

Twickenham Folk Club, The Cabbage Patch, on the Thames at Twickenham, Sunday, May 4th, 2008

Eric Andersen

The Cabbage Patch is at the foot of Twickenham Bridge. It's Sunday night, the pub is bustling after a game of rugger down the road this afternoon. A paint peeled sign outside advertises "Eric Andersen (USA)"

Squeezed between the roar of the weekend front bar and the ring of glasses and laughter out the back is a heavily curtained tiny room where meets the Twickenham Folk Club.

Things got underway with Wendy, an American, recalling Eric Andersen performing on the coffeehouse and bars circuit of New York's Greenwich Village many moons ago. Then like some warp to another time she sings a spirited Darcy Farrow whilst plucking banjo 'Peggy Seegar' style.

Wendy fumbles her final song, written by next week's guests, hailing all the way from Asheville in the Blue Ridge Mountains. What Would Woody Have Done a riposte it seems to the faithful's bumper sticker WWJHD (What Would Jesus Have Done?)

Linda Watkins and her bassist Godfrey Yeomans followed with a fine set of



Eric Anderson, fire, rain, wind and sand
www.ericandersen.com

originals and a classic Sandy Denny song from Fotheringay about Mary Queen of the Scots.

After a short break, there was a hushed expectancy about this sauna like room as Gerry Evans introduced Eric Andersen. Though he has



played the Cambridge Folk Festival back in the sixties and a couple times in London since this will be the opening night of Eric Andersen's first ever tour of England, Ireland and Scotland.

"They like my jokes," he smiles lifting his eyes to the clatter of glasses and conversation through curtained glass behind him. In that ten song first half I heard little snatches of the noise, some from the bar out front but it was blur,

my focus and the audience around me was on the performer.

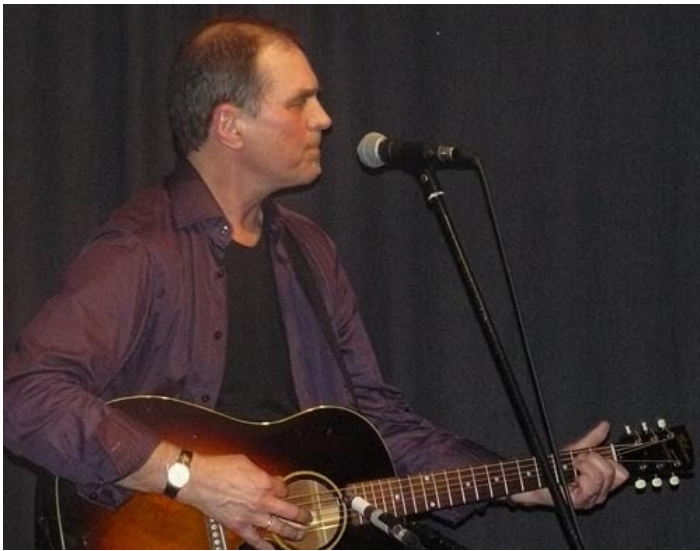
I have this thing about the intimacy of small back bars and songwriters pared down to the basics of their voice and a guitar, and tonight, rack harmonica and electric piano.

If a song stands up on bare boards it can go anywhere the songwriter wants to take it. And boy he took those songs out there tonight. I'm not going to give a blow by blow account of either the first set or the second, leave that kind of chronology to the professors of Grateful Dead set lists.

What I will say is that for his second song Eric Andersen put down his guitar and sat behind the piano and laid a haunted Wind and Sand upon us. Conjured the magic right there out of the ether.

What followed was a song to torch the rise of a new fascism in Europe and a fourth Reich. The ice cold chill of Rain in Amsterdam was as dark as Brecht's Fear and Misery of the Third Reich. Eric Andersen's guitar and words rang like a bell:

“. . . so keep your filthy swastikas and stuff your iron cross, here comes nineteen fourteen, nineteen



thirty two, those cattle cars and yellow stars, it's right back to the roots"

My blood froze. My mind went back to a friend Rod's story of his father and men of Southampton facing up to Moseley and the Black shirts and seeing them off before the long night of the Second World War changed the face of Europe.

A song like this should serve as a death knell to darkness but too often our preoccupations seem to be with the wider issues of saving the planet and weighing up the oil revenues. Songs like this in the sixties took hold of public consciousness and bent political will. Now its all 'rock bands with sushi chefs' at Al Gore concerts.

Eric Andersen drew upon the dark history of Holland's landscape later in the set. Salt On Your Skin was a deep wound from a love lost like reading Jack Hardy's piece on the fixation of poets to their muses. For all its despair the song was strangely beautiful:

"I've been so many places how do I begin, soon as its over it starts up again, all I remember of you as the memory grows thin is the tears in the dark and the salt, the salt on your skin."

A first treasure house of songs had also drawn on Eric Andersen's earlier material like Violets of Dawn and Close The Door Lightly When You Go. The tenth song would be a rollicking Everything Changed with a sardonic line "What was once Charles Bukowski is now Emily Dickenson." That cracked me up.

Sweating from the heat a bar towel was finally brought for him. Eric Andersen wiped his face, opened up the towel and translated 'Theakstons' beer to time for a break. The audience made straight for the cd table.

There was a buzz about the room and the shorter second set was again packed bar by bar with sheer class. The half dozen or so songs ran with rivers and rain in a flood of the heart. We might have been in New York or Clarksdale, Mississippi when Eric

Andersen settled down behind the piano to deliver two songs from his recent live album Blue Rain.

He told us he recorded it with a Scandinavian blues band who cut a deep enough groove to be booked at Morgan Freeman's Ground Zero joint in Clarksdale. I kept thinking about Rik Danko singing "Going Down The Road To See Bessie Smith". I thought of a remark by Hank Buekema made one night on the Hudson too. How songwriters of what Townes Van Zandt called 'the highway kind' have voices that become richer and deeper as their days grow longer. Sitting here listening to Eric Andersen play piano and sing brought that home to me.

As it got way past curfew and the energy from the bar and the yard out back stilled the buzz still held in this tiny sweat filled room. Eric Andersen began his penultimate song, that's the last one before the end I think, by drawing attention to "the greatest living folk singer in the world" as a fella who sings about the place of his birth, New York City. He stumped for Lou Reed whereas a few weeks back I heard Luka Bloom, Christy Moore's brother hold up the crown for Bob Marley. Me I still got my money on Duke Ellington.

No matter it was a great lead in to Eric Andersen's work with Lou Reed and a song called Can't Relive The Past which had the thrust of the Big Apple about it.

By now we were sixteen songs or so in Eric Andersen hung on his rack harmonica and filled his final song with that understated wail like a lamp waving from the Gaslight in the Village. As he struck the last chord on his guitar with the audiences applause ringing in his ear I thought of Rilke and the notion advanced by the great Scotch songwriter Jackie Leven about 'blood remembering'.

The way Rilke had it, the poet as a young man, or woman for that matter, collects a treasure house of experience through life which then is literally poured out in the blood of their poems.

Such it was tonight for a 'fleeting moment of time' this room rang with the words and music from an artist with 21 albums to his name and a life spent creating music from the twin vortexes of the San Francisco beats and 'Hoboken Saturday Nights' in Greenwich Village. And all places in between. Like the Cabbage Patch in Twickenham.

The renaissance continues. Don't miss Eric Andersen on this tour.

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