

# Chesterfield Folk Club

Folk, Acoustic, Blues & Contemporary Concerts



## Review: Chesterfield Folk Club - Cathryn Craig & Brian Willoughby /Tom Chester

Concert: Friday September 13<sup>th</sup> 2019



It's Friday 13<sup>th</sup>, David Bateson has left me in charge of the Folk Club, as he's away in holiday. All the omens are therefore inauspicious in the extreme. Nevertheless, a fantastic evening was had by all and, despite my best efforts, the Folk Club remains unbroken and intact.

Sheffield's Tom Chester was our opening 'local' support act. He's a regular participant in a number of music evenings and open mics in the South Yorkshire and Chesterfield area. He plays in several bands – Southbound, The Call and Pluck. He even has a range of Auden guitars named after him. Whoa! That's cool. That's going to be my new life's ambition. I can see it now. The "Beardy Old Git" range by Seagull.

Tom Chester – photo by Patrick Scott

Tom started his set safely with Richard Thompson's *Keep Your Distance* – a song so beautiful that you could play it on a coal scuttle and still move people to tears. He assayed more adventurous terrain with some blues and fingerpickin' (hooray) in *Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out*. He then played us a particularly thought-provoking song – *Keep Your Dirty Lights On*, by Tim O'Brien. In my experience, folk singers love to sing mining songs about the grim romance of coal and how those bastard Tories have shut down the pits. They also love to sing about the glories of nature and how we humans have despoiled it. And they typically fail to observe the gaping chasm of cognitive dissonance that comes with that territory. *Keep Your Dirty Lights On* bridges that chasm very elegantly, being a song that is both about coal mining and how we depend on it – but also about the filthy consequences of that addiction ("coal is cheap but coal's still black - it ain't never turning green"). Tom sang and

played it beautifully. He went on to treat us to excellent chugging railroad blues, *Blue and Lonesome*, and then possibly my favourite song of his repertoire – Hayes Carll’s “*She Left Me for Jesus*”. The premise is a redneck American lamenting the departure of his girlfriend for some guy called Jesus – (“*If I ever find Jesus, I’m kickin’ his ass*” ..... “*I’ll bet he’s a commie – or worse yet a Jew*”). Tom was a burst of fresh air to someone like me who, frankly, hears probably a bit too much dreary, wistful folk music. Tom served us a healthy and bracing dose of Americana, country and blues – and finished off his set with the Smokey Robinson / Temptations Motown number, *My Girl*.

It’s with deep shame that I have to confess that I, like many others, had not previously come across the duo of Cathryn Craig and Brian Willoughby. I was vaguely aware that Brian had played with The Strawbs, but that was about the extent of my knowledge. So, I had to do a bit of digging to be able to introduce the duo with some semblance of credibility. And blimey...actually, well, missus.... they have a pretty damn impressive c.v. Brian started playing professionally in the late 1960s and has indeed enjoyed a long-term association with the Strawbs and Dave Cousins. But he’s also had an impressive career as a session guitarist, having collaborated with Mary Hopkin, Monty Python and ‘Reckless’ Johnny Wales (wow...reckless!). He met Cathryn in the late 1990s in Nashville and has been duetting with her since then. Cathryn is from Virginia, US of A, and has had her own fair share of impressive collaborations, most notably with Righteous Brother Bill Medley and with Gary Hall. She’s also appeared on albums by the Strawbs and Nanci Griffith.



Brian Willoughby and Cathryn Craig - photo by Patrick Scott

The sound at Chesterfield Folk Club is normally pretty damn spectacular... partly due to the Library Theatre’s excellent acoustics and also partly due to the proficiency of the Club’s sound engineers, Steve Swallow and Geoff Deighton. But tonight’s concert, in our humble opinion,

set new levels of sonic excellence. Cathryn and Brian sounded *fab*. And this was all the more pleasing because the sound check was relatively straightforward. Moreover, Brian wasn't playing super-posh guitars – he was playing Takamines and Yamahas. And also, he played them through a small, mic'ed up – well, I hesitate to call it a practice amp – but it was impressively tiny and produced a very pure sound. Enough geeky stuff, Dave. Stop.

Cathryn and Brian played a couple of blinding sets of songs, with Brian focussing on smooth and beautiful guitar-work, while Cathryn accompanied on guitar and took charge of vocal duties – and what a clear, powerful voice she has! They played us *That Ol' Guitar*. They played us their own motorbike song, *Malahide Moon*. They played us *These Old Stone Walls*, about the stories the walls of an old Irish cottage could tell if only they had ears. Brian impressed us with his sonic screwdriver – an electrical device that causes the guitar strings to resonate Theremin-like. They played us *For Martha*, a song about a homeless woman who used to hang around a California music studio. They played us [Mr Jefferson](#) – sung from the point of view of the illegitimate child of Thomas Jefferson and his slave (“*I never understood what she does for him*”). Brian played us a bloomin' lovely instrumental (actually, why only one? More please!) and regaled us with Roger Whittaker anecdotes. And the great songs kept on coming after the interval – I particularly liked [Alice's Song](#), which tells, with quite a rare degree of insight, how difficult it is to understand life from the point of view of an autistic child (“*why it's so hard to win a place in Alice's heart*”) and ends up with the well-known refrain of “*How I wonder what you are?*”. Brian and Cathryn not only treated us to the Righteous singalong “*You've Lost that Lovin' Feeling*”, but also to a number of Irish songs, which seem especially relevant in these Brexit-riven times: *The Past is Gone* (“*Building bridges is harder than building walls*”) and *The Cooley the Mourne* (“*May peace not come undone*”).

Amen to that.

“*The Cooley and Mourne*” is also the title of their latest album..... <http://www.craigandwilloughby.com/albums/cooley-mourne.htm> - named after the two ranges of mountains, one in Northern Ireland and one in the Republic, that cradle the couple's new home.

You're probably familiar with overblown quotes from artists' websites reading something like - “*xxxx is possibly the greatest living singer and blues guitarist performing in Scotland*”. It was with wry amusement that I noticed the top quote from the Cathryn Craig / Brian Willoughby website - “*One of Spalding Folk Club's Favourite Acts*”. We can only conclude that Spalding Folk Club have bloody good taste and Chesterfield Folk Club can heartily concur in their assessment!

Despite my shameful lack of familiarity with Brian and Cathryn's material, the evening's concert definitely found a place in my pantheon of favourite folk-club gigs. Merely a shame that the audience was not a bit bigger. Go see them next time round – you won't regret it.

*Review by Dave Banks for Chesterfield Folk Club*