

The Raconteur

## The Raconteur The Ritz Acoustic Club Newsletter December, 2004

Thursday, October 28th, 2004

In a life full of nerve-shredding surprises and continual turns for the worse, isn't it wonderful to be reminded of the good old days? Tonight the club was brimming over with beaming nostalgia, and all the talk at the bar was of the return of Spam. Yes, Spam was back, boosted by a multi-million-pound TV ad campaign, battling its way back into our trolleys. Our *supermarket* trolleys, that is. Finding Spam in your underwear would be a thoroughly disturbing experience. And, let's face it, lads, there's no room for any extra meat products in OUR trolleys, right? But Spam's was no ordinary comeback. Even though the ad agency missed the opportunity to front the campaign with an appropriately named puppet or cartoon character (Spammy the Spamster might've been good), it was a glorious renaissance. Whereas before it was known primarily as the subject of a Monty Python song, or as that pink muck they'd feed to soldiers in the trenches to stop them eating rats, or Germans, now it was being hailed as a culinary essential, as tasty and traditional as lamb or beef. By slightly shifting our mealtime parameters, we could now feast on Spam burgers, Spam rissoles or Spam cottage pie. The more eclectic connoisseur might go even further, with Spam en crouete, Spam brulee, or the even more exotic Spam Diane. Then, for the especially rabid Spam fan, there were the speciality dishes - like Spam profiteroles. No, *really*. Just knead your Spam with flour and a pinch of lemon zest, and form into round, fluffy balls. Lightly bake at 220 degrees (gas mark 7) for 15 minutes, then smother with lashings of melted chocolate and serve with a drizzle of *jus de framboise*. It's said your tastebuds will achieve multiple orgasms, so remember to hold a napkin to your lips, or people might think you're being sick. As for Spam liqueur, it's probably best not to go into that. The world is probably not yet ready for a wee dram o' Spam.

Onstage, the evening opened with the indefatigable **Greg Aylmer**, who once again proved his versatility with an a cappella rendition of the classic comedy number The Sick Note, then a jumping reel-thing on mandolin. Next up, in a return surely as welcome and invigorating as that of Spam, was former club chairman **Jim Topping**. With his impressive Spanish tan and sun-bleached locks, he bore an uncanny resemblance to Brad Pitt in Troy, though, rather than treat us to an exhibition of state-of-the-art slaying, he gave us two fresh slices of his insightful, optimistic folk. It was great to have him back, and the crowd's reaction proved it.

Following Jim came the club's favourite ramshackle troubadour **Pete Beach**, first with an untypically melancholy take on Tom Paxton's I Can't Help But Wonder Where I'm Bound, then a raucous romp through Lydia The Tattooed Lady. It was wholly entertaining fare, but our cheers were slightly muted by rumours that that Milverton lot have trying trying to steal Pete and his delightful wife Rose away from us, first with outrageous bribes, then with violent menaces to his person. That's right, they threatened to smack our Beach up! This must never be allowed to happen! We shall fight for the Beaches! We shall fight in the fields and in the streets! We shall fight in the hills! We shall *never surrender*!

Now it was time for **Steve Brown** who, especially for former club vice-president **Paul Austin**, performed an exceptionally delicate version of Eleanor Rigby, unfortunately marred by the behaviour of a coachload of tourists in for the night. At first, we were perplexed by their rude chanting, then utterly confused when we realised they were making monkey-noises -

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thoroughly bizarre as Steve, with his military shorts and Steve Howe instrumentals, is arguably the whitest man in England. Soon, though, it became apparent that they were Spanish and took exception to his surname. Undaunted, Steve courageously riled them further with a run through The Bare Necessities from The Jungle Book. It was noted that perhaps I Wanna Be Like You would've been more provocative, but that would, of course, have fatally undermined Steve's stance. He admitted later he was also afraid of what they might do to his kids' pet donkey.

