a town patrician prior to retirement in 1983, and a move to South Petherton, Somerset where he enjoyed his final decades rich in material comforts and the adoration of his many grandchildren.

The dust was still settling on my Dad's passing when I heard about that of Ron Watts. As well as bringing all manner of US blues legends to this scepter'd isle and being in on the ground floor of punk, Watts was also mainstay of Brewer's Droop, one of the most alarming acts on the early 1970s circuit. Ron was also someone I knew and liked, and who, as a promoter, loomed as large in my legend as he did in that of The Sex Pistols. Indeed, he offered Clayson and the Argonauts his services as manager after booking us at his two principal venues, High Wycombe's Nag's Head and, more prestigiously, the 100 Club, part of a life-changing chain of events.

Gone too was Richard Neville, another part of my past. After he and the two other founders of *Oz* - regarded spuriously as the colour supplement of 'underground' periodical *International Times (IT)* - yielded edition 28 to teenagers in 1970, I submitted three pieces - of which all were published. When the flow-chart of scandal unfolded for pungent disclosure in the morning papers, I scanned them in a parochial newsagent's with mingled excitement and apprehension for my name and found nothing until the following Sunday when one of my pieces filled half a paragraph in *The Observer*. As mentioned in ARGOSY 2014, I wrote to Richard in Wandsworth Prison a fortnight later, and was delighted when he replied, advising me to 'stay tuned in and react according to the situation'.

A 'situation' to which I reacted in August was prefaced when, with the idlest inquisitiveness, I bought *Two Brothers*, a novel centred in Nazi Germany, by Ben Elton – with whom I share the same birthday - at a car-boot sale, and took it with me on a five-day expedition to Riga that was not so much a break as a pilgrimage – because Inese's parents, Juris and Antonija, fled separately from war-torn Latvia in 1942, oppressed as they were by the Germans and/or the Russians. They met and married in Bolton – and produced Inese and her brother Valdis. However, while Antonija and Juris achieved a degree of contentment after settling in Nottingham, they were never to return to Latvia, a source of great sadness to them – and, because of this, Inese and I felt unable to make the trip while they remained alive. *Two Brothers*, therefore, turned out to be entirely appropriate reading matter - and was one of the most emotionally moving tales I've read in a long while. It was also an extraordinary feat of scholarship.

As expected, Riga is quite westernised now that organisations like Pizza Hut, Debenham's and Burger King have thrust tentacles into the city, but, if more insidious, a Russian presence remains tangible – as instanced by the architecture of the Latvian Orthodox Cathedral where lie the remains

(see below) of Inese's great-uncle, St. John (Jānis) Pommers, Archbishop of Riga. He was a kind of Latvian Thomas à Becket, who, upon painting himself into a precarious corner of ecclesiastical politics, was martyred in horrific fashion by persons unknown in 1934.



It was during the closing moments of divine service that we entered the building and shuffled forward in a Stations-of-the-Cross queue, paying respects at the tomb. For reasons I didn't completely fathom, my spirit reeled with the 'beautiful sadness' of a circumstance shrouded by Gregorian chant, incense, vestments that covered what was left of Archbishop John and the serenity that belied the savage nature of his slaying. That night, the image skimmed in and out of all sorts of superficial dreams.

Most waking hours were spent sight-seeing in Riga and beyond, swimming one afternoon in a surprising warm Baltic Sea, and dropping in on various of Inese's relations, most of whose English was as advanced as my Latvian. Indeed, the most complicated sentence I mastered was '*Es nevaru runāt vārdu latviešu*' ('I can't speak a word of Latvian'). Nevertheless, intriguing to the historian in me is that another of Inese's direct ancestors was upholsterer to the Czar, just as my own paternal great-grandfather had been to the populace of Market Harborough.

