

The Raconteur

The Raconteur The Ritz Acoustic Club Newsletter October, 2004

Thursday, September 9th

Autumn had fallen early, rainwater was gently creeping into every orifice and we were counting ourselves lucky that we weren't being battered by hurricanes, like those poor sods in the Caribbean. All the talk at the bar was of how cruel it is to name hurricanes in the way they do. First, victims spend a night of terror as their roof, car and furniture are roughly deposited in the next county. Then they have to squeeze the whole family into a two-man tent and live off stale biscuits for the next six months (you'd probably get more nourishment from chewing on a Band Aid single, and certainly from eating Bob Geldof). And on top of this they have to cope with the indignity of having had their life ripped apart by something called Gaylord. Or Jeanne. Or Frances. A man could feel proud to be brought to his knees by a tempest called Tyson, or Attila, or Lucifer. But Gaylord? Surely that's just a warm breeze, a mere zephyr? What kind of man would cower in the cellar to escape the wrath of Gaylord? It's just not on. In fact, in terms of prior evacuation, it's downright irresponsible. The Raconteur, for one, would not be vacating his prime spot beside the pool at the first shout of "It's Gaylord! Run for your lives!" What a blessing it was, then, when Hurricane Ivan finally showed up. You know where you are with a hurricane called Ivan.

Onstage, the evening began with a real treat as **Gary French** opened with one of his own tracks. Examining a failing relationship, where the length of a settee can become an uncrossable chasm, it was truly special, the equal of many of the songs he covers, arguably even his second number, John Prine's Speed Of The Sound Of Loneliness. Gary was followed by **Greg Aylmer** who, on violin, delivered a solemn but uplifting slice of Vaughan Williams, a folky hymn guaranteed to convince you that God is great and will most assuredly stomp you with his celestial Dr Martens if you disagree. Next up was **Nick Maddocks** with some regretful but upbeat blues from his recent album, then a take on Fort Worth Blues, Steve Earle's ode to Townes Van Zandt, an early mentor and, as Earle put it, "a real bad role model". Perhaps Nick might one day perform Van Zandt's classic Waiting Around To Die for us. Maybe at the Christmas party.

After Nick came **Brian Embleton** with a stylishly mournful version of Tex Ritter's High Noon, then Hoagy Carmichael's Georgia On My Mind. Then it was **Gasoline** with rocking takes on Third Rate Romance by the Amazing Rhythm Aces and Chuck Berry's Memphis, Tennessee. A question: to keep their exotic edge, do Gasoline called themselves Petrol when touring the States?

Next came the long-anticipated return of club favourite **Don Tasty Cheddar**, the audience's joy only slightly tempered by the discovery that, when performing in classier joints, he's known as Don Gruyere. Don has a fine repertoire of old-school Americana and proved it again tonight with two numbers celebrating the easy life down Mexico way, away from the lethal rough and tumble of the Wild West, where angelic señoritas pour a chap's tequila with loving care and attention. Presumably, they also don't mind if you order in a squeaky Speedy Gonzalez voice, and treat Spanish as if it's English spoken very loudly, with an "o" added to the end of every fourth word.

Now came **Nigel Snook**, another man in excellent form. Having stormed through a hugely

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impressive Bach piece, he proceeded on to the laidback blues of Josh White Jr's arrangement of Delia's Gone, his voice warm, touching and redolent of Hot Tuna's Jorma Kaukonen. Also casually excellent was **Jeff Wright** who exercised his vocal chords for the first time in ages when running through Ain't Misbehavin'. He followed this with I Can't Give You Anything But Love, played in tribute to his, and our friend BUDDY, who died a year ago.

By odd coincidence, **John Austin** now stepped up to sing about another Buddy - Buddy Holly, the subject of Don McLean's American Pie. John managed to induce a singalong and big applause, then moved to the piano for a cover of Burt Bacharach's What The World Needs Now Is Love. A beautiful song, and one that raises an interesting question - what else does the world need now? Well, other than the obvious, like an end to war, an engine that runs on tap water and a global ban on Ronan Keating, what about a portion of chips that fulfils all our daily vitamin and mineral requirements? And what about condoms made from the same material as Mexican jumping beans? This would take much of the effort out of sex, thus reducing heart attacks and, as a beneficial by-product, offering prophylactic succour to the lonely. Oh, and what about some more female role models like Abi Titmuss and Rebecca Loos (now, now - we all know sarcasm is the lowest form of wit)?

Amazingly, the halfway point was reached with yet more Buddy-stuff, when **John Dixon** preceded That Ole Devil Called Love with a smooth take on Buddy Holly's Raining In My Heart. Another great song, and a great excuse, too, as The Raconteur found down the pub last Saturday when asked to explain why he had a wet patch on the front of his jeans.

The second half began with **Liz May** on piano, gracefully performing David Gray's film theme This Year's Love. The St John's Ambulance crew standing by in case she tried to replicate Gray's wiggly head movements were thankfully not called upon. Liz then performed her fine self-penned instrumental, before being replaced by Nick Maddocks and Gary French, who cleverly maximised their stage-time by taking it in turns to back each other on two tracks. First Nick gave us his own Friday Night Star and If Only, then Gary sang Slaid Cleaves' Horseshoe Lounge and, with **Pete Beach** stepping up on banjo, the trad classic Will The Circle Be Unbroken - more Hallelujah! than Gawdblessya!, but invigorating, nonetheless.

Gasoline now returned with a tremendous, bluesy interpretation of Stormy Monday, then invited Nick Maddocks to sing back up on Kris Kristofferson's Sunday Morning Coming Down (a part Nick's hero Steve Earle once performed). Then there was another slab of Don Tasty Cheddar, playing Waylon Jennings' Drinkin' And Dreamin', with its sad refrain "I'll drink till I'm dreaming a thousand miles out of my mind". It's a beautiful thought, but closer scrutiny reveals that, looking westward (as Don invariably does), it would only see you marooned on some desolate outcrop in mid-Atlantic, eating raw fish-heads and seaweed ratatouille - no fun when the drink wears off. Don continued with Shel Silverstein's surprisingly cheerful trucker death song Don't Go To Sleep On The Road, then came John Austin with an emotional self-penned piano piece recalling Neil Diamond or Richard Marx, and a catchy slice of honky tonk. He'd be followed by the notorious **Jockstrap Ensemble**, this week featuring Pete Beach, Greg Aylmer and **Jack Cobbe** on bodhran. They'd deliver ramshackle but joyful renditions of Maggie May and John Prine's Blow Up The TV, before stepping aside for Nigel Snook to provide an exceptional finale. First, he jokingly began duelling with himself on banjo and guitar, then deteriorated brilliantly through a comic Kevin Bloody Wilson dope number. Then came a take on Jimmy Reed's Bright Lights, Big City (filtered through Duster Bennett) and finally an obviously heartfelt rendition of Dylan's Lay Lady Lay. A terrific end to a corking session.

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Thursday, September 23rd

Another week, another session. At the bar, all the talk was of whether Jack Cobbe had really twined roses round his bodhran and worn it to Royal Ascot. Then there was the controversy over **Tony Harvey's** songs, so dopily mistitled by The Raconteur in last month's issue. According to a source close to Tony, his latest effort, which perfectly captures the panicked excitement and dread of rejection in a new relationship, is called *My Love Is Like A Red, Red Phone Bill*.

Onstage, Greg Aylmer kicked off with three quicksilver mandolin pieces, being accompanied by Jack on the third. Then Gary French stepped up with a soft, moving take on The Eagles' Saturday Night. As in "Whatever happened to Saturday night?" Yet another interesting question. A quick survey revealed that it's still there, just before Sunday morning. Though, had someone nicked it, that would explain how come the weekend goes so fast. Gary moved on to Hampton and David's Sea Of Heartbreak, Don Gibson's last big hit back in 1961, then that smashing self-penned number he'd laid on us two weeks earlier. It's great to see Gary using a more measured approach, keeping his vocals in check and thus adding more weight to the moments when he really explodes.

Next came Nick Maddocks with an appropriately resigned take on Steve Earle's 1986 classic *My Old Friend The Blues*, and then his own *One More One Nighter*, a track written in the belief that a new baby would put an end to his musical career. He'd be followed by **Ross Keniston**, a singer-songwriter on a rare visit from Taunton, who gave us Savage Garden's fraught *Two Beds And A Coffee Machine*, then covers of Nick Maddocks' *Burn Me* and Bob Dylan's *Knockin' On Heaven's Door*, written for the soundtrack to Sam Peckinpah's *Pat Garrett And Billy The Kid*. Ross is a singer of some passion but, judging on tonight's performance, he could certainly learn from Gary French's vocal control.

Following Ross came a thoroughly entertaining Nigel Snook, this time cheering us with a fun-time take on *All Things Bright And Beautiful*, before blending Mason Williams' 1968 hit *Classical Gas* with Jimmy Webb's epic *MacArthur Park*. Then came some more Bach, and some truly beautiful moments.