Once the Spaniards were ejected and all the commotion had died down, **Gary Day** stepped up with his own highly-charged grunge ballad Infrequent, then his tough, rootsy Stages, both of them certainly good enough for worldwide release. He was followed by the **Silver Street Band** from Milverton - three guys, three guitars, occasional harmonica and some of the finest harmonies we've heard in ages. They gave us Bruce Springsteen's Tougher Than The Rest, their own pastoral Looney Joe (a tad un-PC, but who gives a black, lesbian rat's arse about that?) and then - horror of horrors - a THIRD number. Now it may have been that, as newcomers to the club, they'd be granted secret permission by chairman **Graham Cook**, but in the eyes of most of us this was a crime against convention so grievous it may have torn a hole in the fabric of the Universe itself. Naturally, as is the custom at the RAC when people tear holes in the fabric of the Universe, we said nothing - though our applause was slightly muted by the unimaginable dread that crept upon us.

By the way, the Silver Street Band's aberrant third track was an upbeat swampy number, If The River Was Whiskey. An attractive notion, is it not? The Raconteur has actually heard tell of a White Horse river in the Yukon. And there's certainly a vodka one in Russia. No, sorry, that's the Volga. Actually, a whiskey river's probably a bad idea. Wherever it flowed into the sea, you'd be bound to have a permanent encampment of irritating booze-snobbs whining "Oooh, no, you shouldn't be mixing it with *water*".

After a brief intermission, Gary Day returned with his stark adaptation of Joni Mitchell's Woodstock. An interesting song, that one, for don't we all feel like cogs in something turning? It would certainly explain why we like to get so well-oiled at the weekend. Gary would continue by revisiting Pearl Jam's finest moment, Black, then up would rise **Jon Austin** who proceeded to get the crowd singing along to American Pie, before slipping back off into the shadows. An amazing fellow, is Jon. He entertains us so regularly and so well, yet he shuns the spotlight, loathes the limelight, attention is anathema to him. Why, one look at his car will tell you *that*.

Not to be outdone, Steve Brown maintained the crowd participation with a jaunty Always Look On The Bright Side Of Life, complete with a Cockney accent that really ought to've seen him hired for the Dick Van Dyke part in the new West End stage production of Mary Poppins. More serious was fretboard wizard **Nigel Snook**, who strutted his stuff with a proper flamenco guitar, then laid down some caustic blues. There was now rousing applause when MC Graham Cook mentioned the recent death of John Peel, the most important British DJ of the last 40 years, without whom the Raconteur would never have heard And The Native Hipsters' classic There Goes Concorde Again.

Next the Silver Street Band gave us the rolling gospel of Washington Phillips' Denomination Blues, and Ry Cooder's How Can You Keep On Moving, then Jim Topping came back up, accompanied by **Ian Ryan**, who added sparse, sudden snatches of guitar to Jim's newly written tale of love and distance. Jim would end with a speech about how lucky we are to have the RAC as his new Iberian home is a musical wasteland. Early the next morning, of course, he'd be flying back to his musical wasteland, where it's hot, the wine is cheap and you don't have to do

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any work.

Jim and Ian would now remain onstage, where they'd be joined by Graham Cook and **George Birt**. Amazingly, under the dim lights, it was like a gathering of Hollywood superstars. As said, Jim was like Brad Pitt in Troy. Ian, with his wide-brimmed hat and long hair, resembled Johnny Depp in Dead Man. And Graham was a dead ringer for Robert Redford in . . . um . . . er . . . about 20 years time. Together, the lads really got into it, kicking up a storm with Sweet Home Chicago and Little Willie John's Need Your Love So Bad. A tremendous end to another fine session.

