

Mike Weber's Guide to the Essential

Fairport Convention

1967 ~ 1979



Fairport Convention

June 68

Time Will Show the Wiser
Jack o Diamonds
Chelsea Morning

The first album, when they were seen as sort of a British Jefferson Airplane; Judy Dyble on vocals, Martin Lamble on drums, Ashley (Tyger) Hutchings bass, Richard Thompson & Simon Nicol various guitars and mandolin, Ian MacDonald (later Ian Matthews) vocals.



"Fairport" was the house Simon's family lived in in Muswell Hill; they got together in a spare room to practise, hence, "The Fairport Convention", though the "The" disappeared pretty quickly. There are two Joni Mitchell songs on this album -- which came out before Joni's own version did, I believe. Mitchell's manager or producer (I forget with), Warwick Boyd, sent the songs to their producer, his brother, Joe Boyd, an expatriate American living in London.



What We Did on Our Holidays

January 69

(The July 69 US release was entitled simply "Fairport Convention",

different cover right])

Fotheringay
Tale in Hard Time
Meet on the Ledge
I'll keep it with mine

Front cover "A blackboard at Essex University assaulted by Fairport Convention"

Hutchings, Matthews (Macdonald), Thompson, Nicol, Lamble as before, Sandy Denny vocals. First time I saw that US cover with Sandy sitting down front and



Richard looming behind her, I thought "Hobbit and goblin!"

Unhalfbricking

July 69

(US November 69, with the stupidest cover ever... [below])

Virtually this entire album is Important:



Genesis Hall
Si Tu Dois Partir
Who Knows Where the Time Goes
Percy's Song
Million Dollar Bash

Personnel as before (Matthews on only one track); Dave Swarbrick on session fiddle



Genesis Hall was a well-known and large London squat that was eventually raided by the police. Richard's father was a policeman; "Genesis Hall" the song is about neutrality and ambivalence in emotional circumstance. ("My father he rides with your sheriffs/ and I know he would never mean harm/But to see both sides of a quarrel they say/Is to judge without fear or alarm...")

You may know Judy Collins' version of "Where the Time Goes" -- it was, I understand, the second original song Sandy wrote, written when she was 19.

Three Dylan covers on the list here (You only see two? "Si tu Dois Partir" is a "dog-French" version of "If You Gotta Go, Go Now" that they worked out on stage with audience assistance one night. Martin takes his last drum break on a stack of folding chairs with a lemonade bottle on top, which falls over audibly at the end.)

The cover photo shows Sandy's parents outside their garden in the London suburb of Putney. I've been to Putney to visit Sandy's grave. These people obviously had Money.



Liege and Lief

December 69

Matty Groves
Farewell, Farewell
The Deserter
Medley: The Lark In The Morning / Rakish Paddy /

Foxhunter's Jig / Toss The Feathers

Tam Lin

Crazy Man Michael

Considered by many (not necessarily me) to be the best Fairport album, by the "perfect" lineup.

Big personnel change here -- van crash on the M1 killed drummer Lamble.

Sandy Denny, Vocals

Dave Swarbrick (now officially a member), Fiddle, Viola

Richard Thompson, Guitars, Backing Vocals

Simon Nicol, Guitars

Ashley Hutchings, Bass, Backing Vocals

Dave Mattacks, Drums, Percussion (the second Dave)

"Matty Groves", a trad murder ballad, makes its first (and far from last) appearance. Listed in the Childe "Ballads" in an earlier version as "Little Musgrave".

Ditto "Tam Lin", a ballad of a laird's young daughter who falls in love with a mortal knight held in thrall by the Queen of Faerie. (Basis for the YA fantasy novel "Fire & Hemlock" by Diana Wynne Jones -- well worth your while if you read fantasy)

Full House

July 70

Dirty Linen (inst. medley)

Sloth

Sir Patrick Spens

Flatback Caper (inst. medley)



Even bigger personnel changes:

Tyger left to form Steeleye Span (q.v.)

Sandy left to form Fotheringay

RT, Simon, Swarb and DM still aboard.

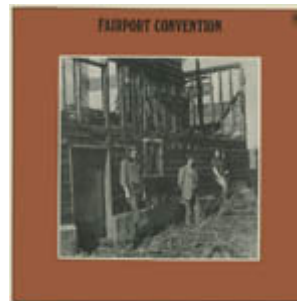
At Swarb's suggestion, his mate from Birmingham, Dave Pegg, auditioned for and got the bass slot.

