

Fairport Convention at Harpenden's Eric Morecambe Centre

Friday 17th February 2023 – Concert review by Carl Filby



Fifty years ago I was going to gigs at the Coatham Hotel in Redcar, including one by Fairport Convention, and enjoying watching Morecambe & Wise at their peak on TV. The late, great Eric Morecambe is no longer with us but Fairport Convention are very much alive and kicking and I hugely enjoyed their gig in Harpenden, part of their 'Wintour 2023'.

Hannah Sanders & Ben Savage are the support act for the Wintour and have played the folk clubs for a few years, initially Hannah as a solo artist and Ben as part of 'The Willows'. This was the first time that I have seen them together and they performed a lovely set of half a dozen numbers, some self-penned, which might be described broadly as Americana. In a nice touch, traditionally on a Fairport tour I believe, the band joined them in their final number 'Reynardine' which of course was a track on the magnificent 'Liege & Lief' album when Sandy Denny (another 'late great') was the band's main vocalist.

Over the years some famous names, many no longer with us, have performed within the Fairport family and they are happy to reference past members and give credit where due as well as having a clearly affectionate dig on occasion. More often than not, the late David Cyril Eric Swarbrick, as Peggy refers to him, is the subject of this 'tribute with a twist'. No wonder really as Swarb has left the band with an impressive legacy of tunes, often co-written with another great former band member Richard Thompson. 'Walk Awhile' was the first of 3 such numbers taken from 'Full House' a UK chart album from 1970 when, in their own words, they became a 'boy band' with the addition of Dave 'Peggy' Pegg and the departure of Sandy Denny. Another classic from that album, 'Sloth', in its longer form, gave Chris Leslie the chance to conjure up memories of Swarb with his distinctive vocals and giving space for all the band members to show off their dexterity on their chosen instrument before bringing the first half of the concert to an end.

Part of the show involves violinist Ric Sanders taking time out from his superlative playing to, in effect, perform a bit of stand-up comedy, albeit of a gentle variety. Other members of the band drift on and off whilst Ric entertains with a series of observations and well-crafted (and a bit corny) jokes. In Harpenden, his performance was embellished by doing that thing Eric Morecambe used to do with his glasses which both he and the audience clearly loved. Personally, I loved his story about the 'bucket list' but I'm not telling and you'll have to go to a gig to hear that.

The second half opened with two songs from the album Angel Delight, another Swarb/Thompson number, 'The Journeyman's Grace' followed by the traditional 'Banks of the Sweet Primroses'.

As is often the case with older bands their musicianship just gets better and better and so it is the case with Fairport. Some older bands struggle with the vocal side but that is definitely not the case here as their harmonies are strong and Chris Leslie and Simon Nicol, who take the lead vocals, do a great job. If anything, Simon Nicol's voice has a strength now that was perhaps not so evident in his youth and I particularly enjoyed his rendition of Ralph McTell's 'The Hiring Fair'.

The second half included Chris Leslie's 'Moondust and Solitude' from the recent 'Shuffle and Go' album and is something of an epic, telling the tale of the Apollo 11 moon landing in 1969 from the point of view of Michael Collins who flew the command module round the moon whilst Armstrong and Aldrin walked there. It's a great showcase for Leslie's singing and song writing, as well as his skill on the mandolin.

After 26 years, Dave Mattacks has slotted back effortlessly into the Fairport line-up, perhaps because he has made a few guest appearances during that time. He and Peggy have resumed their solid earlier partnership in the bass section, and Peggy does an entertaining job handling most of the introductions, most entertainingly perhaps when referring to his aforementioned mate Dave Swarbrick.

Matty Groves is an old favourite from 'Liege and Lief' and the days of Sandy Denny and is apparently played at all Fairport gigs. It is a fitting end to a great night, except that it isn't quite the end. For an encore, Fairport are again joined by Hannah and Ben and provide a rousing finale with 'Meet On The Ledge' and even manage to get the very civilised Harpenden audience on their feet in appreciation.

There are still quite a few dates left on this tour so, if you get the chance, do go and see Fairport in their prime.