With regard to my own principal source of income, the Frank Zappa book has almost-but-not-quite left the runway, and has involved three 'conference calls' in as many weeks with up to five speakers, spread over time zones from England to California. It's now been *seven years* since Gail Zappa and I first met, and the project was suggested. Otherwise, I've been ticking over with such as 'talking head' slots in a televised retrospective about The Beatles' 1967–1970 compilation ('The Blue Album') – and my comments triggering e-mails from both affronted and supportive consumers – plus an item in *Rock 'N' Reel (R2)* about a Pretty Things B-side that captured my adolescent soul, and covering the first stop of *SIXTIES GOLD 2016*, a round-Britain tour in which those on the bill seemed as delighted as the ticket-holders that their ancient smashes were so fervently remembered – and that the often amusing continuity prompted almost as much response. Had he not been so fully occupied with pop, Wayne Fontana especially might have made a mark on cultural history as a truly great comedian.

Like Wayne, PJ Proby had been the voyager of a mighty rough sea prior to re-emergence as a fully-integrated constant of the Sixties circuit – and, at seventy-seven, he's still the proverbial 'pop singer who can really sing'. Starting the second half was not *the* Union Gap but *a* Union Gap, albeit fronted by mainstay Gary Puckett. Though his 'Young Girl' finale endures as one of myriad songs I love to hate, Gary in his trademark military uniform touched the show with a certain Californian showbiz glitz.

Closer to home, Dagenham's Brian Poole and, unencumbered by instruments, Tremeloes Dave Munden and Chip Hawkes gave 'em nothing that hadn't soared high in the charts for either Brian and the group or the group on its own. Spoiled for choice too were the headlining Searchers

containing John McNally there from the beginning with Frank Allen not far behind. From a distance at least, both brought the words 'Dorian' and 'Grey' to mind as they spanned every avenue of a distinguished career from 'Sweets For My Sweet' to 'Somebody Told Me You Were Crying', a highlight of a latter-day album. While the pedal board at the feet of Spencer James – a Searcher for nigh on thirty years – produced orchestral string effects when required, the outfit remains the most piquant and entertaining epitome of the two guitars-bass-drums archetype of the British beat explosion. Accept no substitute!

Of earlier vintage than anyone in *SIXTIES GOLD 2016* was Marty Wilde, one of three pop stars with whom I had discourse in connection with magazine features. The others were Shakin' Stevens and Ray Davies.

The former provided ready and eloquent responses at his home studio within a gated estate about thirty minutes drive from me. As well as being rich, he's a sixty-eight-year-old with all his hair still on his head, and the physique of someone half his age. He and I go back a long way – to a few years after he and his backing Sunsets had caught the lightning of the rock 'n' roll revival manifested most conspicuously via Bill Haley and Buddy Holly re-releases sneaking into the UK Top Fifty; The Dave Clark Five's successful cover of Cat Mother and his All Night News Boys' 'Good Old Rock 'N' Roll', and medleys of the same closing the shows for 'nice little bands' whose designations - Pregnant Doughnut, Puce-Exploding Butterfly, Mind Geraniums *ad nauseum* – implied artistic insights less instantly graspable.

Entertaining a truer underground, Stevens and the Sunsets conducted themselves as if Merseybeat, psychedelia and so forth had never happened when they appeared at the Freshers' Ball on the Saturday after I started college in 1971, brushing aside the prog-rock act that commenced proceedings like matchsticks. Deceptively, Stevens had kicked off casually with light rockabilly, strumming a coy acoustic six-string. Then he abandoned it, and there was a sudden explosion with 'Tutti Frutti' or it might have been 'Roll Over Beethoven'. From then on, we were eating putty out of his hand.

A contingent of non-student Teddy Boys - possibly smuggled in by the Sunsets - raided the stage when Stevens was pouring with visible sweat and in a state of knee-dropping near-collapse during the 'Hound Dog' finale, deserving every penny of his fee that night. Certainly, I was never to miss a performance whenever the combo appeared locally until I graduated.

On going solo, Stevens dominated the British charts – and many beyond - throughout the decade that followed his Top Twenty breakthrough with 1980's 'Marie Marie'. Since then, he's kept his head above the waters of nostalgia to the degree that a return to a qualified contemporary prominence has never been out of the question, chiefly through further pulling of unexpected strokes – as instanced by this very summer's *Echoes Of Our Times*, a 'concept' album as far from classic rock as any fan of Shakin' Stevens and the Sunsets could ever have dreamt.