### Thursday, November 11th, 2004

Another day, another ding-dong night at the RAC. This one was made all the more festive by the fact that it was Treasurer Doug Liles' birthday. And what a picture of happiness he was, as well as being a walking advert for Oil of Ulay. Yes, you read it right, *Ulay!* Without wishing to get all Luddite about it, why should we tolerate the pointless and often ugly renaming of our favourite products? Olay doesn't conjure images of beautiful ladies with cheeks like babies' bums, does it? No, it's what Spaniards screech when they're torturing animals! And damn Cif, too! It should be Jif, as in "It'll be done in a jif". Cif doesn't *mean* anything! And don't get us started on Snickers. Snickers come from sarcastic horses. Before they reduced the size and changed the name, Marathon was a peanut-packed *beast* of a bar. If memory serves, back in the Seventies the chocolate was an inch thick! Call us big girly Paula Radcliffes if you will, but we at the Raconteur never managed to finish one.

So, the mood was one of celebration, the good vibrations unspoiled by the shocking fact that several club members have joined forces to sue the Raconteur under some new European Trade Descriptions Act. Legally, they say, you can't call yourself The Raconteur if you don't tell anecdotes - it's in the dictionary - so we must pick something more accurate. The Dodgy Revieweur, was rather cruelly put forward as a possibility, as was The Bad Jokeur. Meanwhile, The Craponteur was proposed by a rather hurtful number of hitherto friendly members. Ha ha, very funny. Apparently, if we don't cease and desist we could be condemned to up to 800 hours of community service. That's serious, so any suggestion that this might best be served by spending 800 hours *not* writing the Raconteur will *not* be taken in good spirit. You ungrateful gits!

The session was opened by MC Jon Austin, who produced an accurately sweeping keyboard sound for an absorbing cover of 10CC's immortal I'm Not In Love. Then came Greg Aylmer, armed, he said, with a new music book. First from it came The Swedish Waltz - very pretty, oddly familiar and strangely Italian, the kind of soundtrack music they play when James Bond turns up in Capri to foil some master criminal with too many nipples. Then came a very sweet lullaby, before **Gary French** appeared for a stirring version of Cat Stevens' Father And Son, and then a touching If I Give My Heart To You, a song, apparently, that his mother used to sing to him.

After Gary came **Ross Keniston**, with a self-penned song he said was about his sister, but worked as the tale of someone gradually overwhelmed by life. He followed this with a rendition of Tracy Chapman's Baby Can I Hold You, an excellent choice as the song well suited his tone and natural tremolo. It was a massive improvement of his more fraught recent performances. In music, as in other walks of life, it advisable not to climax before you've really got going.

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As Ross departed, so **Nick Maddocks** arrived, with two more cuts of Americana, this time Steve Earle's rootsy anti-war history Ben McCulloch, and a tale of the lifelong enmity and love of two brothers. Then, returning to the club for the first time in ages, was **Ricky Topham**, with his soft voice and smooth guitar and harmonica, delivering a new song, concerning the strength and beauty to be found in long-term relationships.

Now came another new act, **The Willbees**, a duo from Weston and Bristol, both playing left-handed, who provided beautiful harmonies to Boudleaux Bryant's Love Hurts. What amazing subject matter love provides for pop songwriters, how many different views have been taken of it - and not all of them pleasant. Pat Benatar called it a battlefield: J Geils Band said it stinks: Hanoi Rocks saw it as an injection, while Richard Hell & The Voidoids noted that it "comes in spurts" (rhymed, hilariously, with "Oh no, it hurts!"). Hey, let's get a competition going! Think of as many amusing, improbable or downright degraded lyrical uses of Love as you can, and hand them in at the door. Winners will be permitted to see what Membership Secretary **Laura Smith** hides in that big black bag she keeps beside her at all times.

The Willbees continued with the cute and funny C'n I Canoe You Up The River, then gave way to another newcomer, the Bristolian **Dave Oakly**. With a big, clear voice singing over Dylan-ish folk, he began with a political number exploring a soldier's despair, then gave us a more light-hearted number blending a Spanish tune and Irish theme. Then came **Roy Cramer** with some natty urban folk, then the uptempo blues of James Taylor's Wandering, the latter containing the insanely evocative line "you got snakes in your shoes". Well, *that* bears some thinking about. What *kind* of snakes? Obviously, if it was grass snakes they'd quickly turn to a revolting jelly between your toes. Ugh! Adders would be a far bolshier proposition and see you prostrate in Weston hospital, your legs like red zeppelins - probably, as it's Weston, begging to be taken to Taunton in case you catch something worse. And what about giant pythons? Well, my friend, now you have stumbled upon the very latest in extreme sports - *snake-boarding*. Simply smear some No More Nails on the bottom of your trainers, leap onto parallel pythons and away you go. But make sure they haven't just eaten or you'll be standing stationary for a week listening to a gazelle gradually being digested. And carry a sharp knife so you can cut your laces and jump off if they decide to slither off in different directions. A pythonectomy! Ouch!