Note the Tarot-card cover -- two knights, three kings, caricatures of the band members, two guitar players and three guys named Dave.

At 9:10, this recording of "Sloth" is one of the shortest ever; i have personally timed the song at over fifteen minutes in live performance.

"Dirty Linen" gave its name to a long-running folk-music magazine (originally a Fairport fanzine, but eventually covering the entire field).

"Sir Patrick Spens" was the first Fairport track i heard; i immediately went out and bought the album. Instant lifelong obsession.



Angel Delight

June 71

Bridge Over The River Ash

The Journeyman's Grace

Angel Delight

The Bonny Black Hare

And ANOTHER lineup change -- Richard Thompson out and not replaced (at least on the album; this may have been when the Bret-on guitarist Dan ar Braz played some dates on tour with the band); otherwise as before.

"Bridge" is a trad instrumental -- can't recall how they do it here (i don't currently have this album), but, later, Swarb would take over the bass and the non-fiddler members would play it as a string quartet. With running commentary. It will reappear.

They were living in a pub called the Angel. A lorry crashed through the wall into the TV room. The song "Angel Delight" is about this period.



Babbacombe Lee

November 71
(rerecorded in '75 for use as backing to a BBC special about Lee, with Sandy Denny on vocals)

Hanging Song (Wake Up John)

Same lineup as "Angel Delight".

A "rock opera", based on the life of John "Babbacombe" Lee -- "The man they could not hang."

Lee had been convicted of some rather nasty murders, but when it came time for his execution, the gallows trap three times refused to function as he stood on it, though it worked fine otherwise. Under British law of the day, this was taken as an intervention of Providence, and his sentence was commuted to transportation to Australia.

Never heard the whole album; of the tracks i have heard, the "Hanging Song" is the standout.



Rosie

February 73

Hungarian Rhapsody Furs And Feathers

Lineup:

Dave Swarbrick, Vocals, Fiddle, Viola, Mandolin, Acoustic Guitar

Trevor Lucas, Vocals, Guitars

Jerry Donahue, Guitars, Vocals

Dave Pegg, Vocals, Bass, Mandolin

Dave Mattacks, Drums, Percussion, Piano

with

Richard Thompson, Guitar (Track 1)

Sandy Denny, Backing Vocals (Track 1)

Linda Peters, Backing Vocals (Track 1)

Gerry Conway, Drums (Tracks 1, 3, 5)

Tim Donald, Drums (Tracks 2, 6, 7)

Ralph McTell, Guitar (Track 8)

"Hungarian Rhapsody" is a goof about trying to get to a music festival in Hungary.

"Furs and Feathers" is a lullabye/fairy tale narrative about a king who dressed as a beggar.

Trevor Lucas (an Australian) was either already married to or about to marry Sandy; he'd been in Fotheringhay with her.

Linda Peters was about to become Linda Thompson.

Gerry Conway is (as of the last word i have) drummer in the current lineup -- he was as of October 2004 when they played Charlotte NC.

Jerry Donahue is an American; there is (or was, anyway) a Jerry Donahue signature-model Telecaster.

Nine

October 73

Brilliancy Medley/Cherokee Shuffle To Althea from Prison

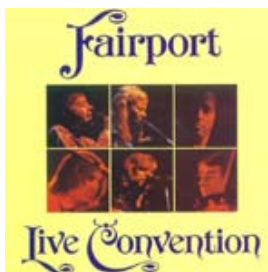


Lineup: The Three Daves

(Peggie, DM and Swarb), Donahue, Lucas (I trust you're beginning to appreciate the fluidity here.)

Most of the Fairport instrumental tracks are worth a listen.

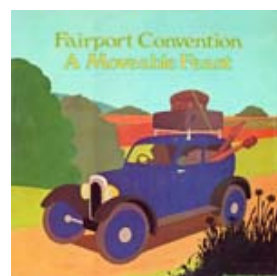
The oddball/standout here is "To Althea From Prison": Music by Swarb, lyrics from the works of Richard Lovelace while in prison - The Gate House, Westminster 1642



Live Convention

July 74

also as



A Moveable Feast (US title)

Lineup:

Sandy Denny	Vocals, Piano
Dave Swarbrick	Vocals, Fiddle
Trevor Lucas	Vocals, Acoustic Guitar, 12-String Acoustic Guitar
Jerry Donahue	Electric Guitar
Dave Pegg	Bass Guitar
Dave Mattacks	Drums

Tracks from two shows; one in Croydon, one in Sydney. Sandy was not, actually an official member of the band at this point, but, if you used to be a member, if the band still does your songs, and your husband is playing in the band and you're traveling along...

