

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Grumpy Old Rock Star

Rick Wakeman

CONTENTS

About the Authors

About the Book

Title Page

Note

Introduction

My life as a Russian doll

Ever been conned?

'Bruddy hell, they done it again!'

'Help yourself, tuck in'

Drink like a fish, smoke like a chimney

The journey of the humping dinosaurs

The healthiest man on earth

Herr Schmidt's fishing trip

The victor, the consul and the roller

A bloody nice curry

'Probably best to book it in your name, Rick'

The tin-bath technique and the small-hours hooker

Gone but not forgotten

The police were very good about it

'Have I done something wrong here, gentlemen?'

'No, Mr Wakeman, six months to live'

'I've got Che Guevara in the shed'

'Hello, Rick, I'm Ronnie Biggs'

Epilogue

Acknowledgements

Illustration Credits

Picture Section

Index

Copyright

ABOUT THE BOOK

Around about August 1948, Mr and Mrs Cyril Wakeman had an early night and some time later, at Perivale in Middlesex, Mrs Wakeman produced a bonny baby son. They named him Richard, but he quickly became known as Rick.

Rick was a likable little fellow who had a talent for the piano and for making trouble, and music became Rick's life. Later he joined a popular music group called Yes and became a legend. Much later he became a Grumpy Old Man who appears on *Countdown*, hosts a hugely popular radio show on *Planet Rock* and performs a one-man show telling stories about his rather extraordinary life.

Which is where this book you are holding comes in. Mr Wakeman is simply one of the great storytellers of our age - let's face it, he has some fabulous material. It seemed a shame that some of the funniest yarns should not be more widely known. So he accepted some cash and here we are.

Curl up by the fire with a *Grumpy Old Rock Star* and your nearest and dearest. We defy you not to want to read it aloud and laugh.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rick Wakeman is the most gifted keyboard player of his generation, as at home onstage at a rock concert as in the organ loft of a great cathedral. As keyboard player for the 70s super-group Yes his extraordinary live tours and multimillion-selling albums are legendary. He has also appeared on *Top Gear* achieving a lamentable lap time of 1.55.26.

Martin Roach, who collaborated with Rick Wakeman on this book, is a five-time *Sunday Times* best-selling author who has written more than a hundred books on music, entertainment and youth culture.

GRUMPY OLD ROCK STAR

AND OTHER
WONDROUS STORIES

By Rick Wakeman

with Martin Roach



preface
publishing

I actually consider myself extremely fortunate to still be alive after all I've been through (well at the time of writing this dedication in June 2008 I was still alive anyway), and therefore be able to share some of my tales of the 'unexpected', 'inexplicable' and 'unbelievable' adventures as both a musician and a grumpy old man.

So many of my musician friends that I grew up with and worked alongside are sadly no longer with us, and so it is to all of them that I dedicate this book, as in their own way, they have all contributed greatly to my becoming a Grumpy Old Rock Star, of which I am immensely proud!

INTRODUCTION

Simple maths ...

On the day this book is published I will have been a professional musician for forty years.

People who know me well, know that nothing 'ordinary' ever happens to me and a 'Spinal Tap' tale of one sort or another will always seem to come about whether I am on the road touring, in the studio recording or just simply walking down the road!

So where does the maths come into it?

Well working on the very conservative estimate that at least three ludicrous things happen to me every year, then a simple calculation will tell you that at least 120 completely farcical events have happened in my life since 1968.

Work backwards through my semi-pro years, college and my schooldays and you've just added at least another hundred such stories.

Therefore, the final maths sum will tell you that potentially, this book is the first of a possible twenty volume set.

I never did like maths much.

MY LIFE AS A RUSSIAN DOLL

YOU KNOW THOSE Russian dolls, the ones that are made to fit inside each other? Well, I was one of those once.

Funnily enough, it was in Russia.

Music has gifted me the opportunity to travel all over the world – touring with Yes, taking my own solo shows around the globe, promotional trips abroad, it's a lot of air miles. And I've come back with as many bizarre experiences as I have souvenirs. On one occasion it was the souvenir itself that put me in a very peculiar situation indeed.

I was booked to do a TV show in Moscow, deep behind the Iron Curtain. The trip was right in the middle of the Cold War, and East/West relations were not good. I'd travelled there before and loved the country – I used to come home with my suitcase crammed full of souvenirs. With \$20 in cash, you could buy the world. The kids and family all loved the red T-shirts with the hammer and sickle on them, the woolly fur hats ... standard tourist fayre.

Luckily, the customs officers at the airport tended to turn a blind eye to all this black-market stuff.

Apart from the KGB uniform I bought from a total stranger in a dark alleyway.

What's all this got to do with a Russian doll, you say? Bear with me ...

My hotel was typical of the type used by Westerners. Police guards on the main doors and barricades outside. You were told there were places you could go, places you couldn't, things you could do, things you couldn't.

Admittedly, it could be quite difficult because the British and American politicians didn't trust the Russians and the Russian politicians didn't trust the British or Americans.

I loved the Russians and got on with them great. The TV show went very well and myself and the band had a lovely time. It was only after the filming that things started to get complicated.

