

A personal memory of Stockton folk club.

My first visits were to the Stork and Castle in 1967. In 1967 The Dubliners had a #7 chart hit with Seven Drunken Nights that led to appearances on the cabaret club circuit including The Fiesta in Norton sometime early in 1968. Ronnie Drew and Barney McKenna came down to The Stork' on the Saturday club night for a pint of Guinness before their late on-stage appearance at The Fiesta.

If I wasn't in the Stork in those days I was along the street in Tito's night club watching Bob Monkhouse, Wee Willie Harris or Wayne Fontana and the Mindbenders and meeting Judy, my wife to be.

One night in the Stork and Castle the resident Bob Dylan impersonator played his floorspot and then proceeded to talk loudly through the next singer's performance. Ron Angel stopped proceedings, put the lights on and pointed at the miscreant and bid him leave immediately cos nothing was going to happen until he did. So tail between his legs he had little choice other than to go. We all knew then what folk club etiquette meant and had to be followed otherwise embarrassment would surely follow. Ron was certainly a father figure and definitely in charge, and for the better.

Toni Arthur who eventually became a regular star of Play School on BBC Children's TV played one night with her then partner Dave Arthur ...and at one point he took a very big tumble and fell off the very small stage! Another Play School contributor, the recently departed Johnny Silvo, played at the club on a Saturday night in December 1966. I wasn't there but was playing at the First (and only) Middlesbrough Folk Festival at the town hall crypt that evening. Johnny came over later to the concert where Maureen Kennedy Martin and The Tinkers were closing the show and did some good-natured heckling from the bar! My

first introduction to a great personality who I would share the stage with many times in years to follow.

That First Middlesbrough Folk Festival was hosted by The Creel from Middlesbrough Folk Club, by then operating in The Grand Hotel opposite the railway station, featuring Stu McFarlane and my school pal Malcolm Harrison who plays guitar so well still at London West End jazz venues. The Creel would eventually recruit Dave Lewis, a fine mandolin player who acquired a Gibson A model mandolin from Dave Swarbrick. Dave would eventually join with Rita Angel and Dave Milner in Jackeroo and were the other resident group at the Sun on a Monday night at Stockton folk club with The Fettleers in the early 70s.

Before that I remember a Friday night, sometime in 68 or 69, at The Sun Inn, featuring the trio Therapy. Who organised that I don't know but I thought Ron Angel might be involved and trying out a new venue. Vin was there that night too. I do remember going to the Talbot with those awful snooker tables intervening on the atmosphere but eventually it was to the Sun Inn on a Monday night where the club would move for longevity that I would go and play most weeks when the club there was packed out every week. When I say packed-out I do mean standing room only ten-deep near the bar at the back. Rita Angel ran the door and was the most welcoming of people for those she collected the money from. Rita was very special where the club was concerned. Guests I remember in the early 70s include the Gaugers from Aberdeen, Miriam Backhouse (now Erasmus) and very contemporary acts from around the Leeds area like the two trios Freeway and Nova. I did a gig there then with Dave Peabody and Hugh McNulty, a goodtime blues and hokum act from west London, gate crashing my show!! So much fun. After 40 years Hugh is still a very close and valued friend as is Andy Caven who was a regular guest and well liked for his great voice and fun performances.

Dave Lewis left Jackaroo and I stepped in sometime around 1974 to become part of the resident group opening the second half. Sean McManus from The Fettleers got a job doing a folk show on the original local ILR station Radio Tees and I contributed with my bluegrass, blues, ragtime and contemporary American record collection. After the show we'd hotfoot it across to The Sun!

Jackaroo had a lot of gigs both in and out of the North East. The Fettleers had a resident spot at The Fiesta club for a short while on a Sunday night, and Jackaroo stood in for them one night opening for the Ian Campbell Folk Group, to a huge audience. We also played at The Sun on a Friday night for the bluegrass and country club run by Trevor King. One of the legendary acts presented there was Bill Clifton and Red Rector. Dave Manship, home from sea, was a regular performer there, after his original involvement in the folk club back in the early 60s. When that club closed regulars Eric and Betty Armstrong, now in Vancouver, Canada, would open a new club featuring mainly bluegrass and old time American music at the Oxbridge that ran until 1982.

I might say here that there were obviously differences of opinion right from the get-go as to what might constitute a folk song, as expressed in the notes already provided by others. Folk clubs originally were inspired by all manner of enthusiasm for this or that. Ballads and Blues clubs were the very first nationally offering Big Bill Broonzy and Woody Guthrie alongside Ewan McColl and Cecil Sharp.

My first folk club visit in 1965 to the Newport Hotel in Middlesbrough found Stockton founding member Johnny Handle as guest. Here was a proper piano in the room that Johnny proceeded to dismantle, removing all the casing for the full, raucous, barrel-house sound, and played some great ragtime jazz! So he wasn't a pure English traddie. Stockton folk club mixed up the entertainment of the likes of Johnny Silvo with the blues of Peabody and McNulty and the ultra contemporary of Ewan

Caruthers and his trio Freeway with pure Scots traditional of The Gaugers. That's what made the club both great and strong.

I'm quite amazed to see how many times I've turned up as a performer considering these last 12 years have been somewhat less regular. If I'd maintained my regularity as it was in the previous 30 years I might well have topped the list. I'd have been proud of that. I'm proud anyway of such a long association with a great institution that puts folk music first.

Eddie Walker
Middlesbrough
March 2012