Typical of live recordings.

"Matty Groves" is back, along with an eleven-minute "Sloth".

I would have sworn that **Sir B. McKenzie** was on a studio album -- perhaps "Nine", but it's not listed there. An instrumental track, its main claim to fame is that it's in (or was in) the Guinness Book of World Records, as the recorded song with the longest title ever: "Sir B. McKenzie's Daughter's Lament For the 77th Mounted Lancers Retreat From The Straits Of Loch Knombe, In The Year Of Our Lord 1727, On The Occasion Of The Announcement Of Her Marriage To The Laird Of Kinleakie". (I see now that what confused me was that it's been issued as a bonus track on the CD of "Full House"; it was originally a single B-side in the UK.)



Rising for the Moon

June 75

Rising for the Moon

White Dress

Stranger to Himself

Iron Lion

Lineup:

Sandy Denny	Vocals, Piano, Guitar
Dave Swarbrick	Vocals, Does It Have Strings? (Fiddle, Viola, Mandolin, Autoharp, Dulcimer, Acoustic Guitar)

Trevor Lucas	Vocals, Guitars, Harmonica
Jerry Donahue	Guitars
Dave Pegg	Bass Guitar, Backing Vocals
Dave Mattacks	Drums
Bruce Rowland	Drums

Sandy's back. DM makes his first exodus; Bruce Rowland his first entrance.

Trevor was apparently a railway buff; "Iron Lion" begins

"Well, I been an engine driver all of my days
That's the only thing I can do.

I hold a good head of steam, everywhere that I'm seen
Wherever my trains roll through..."

(Bruce accomplishes a nice "steam" sound on a brushed ride...)



Gottle o Geer

May 76

Sandy's Song

Limey's Lament

Lineup:

Dave Swarbrick	Vocals, The Usual
Dave Pegg	Bass, Backing Vocals
Bruce Rowland	Drums, Backing Vocals
with	
Simon Nicol	Electric Guitar (Track 9)
Martin Carthy	Acoustic Guitar (Track 4)
Eric Johns	Electric Guitar (Tracks 1, 7)
Ian Wilson	Electric Guitar (Track 4)
Nick Judd	Piano (Tracks 2, 6)
Robert Palmer	Harmonica, Vocals (Track 6)

Though listed as "Sandy's Song", the "real" title is "Take Away the Load" -- another by Sandy Denny in the vein of "Who Knows Where the Time Goes"; even though it was two years before Sandy took her fatal fall, it almost sounds like a tribute to an Absent Friend.

"Limey's Lament" is a bizarre (and hilarious) near-monotone semi-chant about the culture shock of touring in the US. Given REM's known reverence of Fairport (they went to London to record with John Wood

for one of their first big budget albums), one wonders if it might have inspired them...

"Fairport Convention's Contractual Obligation" -- they owed Island an album. Swarb was working on a solo album with the gang sitting in. Originally, Simon was only working in the production end. Quoting: "Simon Nicol's guitar overdub on Track 9 was a replacement for a part Ron Wood had recorded when the basic backing track had first been laid down in 1972 for use on a Gerry Lockran LP"

The Bonny Bunch of Roses

July 77

Lineup:

Dave Swarbrick	Vocals, Fiddle
Dave Pegg	Vocals, Bass
Bruce Rowland	Drums
Simon Nicol	Vocals, Guitars

Simon officially rejoins.

I know darn well i've heard this album at least once. Can't call any particular tracks to mind. New label --

Vertigo

Re-issued 2001 as two LPs on one CD along with "Tipplers' Tales"



Tipplers' Tales

May 78

Jack O'Rion

John Barleycorn

Dave Swarbrick	Vocals, Fiddle, Mandolin, Mandocello
Simon Nicol	Vocals, Guitars, Electric Dulcimer, Piano
Dave Pegg	Vocals, Bass, Mandolin, Guitar
Bruce Rowland	Drums

"Jack O'Rion" runs over eleven minutes, including several interpolated fiddle pieces showcasing Swarb. If you trace the ballad's history back (i think it's in Childe), somehow Glasgerion, the fabled Welsh harpist-king, has become "Jack O'Rion" as an example of the "folk process".



