

Simon Nicol is the only remaining founder member of Fairport Convention, the folk-rock band formed in London in 1967 as an English counterpart to the Jefferson Airplane. His was a pivotal position in that classic Fairports line-up of Richard Thompson (gtr), Martin Lamble (drms), Ashley Hutchings (bs), Ian Matthews (vcls) and Sandy Denny (vcls), following the swift departure of Judy Dyble who appeared on the debut album ('Fairport Convention', Polydor 1968). It was this group that produced the legendary 'What We Did On Our Holidays' (Island, 1969) and 'Unhalfbricking' (Island, 1969), the latter of which was recorded after Matthews had left to form Matthews Southern Comfort and released just a month before Martin Lamble was killed in a car accident. At this point that the band embraced English folk to the fullest extent, releasing their biggest selling album 'Liege and Lief' (Island, 1969) with Dave Swarbrick (violin and vcls) and Dave Mattacks (drms) filling the gaps, and with innumerable line-up changes they have continued to this day in much the same vein.

Our man Mick Donovan caught up with Simon Nicol at the Cabbage Patch in Twickenham, London, and was able to spend some time chatting with him in the bar downstairs prior to a nowadays rare appearance as a duo with Dave Swarbrick. Here's the results, and still to come we have the transcription of Mick's subsequent conversation with Swarb himself.

PT: This is a rare treat.

SN: Swarb and I used to do this a lot after Fairport folded in 1979. After about twelve months or so, we started working as a duo throughout the early '80s - probably for three or four years. I think we were the best there was at that kind of thing. Since then we haven't done it very often. I

should think the last time was two years ago, and that wasn't an official appearance. Swarb was doing a solo gig, he hadn't done any work for a while and he just 'phoned me up and asked how I felt about going along to sort of hold his hand. So I went along. We had a good time, but it was very much a case of dredging the memory banks. This gig tonight is an odd one because this was originally going to be with Ric (Sanders, the Fairport's current violinist who had suffered an injury to his hand). We still don't do much of this kind of thing together, but occasionally people call me up and twist my arm. And because I'd said yes to this guy some time ago, I didn't want to sacrifice it or let him down. So I decided to give Swarb a ring and see if he could do it, because I don't like working on my own. Anyway, that's why we're here. And it's a bit of a memory test.

You're planning to play 'Crazy Man Michael' off 'Liege and Lief' tonight.

We've only played 'Crazy man Michael' twice in fifteen years. It's a bit like riding a bike - sometimes you can be a bit wobbly. But we'll find out.

Turning the clock back a bit, Sandy Denny was the singer on what's seen as your three classic albums, 'What We Did On Our Holidays', 'Unhalfbricking' and 'Liege and Lief' - what was she like as a person?

Sandy was brilliant on both fronts. A great loss. When you consider how many albums the band has made, how many gigs the band has done over the past 25 years, and what

a small percentage she was actually involved in, the fact that everybody still thinks of her Fairport connection shows you what kind of a shadow she cast. She was a big lady and is still very fondly remembered by whoever came into contact with her, or especially worked with her, because her voice was sans pareil, really. She really had that magic thing. She could suspend time. And it's lovely that there's some nice records of her. Everyone was saddened and upset when she pegged out, obviously, but no-one was surprised really. I think that if they put their hand on their heart they couldn't say they were surprised that she did die young, because there was always something about her of an accident just waiting to happen. She was always on the limit, always on the edge. She needed a lot of looking after. In Fairport, we've been very lucky to have the two girls (Julianne Regan from All About Eve and Vicki Clayton) doing the Sandy spot. They are so strong individually and so utterly unlike one another, but they can each do it. Julianne's got talent, but we can give it to Vicki another time. They are always going to be Sandy's songs, but it's not just a slavish thing. They can both convince the audience, at the time that they're singing, that it fits their voices. We are fortunate

like I say - it would be invidious to have one girl who had cornered the market. When we started the whole idea, it was Kathy Le Surf who was the first girl we asked to do it, that was in 1986.

I've got a video of that.

I don't think I've got one of those videos. June Tabor did it after that. We wanted to spread it around so it didn't get associated with one person, particularly because it's been so nice to do that thing once a year at Cropredy. We've never been interested in being retro, to turn people's attentions back to a particular time, but it's nice to have a history and to recognise it. The band has always existed on the principle of how well it plays.

I go to Cropredy, my wife and I take our boy along with us.

As long as we keep putting on that event and it keeps going well, new people will be coming along to it. It's growing because of what young people's parents have exposed them to. It's the only festival I've ever been to with that much of a family vibe. People really go together. Extended families go. They bring their grannies and grandads along, with a couple of



Left to right: Martin lamble, Simon Nicol, Judy Dyble, Richard Thompson, Ian Matthews & Ashley Hutchings

chairs and some blankets.

The set for your 25th anniversary event at Cropredy was chronological.

We did that on the Saturday night. It's obviously very difficult to pick what songs are possible, what songs are suitable, and then strike a balance between each of the periods. But I think, and from the feedback that I had from people who came along, that we managed to squeeze in quite a few favourites. Everybody was very complimentary about the running order of the songs. I enjoyed the Friday night more myself, because on Saturday night it was a case of "he's on for two numbers and then he goes off and she comes on, then she comes off and then we change guitars..." On the Friday night though, there was Julianne Regan who came on once and Robert Plant who came on as a big surprise, and that was all. That was all a great success, even though Chris (Ric Sanders' replacement on violin) was obviously thrown in very much at the deep end. Brilliant.