The discussion with Ray Davies, however, was prompted by his desire to publicise a CD repackaging of the Kinks' 1972 double-LP *Everybody's in Show-Biz*. Yet, after my *audience-with-the-Pope*-like awe was under control, we strayed into all manner of tangents, instanced by a discussion about the Eurovision Song Contest and how, because it exposes a point of view, the soppiest, most lovey-dovey song may be construed as "political", even, say, 'Sing Little Birdie', 1959's UK entry by Pearl Carr and Teddy Johnson. I reckoned that its lyrical subtext might be interpreted, arguably, as concerning what Sartre wrote about the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 and what Camus thought he meant. In turn, Ray suggested that perhaps 'Puppet On A String' 'had a deeper meaning. Who was the puppeteer? The German president? Were the British the marionettes?' In parenthesis, my thoughts on this were contained too in a letter to *The Guardian* (see <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2016/may/17/eurovision-song-row-were-sing-little-birdie-and-waterloo-political-songs-too>) – which didn't trouble to publish another missal of mine that, *à propos* nothing in particular, pointed out that Theresa May's husband looks like Freddie Garrity (of Freddie and the Dreamers) and has the same name as the lead singer of The Pretty Things.

Around that time too, another national newspaper's daily column of famous birthdays listed a bloke described as a 'theorist'. How precisely does he make a living? Does he have a structured day? Would I find a vacancy for a theorist at the Job Centre? How much does he charge per theory? If the theory is disproved, does he issue a full or partial refund? Is there a discount if you buy in bulk? An Einstein-type theory for Stephen Hawking? Give me till tomorrow afternoon. Something to suit Immanuel Kant? I'm not really in the mood for Immanuel this minute, but if there's no hurry, I can get it biked over by Tuesday. Dobrica Ćosić wants a selection for another lecture tour? I'm fresh out, but there should be some in soon - as long as he doesn't mind sharing one about the partition of Kosovo with Noam Chomsky. If Baroness Warnock rings, tell her that her order's in the post...

I digress. The most conspicuous outcomes of the one-to-one with Ray Davies were him praising my article on Facebook (see below), and an invitation to Hornsey Town Hall where the once and - increasingly less likely - future Kink and Mark 'Luke Skywalker' Hamill, chatted cosily to a backdrop of stills in the auditorium where Ray and other *norf* London youths rock 'n' rolled together when fame was far away. Indeed, a prelude to this conversational feast was an excerpt shot in the very premises for *Imaginary Man*, a 2010 television documentary. The rest of the evening was to do chiefly with *Everybody's in Showbiz* and its *Muswell Hillbillies* predecessor as well as readings from Ray's *Americana: The Kinks, the Road and the Perfect Riff* chronicle. He also rose from his armchair to strap on an acoustic six-string and give 'em relevant songs in that endearingly wobbly delivery as unmistakably English as Bob Dylan's is North American, accompanied by second guitarist and backing vocalist Bill Shanley. Nevertheless, the likes of 'Oklahoma USA' and 'Celluloid Heroes' prompted more subdued reaction than that for the only nods to a more distant past - 'Dedicated Follower Of Fashion', 'Sunny Afternoon' and its 'I'm Not Like Everybody Else' B-side - when the older majority of the audience became Swinging Sixties teenagers again, lovestruck and irresponsible.

By chance, among these was my old friend and intermittent bane of my existence Mic Dover, who spotted me being shown to my seat. Decades earlier, Mic and I had been flung together as, respectively, guitarist and lead vocalist, in Turnpike, a folk-rock quintet dwelling at Pond Cottage in Upper Basildon, seven miles south-east of where Traffic had 'got it together in the country' more successfully. A few weeks before the Ray Davies show, we'd met up with Alan Barwise, once Turnpike's drummer, for a maudlin haunting of a village that is no longer the farming community of yore.



On the cover of the new R2 Magazine this month. It has an interview I did with Alan Clayton this year. Alan did a great job so make sure you pick it up. <https://www.facebook.com/R2magazine>

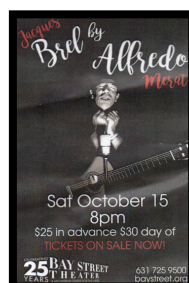
An entertainment bordering the same territory as the Davies show took place after Inese and I were enticed to experience Rick Wakeman telling funny stories about himself, punctuated with bouts of keyboard virtuosity, at a charity event for animal welfare that also embraced a raffle for such as a football shirt autographed by 'Gazza' – for which the starting bid was '350' (and I thought truly that it meant £3.50) – and increasingly more vicious clapping for incessant speeches of thanks.