Farewell, Farewell

September 79

Orange Blossom Special
Bridge on the River Ash
Meet on the Ledge

Lineup:

Simon Nicol	Vocals,
Electric Guitar, Viola,	Electric Dulcimer
Dave Swarbrick	Vocals, Fiddle, Mandolin
Dave Pegg	Vocals, Bass Guitar, Fiddle, Mandolin
Bruce Rowland	Drums, Bass Guitar, Tambourine

Last album before the band went on hiatus till '85. This one's reissue history is bizarre -- there was a CD on a small UK label, which included one bonus track. Then there was another CD reissue -- the currently-available version -- entitled "Encore Encore", featuring three *more* bonus tracks. And then there was a 2-lp vinyl re-release of *that*.

In Emma Bull's elf/punk/motorcycle/folk-rock novel **Finder**, the protagonist describes a performance by a (fictitious) band named County Hell Fairgrounds, saying "...the bass player grabbed a handful of strings and proceeded to climb the alphabet..." in response to his startled query "How does he make his hands *do* that?" his friend replies "Too much Fairport Convention as a child." Well, here's the track she may well have been particularly referring to. It begins with Swarb turning the hottest performance of the tune i've ever heard, anyway, and then Peggie and Bruce literally kick it into hyperdrive.

This was (as the title implies) their farewell tour. There are some minor studio overdubs.

Like their live concerts, the album originally ended with Richard and Swarb's "Meet on the Ledge".

"Bridge on the River Ash" features the whole band on fiddles. It includes their running commentary: "Pianissimo?" "We haven't had a drink yet -- they wouldn't let us into the bar."

Two Reissue Albums that Cover the Same Period:



House Full

June 86

Live at the L.A. Troubador

Lineup: Same as **Full House**

For this one I'll just quote my Amazon review:

Having seen close approximations of all of them at Cropredy, Fairport live in any of its incarnations seems to have been an awesome thing.

But this was the noblest Fairport of them all, in terms of sheer virtuosity and jaw-dropping chops -- and this album documents that to the hilt. This would be a 5-star album except that the sound is a bit thin and dry... and, even at that, it just misses.

((If the mobile truck had been there for some of the {not necessarily musical} moments mentioned in the liner notes, it would be about a 6-star album.)) *

It flat doesn't get any tighter and solidier on stage, and with guitarists Richard Thompson & Simon Nicol and the Three Daves -- Swarbrick on his demon fiddle dancing with & around RT and SN's guitars and Pegg on bass & Mattacks on thundering drums providing a bottom and a beat that has to be experienced to be appreciated -- Fairport mounted a sonic attack that is almost frightening coming from a "folk" band.

Granted, absent Sandy Denny, neither Richard nor Swarb really fills that gap on vocals, but what this band has in its own right that the "Liege & Leaf" Fairport didn't exploit as fully is its sheer power and virtuosity.

"Matty Groves" is a classic Fairport raveup, "Sir Patrick Spens" is a nice reading of a "trad.arr." ballad, "Mason's Apron" a nice instrumental... But "Sloth", at something like twelve minutes is simply incredible.

*The "moments" referred to above include Led Zeppelin (old hometown mates of Swarb and Peggie) sitting in, and Fairport, finding themselves doing three sets most nights instead of the two they were supposed to, running out of songs while they still had time to fill and dragging Linda Ronstadt up on stage and doing pretty much all of *her* songs...



HEYDAY - BBC RADIO SESSIONS 1968-1969

September 87

Suzanne
Bird on a Wire
Percy's Song (abridged)

Lineup:

Ian Matthews	Vocals
Sandy Denny	Vocals
Richard Thompson	Vocals, Electric & Acoustic Guitars, Organ
Simon Nicol	Electric & Acoustic Guitars, Electric Dulcimer
Ashley Hutchings	Bass Guitar, Backing Vocals
Martin Lamble	Drums

As you probably know, for a long time the BBC has had a practise of inviting artists to come in and record "live-in-the-studio" versions of their songs for broadcast, often in conjunction with interview features, sometimes just to have something unique to play.

And that's where this album originates.

The original genesis of this album a friends-only cassette assembled by Tyger, with typed track listing and hand-lettered labels; some years later, various people leaned on John Wood sufficiently that he agreed to assemble a CD version for release.

The standouts are the two Leonard Cohen numbers; too bad they didn't release them on any studio albums...



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