It was no secret that the Russian black market couldn't get enough dollars. The buck could buy you anything, and I mean *anything*! Funnily enough, the dollar bills themselves had to be crease-free, in absolute mint condition. They also needed to be low denominations, one or two dollars ideally.

This one particular day I slipped a dollar into the hand of the policeman on guard at the door of my hotel and went off wandering. It was *freezing*, properly cold. I was wearing this absolutely huge coat I'd bought in America which was like a rancher's coat – it was massive. As I trotted off down the street, I looked like Mr Blobby crossed with J. R. Ewing. Any Westerners wandering around certain dingy backstreet lanes were so easy to spot and with my hair, height and rancher's coat I was like a beacon of the West crunching loudly through the snow. It wasn't long before I was approached by a very suspicious-looking character who'd clearly bought his battered old brown suitcase from Arthur Daley or Del Boy Trotter. Most of these characters actually knew me because, as I've said, I'd been over a few times and was always a willing customer. You'd walk along a main street and from the shadows of a dark alley you'd hear, 'Mr Wakeman, over here, you buy T-shirt?' These 'entrepreneurs' would then open some dusty old suitcase and offer you perhaps five T-shirts for a dollar. They weren't exactly the finest quality but I always bought quite a few and enjoyed our little chats.

However, on this occasion, it wasn't a paper-thin T-shirt that I was offered.

It was a genuine KGB uniform.

Out of a suitcase.

From a complete stranger down a back alley, off the beaten track in the middle of Cold War-entrenched Moscow.

Don't ask me why, but when this man whispered for me to go down this shadowy dead end to look at what would obviously be illegal merchandise, for some reason unknown to my right-thinking mind I did. He huddled behind a wall and opened up his case, saying, 'Here, KGB uniform. Is good.'

I knew this was playing with fire. Being in possession of a KGB artefact or uniform was considered a very serious crime.

I knew all of this.

However, it was a really very splendid uniform.

Splendid.

At first I assumed it was a fake and I told him so. He was having none of it.

'No, really, this is KGB. My brother's uniform. I got hat too.'

'But how do I know it's real?'

'It was my brother's. He was in KGB and then ... he ... er ... left.'

'Right. And how the hell am I supposed to get this thing back to my hotel room?'

'You take off big coat, put on KGB uniform underneath, put big coat over top and put hat in bag - nobody know.'

'How much?'

'Five dollar.'

'Done.'

I took off my *Dallas* coat, furtively changed into this long KGB greatcoat and, with my fingers struggling to grasp the buttons in the cold, put my own coat over the top. Looking like a blimp, I started to walk away, back towards the main road.

'Mr Wakeman ...' It was the same guy, shuffling after me.

‘What?’

‘You want to buy admiral’s jacket?’

Great. I couldn’t resist.

He opened up his case again.

‘It’s splendid, very nice. How do I know it’s real?’

‘Is really real, this is actual admiral jacket. It was my other brother. He was an admiral and then ... er ... he wasn’t.’

‘You’ve got a lot of family in the military, haven’t you?’

‘Er, yes, well, er, I did have.’

‘Right, and how do you suggest I get this back to the hotel as well?’

‘Is easy. You take off coat, put admiral’s jacket over KGB one of my other brother, then put your coat over top.’

At least I wasn’t going to be cold.

He took this admiral’s uniform out of his suitcase and it really was beautiful, resplendent with these magnificent shiny buttons and badges. Every bone in my body was telling me I was sailing a little too close to the wind, but it certainly was a splendid uniform.

‘How much?’

‘Eight dollar.’

‘Done.’

By the time I’d got changed again I made Pavarotti look like Twiggy. I could barely walk down the alleyway without turning sideways. I’m thinking, *This is absolutely preposterous*. I got back to the hotel and the guard on the door just laughed out loud when he saw me. I slipped him a dollar and he didn’t care any more. He just carried on chuckling as this six-foot-plus multi-layered Russian doll with blond hair waddled across the foyer.

Sweating and rather breathless, I got back to my room and peeled off all these layers, then laid the two uniforms neatly out on the bed, next to the dolls and T-shirts I’d also ended up buying. The uniforms were really very splendid. However, scary visions of decades of hard labour in a

Siberian prison camp were giving me severe doubts about the wisdom of trying to smuggle these things out of the country. I felt lucky not to have got caught wearing them in the street and I was just anxious to get back home. So, despite the absolute logic of my sensible purchasing decision, it was with a heavy heart that I decided to leave the uniforms behind.

At this point the phone rang. It was someone from the TV company; they still had our passports, which needed exit visas stamped in them. Bloody visas. Me and visas have never really got on very well, but I'll tell you more about that later. As soon as I heard his voice, I thought to myself, *Please don't let there be a problem with the visas.*

'Mr Wakeman, I'm sorry but there is a problem with the visas.'

Great.

'But I have been assured that the visas will be ready for your Aeroflot flight home in the morning.'

I put the phone down and started to head off for some food but, with my anxiety levels escalating, I turned back to my bed and carefully folded the uniforms up in my suitcase. Then, just in case a maid – or someone else – came into my room while I was away, I locked the case and hid it under the bed. Best to play safe.