More absorbing was an appearance at a local jazz venue by an entity called Moscow Drug Club, who were worthy of attention because I'd gathered that among ingredients in its stylistic stew was *chanson*. Their repertoire included a couple of originals that blended just as smoothly in the stylistic stew as works by, say, Berthold Brecht, Peggy Lee, The Andrews Sisters, Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, Jacques Brel and, in the 'Istanbul' finale, They Might Be Giants-via-1950s hitmakers, The Four Lads. More specifically, the Club dealt out such as 'Miserlou', associated by most with a 1962 instrumental treatment by Dick Dale, 'King Of The Surf Guitar' - just as 'Two Guitars', also derived from a folk source, is with Charles Aznavour, and which the MDC accelerated likewise to *allegro con fuoco*, commensurate with the central character's drunken restlessness. Yeah, they were all right, I suppose.

There's nothing much else of general significance to report pertaining to a season of heatwave after heatwave, apart from being interviewed for regional television at the Marshall amplication facility in Bletchley about the late Jim Marshall - where I thought it politic not to mention that, in 1972, a musical equipment shop equivalent of a dodgy used-car salesman persuaded me that a clapped-out Marshall PA mixer was a sound one. I also pontificated about modern classical music one Saturday night via Skype by a Memphis-based podcast called Sonosphere (see <https://sonospherepodcast.com/2016/07/30/the-birth-of-modern-music-series-part-3-edgard-varese/>). The fellow asking the questions expressed mild astonishment that I'd never undertaken any serious concerts in North America - because he reckoned I'd go down a storm. I replied that the only leverage I have for such undertakings is marginal and patchy cult celebrity. Little did I know what was on the horizon. Even now, I can scarcely believe that it happened.

Certainly, New York State was one of the last places on the planet I expected to be when I was contacted by Alfredo Merat, an artiste much in artistic debt to Jacques Brel - and who lives in the opulent Hamptons on Long Island. On the strength of both my authorship of the Brel biography and what he'd seen of Clayson extravaganzas on You Tube, he wanted me to dispense a prologue and provide continuity to a concert he'd be undertaking in a 300-seat theatre he'd booked in Sag Harbour, the very heart of maybe the most affluent region of the sub-continent, what with the likes of Paul McCartney, Roger Waters, Paul Simon and Jon Bon Jovi owning acreages there. While only half-expecting Alfredo's proposal to come to anything, I agreed - and, within a week, aeroplane tickets for Inese and I fluttered onto the doormat.

Our adventure didn't get off to a particularly promising start, what with a two hour queue in the customs area at JFK, owing to terrorist paranoia necessitating the finger-printing and iris-scanning of all incomers. It was very different from the last time I was there almost a quarter of a century ago. Nonetheless, what amounted to a working vacation was most pleasant in a slightly surreal kind of way, not least because of Alfredo attending most solicitously to - and even anticipating - our every need when staying at his chief property. There was a scintillating whistle-stop tour of one of the most unspoilt and beautiful rural areas in which I have ever been - which included a dip in the North Atlantic (in mid-October!) - a restaurant meal every evening, and a *soirée* after the show in a moated mansion like something out of Dallas or Dynasty - so much so that I thought at first it was an art museum when walking along a corridor hung with original masters, some by the late Jackson Pollack, another Long Islander.



The recital itself (entitled *Brel by Alfredo*) was a walkover, despite us flying in the face of superstition by undertaking a dress rehearsal during not the day before but the *afternoon* a few

hours prior to the customers' arrival. Yet it was all outstandingly professional from a thoroughly proficient backing combo utilizing the instruments (including accordion) that Jacques Brel himself employed in his prime - to a visual production criteria with specific lighting effects and precise positioning – marked by crosses of red tape – at the various points I was to stand when delivering the dialogue.