It was now noted that, for the first time in many, many months, we were running short of musicians. Those present must stand up and be counted and, as ever, they did. First Greg and Jack got toes tapping with their mandolin-bodhran combo, then so-to-be club chairman **Graham Cook** took a break from the sound-desk to give us nicely natural covers of Dylan's *It's All Over Now*, *Baby Blue* and Elias McDaniel's *Before You Accuse Me*, made famous by Bo Diddley and Eric Clapton. After a brief intermission, Liz May reprised *This Year's Love* then performed a lovely, Eva Cassidy-influenced version of Sting's *Fields Of Gold*.

After Liz came **Andy Betts** for his third appearance at the RAC and his first in a long while. After an unsuccessful stab at some Supertramp, he played a track of his own composition, an atmospheric number with a vocal recalling Mark Knopfler. While on the subject of Supertramp, it's worth contemplating the philosophical poser raised in one of their biggest hits - "Could we have kippers for breakfast, mummy dear, mummy dear?" Note the deliberate use of "Could" rather than "May" - the writer is clearly demanding a far more profound answer than Yes, No, or Shut up and eat your Sugar Puffs. A few hours of research found varying replies to this age-old question from some of humanity's greatest minds. Sigmund Freud: "Predictably, ze kippers in question are blatant phallic symbols intended to rouse "mummy dear" (what a giveaway!) to a crescendo of incestuous post-breakfast lust. Ze emasculated father, meanwhile, is consigned

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to an asexual void of porridge, or maybe Alpen". Franz Kafka: "How can you talk to me of kippers - I'm a giant beetle! Have you no crunchy grubs, or worms?" Jean-Paul Sartre: "There can be no kippers for us - only sorrow". Dr Timothy Leary: "Smoked herring? Sure, man, I've smoked everything". Friedrich Nietzsche: "Yes! Many kippers! For ze Vitamin E unt Omega 3 fatty acids vill fortify ze minds unt bodies of our glorious Aryan stormtroopers as zey cut a bloody swathe from Munchen to Moscow, crushing ze kipper-less weaklings beneath zeir shiny jackboots!" Fascinating stuff, and absolute proof that Supertramp were not just beardy wallies with funny voices.

Following Andy was **Mark Porter** who gave us increasingly confident renditions of The Calling's Wherever You Will Go and Bad Company's Shooting Star. Then Gary French stepped up with The Ballad Of Lucy Jordan and a high-quality medley, running from Maurice Williams' Stay, through Bobby Freeman's Do You Want To Dance to Blue Moon. Nick Maddocks then delivered his own Steal Away, about leaving stressful city life behind, and Steve Earle's Christmas In Washington, with its plaintive chorus of "Come back, Woody Guthrie". That's a great idea, and timely, too. Few things would liven up the forthcoming US Presidential elections more than an unscheduled appearance by a zombie folk singer.

Next, Ross Keniston returned, this time on piano, with a superdrama concerning an ex. Then the evening was brought towards its close by Graham Cook and Nigel Snook and a spirited take on Robert Johnson's Crossroads, Nigel staying up to end proceedings with a superb cover of Erroll Garner's Misty. Musically, we'd been short-staffed, but not short-changed.

BREAKING NEWS . . . BREAKING NEWS . . . BREAKING NEWS . . .

The AGM was held this week and new committee members elected. Welcome to new chairman Graham Cook, vice-chairman **Bryan Counsell**, plus **Caroline**, **Laura** and John Austin. The poor, beautiful fools - they have no idea what they've let themselves in for. Major thanks, of course, go out to departing members Tony Harvey, Mark Porter, **Paul Austin**, **Colin Hillier** and also former chairman Jack Cobbe. Special thanks to **Trish Liles** - the accounts showed exactly how vital her raffles have been.

Members are reminded of two upcoming shows - **Bob Brozman** on Friday, October 15th (£10), and **Clive Gregson** on Saturday, November 27th (£5). Clive will have been on tour with Nanci Griffith and should be in top form. Tickets are available from GC Music (01278-794-434).

Bad news about the Christmas party on Friday, December 17th. KEANU REEVES has turned us down, as have JUDE LAW and (even though Treasurer **Doug Liles** offered to re-mortgage his house to pay her fee) JORDAN. Nevertheless, Secretary **Steve Brown** is now in terrier-like pursuit of Lord Of The Rings star ELIJAH WOOD. He's only little so we can probably bully him into it.

Apologies to anyone who's had their name spelt wrongly in the last few issues. The Rackontuer takes full responsibility and . . . oops, I did it again. DOH!