The next morning there was no sign of the passports at the hotel. I called the TV company and they assured me that the visas would be waiting for me at the airport. By now I was in a right state – all I wanted to do was go home, all I could think about was my passport, my exit visa and how I desperately did not want to miss my flight. I headed off to the airport with hours to spare. Back in those days, Russian airports were like some throwback to a railway station in the 1920s, and the ticket desks were just little wooden holes in the wall with pale undernourished faces behind them. Very few Russians flew so these decrepit buildings were often a hive of Westerners. I explained my

situation and that I had been assured the passports plus visas would be waiting for us in time for our flight.

No sign of the passports.

Great.

I sat down on this old wooden bench with the rest of the band while people made enquiries. There were no telephones, we didn't know anyone and our flight-departure time was getting worryingly close. My mind was a whirl with what to do about these visas. We sat there for an eternity ... but no news.

Then our flight left.

Without us on board.

Just after we realised the plane had gone, a sternly dressed man in a dark suit walked over to me. Without introduction he said, 'Mr Wakeman, can you come with me, please?'

Of course, I complied and followed him into this tiny office. He was Head of Security at the airport. In the corner was a little cabinet with a very old kettle on it, next to a small table - not even as big as a desk - and his chair to one side. We could barely both fit in the room. It smelled musty and very 1950s. He introduced himself as Igor - I kid you not - with a second name I couldn't understand but it did end in 'kov', and said, 'Sit, please, sit. Mr Wakeman, you did not go when your plane left. Why is this?'

I said that we didn't have our passports or visas and explained at length all the problems we'd had. He said there was an unscheduled British Airways flight stopping at the airport that afternoon and he could arrange to get us on that. He took the phone number of the TV station that had our passports and said he would make some calls and get the visas sorted. Then he instructed me to buy these new plane tickets while I waited. I was sent to some Finnish airline with an even smaller office. Bizarrely, they accepted my AmEx card and gave me four scraps of paper that looked like old betting slips but were, apparently,

plane tickets. When I looked at my credit card receipt ... it was for \$2,000! This was a small fortune back then, but by this stage I didn't care.

When I got back to Igor's office he was on the phone to the TV company; he appeared to be quite irate with them and had explained that I was now \$2,000 down because of their problems with the visas. The TV guy came on the phone, apologised profusely and said, 'I have your passports and I have your visas. I come over now. I will bring \$2,000 in an envelope for you to airport ...'

'No! You can't do that - I'm supposed to leave the country with the same currency I came in with. That's worth about a billion roubles ... they'll never let me out.' By this point, I was waiting for novelist Len Deighton's spy character Harry Palmer to walk through the door. Or Michael Caine, who played Palmer in the movies.

The passports finally arrived with visas stamped in them. Igor was visibly relieved and he said to me, 'OK, I think everything sorted. Tickets, passports, visa ... I will offer my help to get you through customs quick but you need to tell me if you have like Russian dolls or any T-shirts, that kind of thing. Do you have anything that you shouldn't have in the suitcase, Mr Wakeman?'

It was at this point that, for the very first time that day, I realised that in my rush to get to the airport I hadn't taken out the KGB and Soviet admiral uniforms, which were folded neatly in the suitcase that nestled between my legs, next to Igor's table, in that small 1970s office, in that decrepit airport, in Cold War Russia, thousands of miles from home.

'Er, yes, well, there are a couple of little things, yes.'

'OK, what like, dolls, yes? You like Russian dolls?'

'Er, no.'

Igor opened the suitcase and looked in. His face went as white as the snow that was tumbling onto the tundra outside.

‘Mr Wakeman, what is this?’

‘It’s an authentic KGB uniform, I believe.’

‘Yes, I know it is KGB uniform, Mr Wakeman, but what is it doing here?’

‘It’s a cracking uniform,’ I offered, clawing for some hope.

‘Is not possible, Mr Wakeman. No one has those uniforms.’

‘But they are real, they belonged to this chap’s brother ... er ... and he was in the KGB and ... er ... then he left.’

Igor leaned across the table and said, ‘Rick, *nobody* leaves KGB.’ He put the tips of his fingers in a pyramid of anxiety and sat thinking for a few moments. Then he said, ‘OK, here is what we do. I may be able to help you but you must help me, Rick.’

At that moment, I could think of very little I wouldn’t do to ‘help’ him – I could almost smell the gruel they served at the Siberian labour camp.

‘Anything, sir, I’ll do anything. What is it you want?’

‘Some records by Led Zeppelin. And The Who, yes?’

I don’t think I’ve ever been so relieved in my life. I was in a very serious situation and yet here was something so trivial and easy for me to get hold of that could remedy everything.

‘My friend, I can get you records by anybody you like!’

‘Even The Yes?’

‘Yes, even The Yes.’

He quietly explained that Lufthansa trucks were able to travel across East/West borders relatively unchecked and that was how we would be able to get him the records. I promised him I would send all the records he wanted and he hastily scribbled out a list. He then escorted me to the metal detector at customs and whispered in my ear, ‘Do not worry, