

## Contemporary Folk in Glasgow NOW ...

Folk Guitarist Tom O'Hagan takes a critical look at the problems facing contemporary folk music in Glasgow today.

**I**T IS heartening to go to one of the infrequent "big" concerts of the Incredible String Band or Pentangle to see great crowds that can turn out to see the maestros. What is positively disheartening, is to be an almost redundant contemporary folk singer/guitarist in the very city which nurtured the likes of Jansch and Donovan and sponsored people like Mike Heron and Robin Williamson. This is not a strictly personal grief; I'm not bewailing the fact that people spit in *my* eye and no one else's and tell me particularly that no one wants to know. The misfortune that Glasgow has virtually no clubs to where contemporary folk artists can play is a misfortune that has been experienced by Les Brown, Frank Coia, John Martyn, Alan Tall . . . to name but a few.

**I**N about four years almost any semblance of a contemporary folk scene in Glasgow has totally disappeared. Four years ago Glasgow had three folk clubs in the city centre—"The Folk Centre", "The Bothy" and "Clive's"—all of which catered for contemporary folk music and country blues. These clubs were open every weekend and all sponsored other concerts elsewhere in the city. On top of that, some lounges and hotels had good folk evenings (not sing-along rabbles) and these also were well attended. The "Folk Centre" dealt mainly with the traditional side of things but often brought up Jansch and Graham from London because the profits they made allowed them to put on really good artists fairly frequently. Mike Heron, Les Brown and Frank Coia played there about once a week alongside such traditional heroes as Josh McCrae and Hamish Imlach. "The Bothy", also mainly a trad' club but not averse to country blues, used to put on some unknown but interesting artists. Now we come to "Clive's". "Clive's" was a single room in Sauchiehall Street (above the Gaumont, I think) belonging to Clive Palmer. Clive himself being a popular folk personality and friendly with anyone who was somebody in the British folk scene, was able to utilise his friendships in having along many personalities who played for a favour. In "Clive's" the Incredible String Band formed and new ideas and talents were arriving all the time.

There was almost no reason for the fact that these clubs and pubs shut down, or should I say no reason for the audiences disappearing . . .

It has been suggested for a part of the reason that no talent

was able to replace the gaps left by these people who eventually "made it" in the London scene and naturally disappeared to that English Eldorado, but this is pure nonsense. At the peak of their Glasgow careers there were few of these artists could compete with Alan Tall, who by rights is the top of the Glasgow contemporary folk scene and earns about £8 on a good week from it!



▲ Tom O'Hagan

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**T**HERE were two reasons for the closure of "Clive's Mecca"; firstly the "fuzz" who insisted it was a fire hazard and just to make sure bust Clive on an acid charge; secondly, Clive made it big with the String Band. The "Bothy" audiences fell so low that they could not pay for the rent of the hall, let alone artists and had to close down. "The Folk Centre" is now crashing to a miserable end because since the management were unbelievably stingy about paying artists, no self respecting musician could afford the extravagance of a night there. They had no respect for the artists, pushing them around on an employer/employee basis. The management appeared to be so ill-organised that even if they booked you, you couldn't be certain that they would feel like opening the club. All of which combined meant a lack of good artists and therefore a drastic fall in audiences. Now, although the "Folk Centre" is still officially open, it doesn't mean anything is happening there. They put on a few isolated concerts but don't contribute to a regular scene at all.

**W**HAT of today? Well, what of today! Absolutely nothing. In the "Maryland Club" on Friday nights there is usually a folk/blues or a contemporary folk artist playing there, but it's a hard gig to get any satisfaction from, because it's hard for an audience to adjust—after the thunder of amplified music—to the softness of a solo artist on acoustic guitar. There are places outside Glasgow, but not places that are specifically catering for contemporary folk—only places which will tolerate a contemporary artist now and again and pay him some money and hope that the "again" is as far away as possible. I'm sorry if I seem to be mentioning money a lot but it's about the only measure you can judge yourself on these days. The only glimmer of light for today comes from something that happened about three years ago and stopped happening about two years ago and that was the "Long John"—perhaps many of you have heard of it, perhaps not so many. For those who have not heard and even for those who have heard, I can relate in great detail every inch of the story, because this is something that *must* happen again, and hearing the story might put ideas into someone's head who knows of suitable premises.