Having been informed that the James Taylor line is actually "snakes in the ocean", and told to stop being so stupid, we settled back to watch **Dave** and **Issy Emeny**, on guitar and accordion respectively, with two fine trad-style numbers written by Issy herself. The first was an aching lament called The Bristol Sailor, the second a jerky reel that had everyone clapping along. Standards were kept absurdly high by Gary Day, with two more meaty slabs of American gothic. Gary would stay onstage with Steve Brown to provide vocals for a cover of Led Zeppelin's haunting No Quarter. Unfortunately, they didn't dress up as medieval knights for the performance, like Led Zep did in their movie The Song Remains The Same. This was not by choice, rather it was due to the club's strict policy on the carrying of deadly weapons. **Doreen** has, in fact, banned swords from the premises, as well as switchblades, kung fu death stars and Kalashnikovs. Anyone bringing in such items will have them peremptorily confiscated, and they will be stored under the stage until being auctioned off for charity - just like those Weapons of Mass Destruction she took off that stropky bloke with the beard and turban on Carnival Night.

Once the Lords of Prog had stepped down, **John Dixon** would step up for a casually impressive take on the Everly Brothers' Let It Be Me. Incidentally, the Everlys once shared chart-space with the late, great Bobby Darin, about whom, members might be interested to learn, Oscar-winner

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and artistic director of the Old Vic Kevin Spacey has just made a movie, entitled Beyond The Sea. Darin, of course, was a supremely gifted songwriter and performer who hit big with the likes of Dream Lover, Mack The Knife, Queen Of The Hop and Splish Splash, this last song concerning a fellow who wanders into a party completely naked - a *faux pas* from which no amount of Le Piat D'Or can redeem you.

Actually, once you've conquered the initial embarrassment, turning up for social functions completely starkers can be extremely liberating (though it can also, as the Raconteur discovered when arriving at Buckingham Palace to accept a bronze Duke of Edinburgh award, lead to brutal manhandling and incarceration. Fascists!). So, why don't we freespirited souls at the RAC give it a go, break a few taboos, push back the envelope of so-called "decency", emancipate our bodies and our minds? Here's the plan. Next week, ladies should turn up dressed only in furs, with men, naturally, in their favourite mackintoshes. Then, at an appropriate moment, perhaps when that Scottish fellow from Milverton bursts into the opening chorus of The Whole Of The Moon, we could, en masse, seductively wriggle out of our constricting attire and reveal ourselves in all our intoxicating glory!

What's your instinctive reaction to this scenario? Is it a) Yes! I was created in the image of God - *adore me!* Is it b) NURSE! The *screens!* Or is it a more lukewarm c) Er . . . you first. If your answer was c), the Raconteur says Get off the fence! It's not only tedious, but the splinters can be excruciating when you're in the nuddy. If it was b), remember that ugliness, like beauty, is only skin-deep. A bit of work with an industrial sander should sort you out a treat. And if your answer was a), please pass your details (no, not *those* details) to Treasurer Doug Liles who, for the last few years, has been struggling to organise a revival of Oh! Calcutta! At the moment, as several members have pulled out prematurely (oer), it's a one-man show and any new playmates, sorry, fellow actors would be made to feel . . . sadly, Doug's press release is indecipherably smudged at this point, but we're sure he means "made to feel more than welcome".

