



John Richards, left, with his current band



John, left, with Bev Pegg and friends



John tells his life story in his cottage garden

# Icons have John's music style covered

## John Ogden meets John Richards

**T**HEY may not have seen him play before. They may not even recognise his name.

But when Wolverhampton's other famous John Richards sings, his audiences always join in the chorus, because his songs are known worldwide.

Says John: "You go into folk clubs and hear people singing them as though they are traditional songs almost, which is fantastic, because that's why I write 'em."

For him the gods he worshipped as a youngster have stepped down from Olympus and said: "We love your work, can we use it?" – none more so than Fairport Convention, who have done three versions of his song Honour And Praise.

Says John: "The most exciting moment ever for me was at the Credeney festival when Fairport did that song for the first time. There were about 15,000 people there, and though Fairport always announce that it's my song I still wanted to jump in the air and say: 'I wrote this, I wrote this,' because I bought my first Fairport album when I was 15, and I know the line-up has changed since then, but to have them record my stuff... I was on a high for days after that."

On a personal note I'm grateful to John to be grateful for revealing the existence of the Sodom Methodist Chapel (it's in Upper Ettingshall, apparently, but being minister there sounds like a job from The Life Of Brian).

John's mother was the granddaughter of John Starkey, landlord of the Black Horse at Sodom, and his grandfather was the chapel choirmaster, so John grew up in Coseley with music all around him.

"Dad was secretary of the Sunday school and bass singer, my Uncle Sam was an organist, Mum was a violinist and soprano, and I had uncles who were choirmasters and organists," he says.

Sent to his Uncle Harold for piano lessons, the five-year-old hated them, "but I developed the irritating habit of taking mum's violin, hanging it round my neck and strumming it, until they gave up and I got my first guitar aged 11.

Hearing that fellow chapel worshipper Chris Briscoe was teaching his two nephews to play the guitar, says John, "dad asked him if he'd show me some chords, and it was then that I realised that the years



John Richards shows John Ogden his specially-made bouzouki

with uncle Harold were not wasted at all, and three chords suddenly opened the door for a whole rack of stuff, and we formed a band, found a drummer, and became The Echo Four, when I was 14."

Though a West Bromwich band asked him to join them, he concentrated on his GCEs, "then, typical of a teenager, I decided I wanted a scooter, so I sold my Watkins Rapier 33 and amp and bought a Lambretta TV

175. I was a mod for a year, then sold the scooter, grew my hair, got some patched jeans, started going to the Catacombs club in Wolverhampton and bought an acoustic 12-string, and that was the start of it all."

He saw Free, Davie Bowie playing solo, Yes, and many blues-based bands, then a pal played him an Incredible String Band LP, "and that was the clincher for me."

He concentrated on acoustic music and started writing his own songs, then his geography teacher at High Arcal school persuaded him to play for the sixth form, "and that's what got me performing."

At Wednesbury College, studying accountancy, he was asked to run the folk club there, duetting with a pal called Trevor Bould, and meeting many other singers. At the same time Martin Carthy and The Watersons were making their mark and bands like Fairport were combining folk and electrical

music – "wonderful times really."

Working for John Thompson, Richard answered an Express & Star ad for a finger-style guitarist/singer/songwriter and met Bev Pegg, who had a studio in his Kinver garage, "and we recorded two albums, then I met Mike Tinsley, a fine mandolin player and we opened a club at the Saracen's Head, Dudley.

"We started to book bigger names, including Robin Dransfield, and when he heard my song Did You Like The Battle, Sir? he said: 'Do you mind if I cover that' and that was the start of it all."

Later top duo Show Of Hands, featuring first Paul Downes and Phil Beer, then Beer and Steve Knightley, recorded the song after hearing Robin's version, and Paul has since recorded half a dozen of John's songs.

After the duo merged with Kidderminster's Greenmantle to form Springheel Jack, John's next band was Wolverhampton's Ivor Smallpiece Band, and when they split into two, John's half called themselves Maurice and The Minors, who despite the name turbo-charged his writing career.

They went to Dave Pegg's studio, where Fairport and Jethro Tull have recorded – "It was exciting just to be there to be honest," says John – and made a cassette called One Lady Owner. His only song on it was Honour And Praise, "but

Dave Pegg said: 'Would you mind if Fairport covered this?' and I was delighted, then Simon Nicol asked me to send him any new stuff."

Simon recorded The Deserter on a solo album, then Fairport recorded it, and on their 35th anniversary they rearranged it and did it again, then last year it was released by Michael Black, "so 20 years on it's still going strong – five other people have recorded it."

After another cassette, Bodywork Needs Attention, the group cut their first LP, Run By The Moon, which contained five of John's songs, and Nicol, Fairport, Paul Downes and John's long-time pal Bill Caddick all recorded cover versions, and they were sung in folk clubs nationwide.

After the band split up, John formed Desperate Men a good-time folk-rock band, which lasted for 13 years, at the end of which, in 2001 he recorded an acoustic album of his best songs.

Behind The Lines, saw Roaring Water Bay covered by Show of Hands, then Shine On by Tom McConville from Newcastle, and the latw Johnny Collins.

The album featured, among other guests, Chris Drinan on flute and whistles and bassist Jim Sutton, from the Maurice days, plus John's daughter Emma, who had joined him in Desperate Men, "and that got me into thinking I ought to put a new acoustic line-up together."

After a four-track EP called If You Can Walk You Can Dance, made with Emma, Wolverhampton sax, bass and guitar player Mat Taylor, and fiddler Emily Sanders, he formed The John Richards Band with Chris, Jim and Emma, plus accordion player Allie Fellows.

By that time John and family had bought a cottage in Devon, where his song about the coastal village Hallsands, which was swept away after massive offshore dredging, was used by Radio Devon to introduce plays about the disaster.

The song was from the band's Walls Of Hope CD, while If You Can Walk You Can Dance was covered by Bram Taylor, who later covered Foundryman's Daughter, from the band's last LP, For Love Nor Money.

Says John: "Each time I get an album out I get a cover from somebody and that keeps me very satisfied – the more people who sing my songs, the happier I am."