Rehearsal on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2016

While not sticking to the script I'd submitted, I was a hit with an audience as some sort of bonkers Englishman, even if I didn't understand sometimes what they were laughing at – and the producer of the show expressed guarded interest in me returning in my own right. Here's an extract from a review penned by Jon Rose, son of the screenwriter for the 1957 movie, *Twelve Angry Men*:-

*The English strain is served not as a starter or side dish, but as supplementary entrée. Alan Clayson, founder of the well-received band The Argonauts and a prolific and highly regarded author (30 books) and journalist in the pop music scene, brings a droll, wise observer's role to the mix as he reads selections from his definitive biography of Jacques Brel (2010). Playing off Alfredo's sardonic, elfin presence, Alan enters and exits as a literary and directorial narrator in a black turtleneck, the easygoing weekend stage bohemian. Alan holds forth with a very British cadence, precisely enunciated and unfailingly astute, that befits a high lecture or a burnished Parliamentary oration... now cautiously searching for an entrance, a place amid the suave French-cum-transplanted Spanish milieu... now with razor and barb on his tongue effortlessly, humorously belying his bluff Englishness.*

I was, therefore, an appropriate foil to Alfredo, who bathed in a palpable wave of goodwill that washed over him when, to his own guitar strumming, he entered the spotlight to kick off an intimate ninety minutes. Though he elected to emote every item in French (apart from the Flemish sections of 'Marieke'), he cast a similar spell as Brel did during the few in-person manifestations by the great *chansonnier* in the English language concert arena, i.e. hardly a word of what was being sung was understood, but it was impossible not to be swept away by the over-riding passion. Nevertheless, Alfredo was very much his own man as an *interpreter* rather than *imitator* throughout a utterly captivating performance that's likely to prompt a sensation if it ever comes to Europe. *Formidable!*

Of more orthodox Clayson engagements since 2015, there was a spontaneous cessation of chatter the instant I walked on at the Granary, a return to the annual Frome Festival where the programme described me as 'mad, bad and dangerous to know'. Clayson Sings Chanson (i.e. me and keyboard-player Andy Lavery) - at Eastbourne's Under Ground Theatre – supported by Robb Johnson (no relation to Teddy) and, most recently, The Quay in Newport on the Isle of Wight (with support from formidable singing guitarist Paul Armfield, who I first heard thrumming double-bass with a bar band in Ventnor) were also resounding artistic triumphs, albeit ones that just about got into a profit position – as did that of Clayson and the Argonauts headlining over (and, it has to be said, totally

eclipsing) two youthful outfits at the Dublin Castle, a dingy if celebrated shrine of both pub-rock and Britpop. A side-effect of this appearance was an interview for Public House – ‘a humorous free-speech publication made in East London for the unconventional artist & writer,’ it says here – by Joe Alleycat Capaldi of The Garage Flowers. It contained the telling reply, ‘A good half of my life is spent in a world of imagination. How else could I cope?’ in reply to his ‘Fantasy or Reality?’ enquiry, and may be read in full via <http://readpublichouse.uk/2016/12/music-ed-alan-clayson/>.



*Dublin Introit at the Dublin Castle: April Fools' Day 2016*

Moreover, what had all the initial makings of a bastard of a gig turned out OK when we opened for Hawklords, born in the late 1970s from the ranks of a then-sundered Hawkwind, at Hitchin's Club 85. We were beset with mild pre-performance agitation emanating from Hawklords deciding to play for longer than scheduled, requiring us to be on the boards ten minutes after a hurried soundcheck. This booking had transpired through the auspices of an amazing gentleman named Bob Mardon, the function room's sixty-year-old administrator, who I first met when the Argonauts and I had a terrible time at a punk-infested dungeon in Essex, circa 1977 – the only occasion where we were subjected to Niagaras of appreciative spittle.