Back onstage, John Dixon was replaced by **Tony Harvey**, on temporary panto-leave, who caused gales of laughter with his Elvis impersonation, doing That's All Right. Tony made it clear yet again that he will be returning fresh in the New Year, with a set of new songs. One, apparently, capturing the sparkling effervescence of new love, is to be titled Song To The Syphon. Another, examining the supposedly gay relationship between Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, will be called The Fabulous Baker Street Boys.

The evening continued in rough-house fashion as **The Jockstrap Ensemble**, featuring Pete Beach, Greg Aylmer and **Jack Cobbe** kicked into Maggie May. Pete forced Greg into a solo for which he was wholly unprepared, and it *still* worked - a typical Ensemble success. Then Dave Oakley gave us another number concerning the uselessness of war. Very apt, given George Bush's recent election victory. Incidentally, according to Reuters reports, following his election defeat Kerry has kissed and made up with Brian McFadden and is negotiating a reunion with Atomic Kitten. No, that can't be right ...

After Dave Oakley, The Willbees gave us a comically altered version of The Trail Of The Lonesome Pine (sadly, they didn't sing in impossibly high voices and bash each other on the head, like Laurel and Hardy), then proved their harmonic abilities yet again with Kent Lewis's Song Of Wyoming, a bucolic song of the Western frontier, popularised by John Denver. They'd be followed by **Mark Porter**, also celebrating his birthday, who gave us touching takes on Alan Jackson's It's 5 O'Clock Somewhere and Joshua Kadison's Jesse. A warming farewell would be

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provided by Jon Austin, back at the keyboard for Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye. It had been yet another fine session.

### **BREAKING NEWS . . . BREAKING NEWS . . . BREAKING NEWS . . .**

The final RAC gig of the year, **Clive Gregson**, was a success. Clive proved to be engaging, funny and a fine guitarist, taking requests and jumping into the audience at the end to play some acoustic rock and roll. It was also announced that the **Bob Brozman** show in October actually turned a profit - £17! Yowza! The next concert will be by festival favourites **Hoover The Dog**, in February.

More bad news about the Christmas party, set for Friday, December 17th. That ungrateful little runt CHESNEY from Coronation Street has done the dirty on us, so we have no one to play Santa. This blow was made all the more sickening by the fact that original choice BRAD PITT did finally get back to Secretary Steve Brown, but Steve was out walking the donkey and missed the call. Nevertheless, the party will go on, with food and everything, and various members are planning special performances. Rumours that Treasurer Doug Liles has been spotted in the lingerie department of M&S, and has asked Doreen to erect a pole in the middle of the stage are not necessarily to be discounted.

Members are reminded that subs are now (over)due. If you do not join the Ritz Social Club, you may only attend once a month. Fees for new members are £10, existing members £8. Then it's just £1 to join the Ritz Acoustic Club. Given the cheap drinks and high entertainment, this is ridiculously good value, so cough up.

The competition to find a new alternative to the club's logo "Provide, Promote, Perform" has now ended. The winner was Miss J. Aniston of Los Angeles, California, USA with her witty entry "Provide, Promote, Puh-lease".

Finally, great news! As you know, Burnham has a long tradition of honouring writers by naming roads after them. We did it for JM Barrie, creator of Peter Pan: masterful playwright and screenwriter Tom Stoppard: George Bernard Shaw, who brought realism to British theatre: John Osborne, the original Angry Young Man (did you know Look Back In Anger was based on his experiences in Bridgwater?): not to mention Byron, Shelley and the rest. Well, driving down (Jeffrey) Archer Drive, it dawned on the Raconteur that, actually, any prat with a pen was in with a chance, so we applied to the council and, without wishing to blow one's own trumpet (sadly, an anatomical impossibility since the slipped disc), we were accepted! That's right, on January 1st, 2005, at 10am, we'll be proudly snipping the ribbon across Raconteur Boulevard, the renamed road stretching from the Tesco's roundabout to Pepperall Road. Anyone suggesting that this is because the road, like the Raconteur, is long, windy and utterly pointless can go boil their head.