What happened to Ric?

He had something of a setback. One of the tendons he damaged when he went through a plate glass window after tripping up on the pavement in Oxfordshire came apart again. He was overdoing the physiotherapy, and the tendon that operates the middle finger came apart. They had to operate on him again to tidy it up. He was determined to make himself fully better.

Ian Matthews at Cropredy...

He did one year with us and it didn't work out that brilliantly. Ian was in the band for quite a short period of time and a very long time ago, and he has changed a lot more than we have. I don't feel a great deal in common with him now. Looking back, I prob-

ably didn't feel that close to him at the time either. But Fairport's always been a very democratic, co-operative, internally self-governing organisation and the only way it can work is if people still remember to wear that hat. No matter if they've been away doing something else. When Richard comes in for instance he's one of the lads. He doesn't make any fuss, doesn't make waves.

Did Ian want to be a star?

Well he is, isn't he?



What's your favourite Fairport album and track?

I've got a really soft spot for 'What We Did On Our Holidays'. I wouldn't want to pick one track. I'd give you a different answer every day. I have very happy memories of that album. The freshness of the moment of discovery, and that record of what was possible. With the first album, I suppose we were slightly overawed by the whole business of being in the studio at sixteen, seventeen years of age, and we were very much feeling our way musically, whereas the band was infinitely better balanced when Sandy came in. She was so much more powerful. She was a stronger musical force than her predecessor. The album was really fun to do. There's a great communal vibe

between the band, John Wood (the engineer), everybody. In the studio, I remember it being a real buzzy time, and the material was really strong on that record.

The late Martin Lamble was drummer at the time. What of him as a musician?

Martin was cut down long before his prime. He was a very musical drummer, very, very melodic in a way I haven't really encountered since, with the possible exception of Jim Keltner and Russ Kunkel. Most of the other drummers I've worked with have been less melodic. But Martin always wanted to get inside a song.

What of Martin as a person?

He was extremely bright, very droll, very quick. But it's very hard to talk about this because the guy was the same age as my daughter is now when he died, when he was killed. And I think of her, obviously, as a very immature being, a child really. Consider then that Martin was that age when he was going out doing these gigs and making a couple of albums and stuff. I was even younger than Martin, so that puts me in a very strange position even with my own children. But that's what life does to you. I remember him being that much smarter than the rest of the people around. Very self-possessed.

How about Ashley Hutchings?

Very serious, still is, but a visionary. He had a very clear idea of where he was going.

Richard Thompson?

Richard was just terribly gifted. Shy, yes, but he's less shy now since he's married Nancy. She's a Californian. She's dragged him out. And of course Richard's had a lot more experience now, doing solo performances. The

way he controls his audience... he has a great time.

The sound of Richard Thompson and Sandy Denny and the albums they were together on; that's Fairport Convention for me.

That was the 60s, man. You were there too. I can tell by your hairline.

Dave Swarbrick actually appeared on 'Unhalfbricking', although he didn't join the band until later.

Dave was there strictly as a session musician. He didn't really get involved until after we'd had the accident (which Martin died in) and we had to reform the band. Then that meant the severance of his partnership with Martin Carthy at that point, because they'd already established themselves as a very solid working unit.

He was more experienced than you were at the time.

He was a bigger name, but he really fancied the job. He wanted to throw his lot in with us. And he quite got off on the fact that he could hear the electric fiddle much better than he could the acoustic - he was having ear problems even then.

How much longer will Fairport continue for, do you think?

I don't think about it. I didn't think about it then, don't think about it now. The thing is bigger than the sum of its parts and it always has been. Nobody's indispensable and I think that as long as there's a continuity of development, it'll go on. If it goes to sleep and becomes extinct and somebody tries to revive it who hasn't got anything to do with it, or who has only tenuous connections, then that will probably be the end of it. I see no reason though why it shouldn't carry on developing musically in the way that things like the male voice

choirs in Wales or the silver bands of the north that have been going for a hundred years or more have done. They still have a sense of identity, even though people have come in at the bottom end of it and gone out at the top. I can see this band being the first one of our generation to do that. There are parallels already, because Martin Allcock and Ric Sanders, the latest members of the band, wouldn't even have become musicians had they not been turned on by the music we were playing. Ric learned to play the fiddle from the medley on 'Liege and Lief'. And Martin's already been in the band for twice as long as Richard ever was. Poor Richard. He left the band in 1970, twenty four years ago, and still it's "Richard Thompson, ex-Fairport Convention guitarist".

What of the band's origins? The name of the band came from your family's home in Muswell Hill, a house called 'Fairport'.

I wouldn't say I was responsible. If anyone was responsible it would have to be Ashley because he was the visionary. He was the one who was the ringmaster. He knew the elements that he needed to make a band. I was one of the elements, and we all started playing off of each other.

There was a very rocky, West Coast feel early on.

Yeah. Quite a lot of it has to do with the material we liked to do as a band. We wanted to do stuff which wasn't widely known at the time. I was probably more into the American singer/songwriters, the Dylans and Phil Ochs's. Those kind of guys. Ashley's interests were pretty broad ranging. We were all very excited by what the Byrds were doing.

I remember seeing Ian, Sandy, Richard, Ashley, Martin and yourself as Fairport at the Country Club in West Hampstead, 1968.

I remember the place, there was no stage. We had some magic nights in that place. Lots of really good nights.

Simon Nicol was interviewed by Mick Donovan. Written and directed by Mick Donovan, produced by Phil. © Ptolemaic Terrascope, 1994