So remorseful was Bob about our lesser sufferings at Club 85 that he messaged me thus:-

*Many thanks for a great gig last weekend.*

*I must apologise for the chaos aka sound checks, we normally run so smoothly that it caught me completely off guard.*

*But in the end, despite all the hassles you and your band were of course magnificent, I love that the audience had no idea how to take you yet gradually fell under your spell and will never forget the experience.*

*You always put on a great show regardless of the lead up to it, like true troupers.*



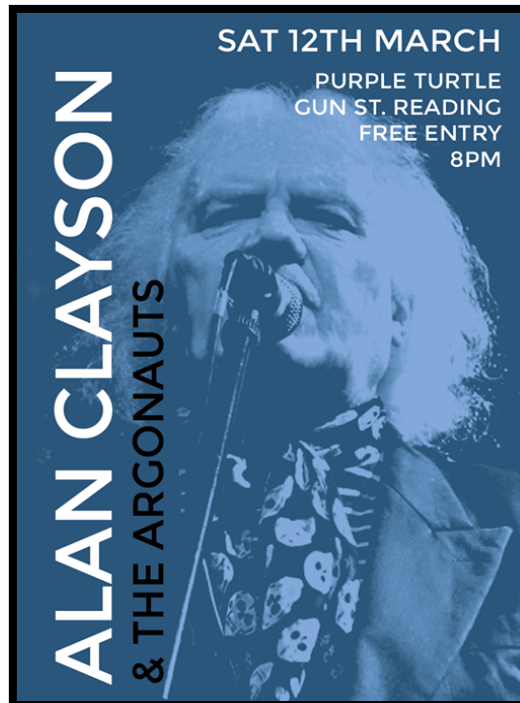
Anyway not quite sure were that's going except to say thank you so much for your patience and professionalism in the face of adversity, and that your show was wonderful.



Into the bargain, several audio-visual minutes reared up on Facebook. See [https://www.facebook.com/bowkers.cat/posts/1380609348646439?notif\\_t=tagged\\_with\\_story&notif\\_id=1480676266596976](https://www.facebook.com/bowkers.cat/posts/1380609348646439?notif_t=tagged_with_story&notif_id=1480676266596976) To crown further our snatching of victory from the jaws of potential catastrophe, I was presented with a bottle of Jack Daniel's by Billy Ritchie, once the keyboard player and principal creative force in 1-2-3, a Scottish trio who evolved into Clouds, one of Britain's most severely undervalued post-psychedelic outfits. In the wake of acclaim for 2010's *Up Above Our Heads: Clouds 1966-71*, a double CD anthology, Billy's contribution to Sky Arts' recent *Trailblazers Of Prog* series was wholly justified – and he has lately finished an autobiography, *The ABC Of 1-2-3*, an engrossing saga that further reinforces the tenet that the cream doesn't necessarily rise to the top in the music industry.

The whiskey was Billy's highly practical way of thanking me for an article about Clouds for *Record Collector* three years ago. In a message the following morning, he also expressed anxiety that 'when you had your early run-through, I wasn't optimistic, but you found the cohesion and impact, thanks mainly to your stage presence and wonderful asides as well as the performance itself, which had an urgency that couldn't be ignored. It was great to see the crowd all smiling and enjoying it all the way through, building to a real climax. It was easy to see that the audience view you as a National Treasure. I was so glad to be there and catch that performance and reception - very proud of you!' Aw-shucks, Billy... Finally, one of Hawklord's' more shock-headed members was mistaken for me and congratulated for the set he hadn't just performed.

Such laudation was at odds with a rough March night at the Purple Turtle in Reading – where it was discovered that, counter to all previous Clayson And the Argonauts commitments, admission was free - with Jackie Doe and her Uncertainty Of Passion, traceable to Parisian Fishnets, a trio led by accordionist Jackie and with whom I thrummed twelve-string guitar in the early 1990s. Their stock-in-trade (as the name implies) was French café music - *valse musettes*, tangos *et al.*



Thus the defiantly seated Uncertainty Of Passion went down as well as Parisian Fishnets might have done on an occasion that conjured up an updating of provincial functions of my 1960s schooldays, where a group's individuality was secondary to its churning out of cavorting and snogging music for teenagers insensible to shifts in parameters of musical consciousness that weren't or hadn't ever been in the Top Forty. So it was that Clayson and the Argonauts, suppressing weary fury, went the distance at the Purple Turtle in a blizzard of distortion and unbalanced onstage monitoring, without either milking the crowd or bothering with an encore demanded by the handful for whom our presentation – and you can take this how you like – beggared belief.