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Edinburgh Festival . . . Traverse . . .

Davy Graham . . . I.S.B. . . . Steak House Ten . . .

Jean and Moira

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I was through at the Edinburgh Festival in 1967 and finding that my money was rapidly dwindling and that I wasn't seeing all I wanted to see, looked for something that was happening in the afternoon to prevent me spending what I did have left on drink. In order to find something I collected a formidable array of "what's on where" brochures and went to the Traverse Theatre bar to search through them. At 3 o'clock when the bar should (I thought) have been closing and should have been getting emptier, I found it was becoming busier and people were sitting in every spare inch of floor and somebody was rigging up a P.A. system at the end of the bar; most of the people who were arriving, I must add, were pretty groovy. Adding to my surprise was the fact that Adrian Henri of Liverpool fame was walking up to the P.A. system with a collection of friends who were clutching such things as sheaves of paper, saxophones and guitars and that one of those clutching a guitar was Davy Graham. Somebody came round and collected 3s. from every-

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one and Adrian Henri introduced Davy Graham as "the resident maestro" and the latter began to play. It was a lovely set-up. Music then poetry, then music and poetry together, poets and musicians who represented mainly Liverpool, Newcastle or Edinburgh, plus lovely little surprises like John Martyn popping in for half-an-hour, etc. Needless to say I had found my afternoon's entertainment.

**N**OT very long after I came back to Glasgow I met two girls, Jean Watt and Moira O'Toole, who had heard me play somewhere and wondered if I was interested in helping them start a folk club somewhere. They were nice girls and turned on to the Liverpool poetry scene and the Incredible String Band which in 1967 was pretty turned on, and since I rather fancied a shot at something "a la Traverse bar", I was all ears. They had already permission from the manager of "Steak House Ten" in Gibson Street to use his coffee bar—beneath the Steak House—between 6.30 and 10.30 p.m. on Friday nights. It had a great atmosphere, skeletons in corners, stained glass windows, just the sort of place you dream of as being a perfect club.

I can't remember how long it took to attract crowds; I think at first we played mainly to ourselves and a few friends and charged 1s. entrance money, half of which went to the owner. Just by word of mouth news got around, more I imagine about the "Long John" as a place rather than the quality of the performances, but there were no artist/audience barriers and anyone who was interested in doing anything was very welcome. Traditional folk music we banned in order to prevent a drunken mob from the "Scotia" staggering along for fights and fun, but things really picked up and at the climax we had a really tremendous scene: Poetry by Tommy Cockburn and Bill Sweeney. Poetry and short stories by Hamish Paterson and contemporary folk from myself (Tom O'Hagan), Alan Tall, Eric Cuthbertson and Dave Schorstein. Hardly household names, I know, but anyone who came once, came regularly; the place was packed out making a very good social and artistic scene. Several things happened that ended it all. Jean and Moira had trouble with some of the guys who came and left, leaving the management side on the shoulders of some pretty shifty people who absconded with money and pushed soft drugs leading to fuzz raids, owners complaining and finally curtains. But for one year in one small part of Glasgow there was a real scene in contemporary folk. Nothing ever replaced the "Long John" and the people concerned drifted off on their own ways, but at least it proves that it could be done.

**O**NLY the Universities in the city are trying something in the contemporary scene, but they are disheartened by the lack of audiences. What happens to all these people who turn out for I.S.B. concerts, etc. and what do they do (apart from turn on) when they are not at these concerts? I set out intending to write about the Glasgow contemporary folk scene but after fruitless searching it appears to be non-existent. Tom McGrath started something called "Other People" in the Arts Council premises in Blythswood Square, but it needed great support to get off the ground. It happened every second Friday night and it was the only thing happening in Glasgow until it crashed last December.

I can only now finish with a plea to audiences and promoters. Audiences, give as much support as possible to a contemporary folk scene in the city. Promoters, specify in advertisements whether it is contemporary or trad' folk you are promoting ●

TOM O'HAGAN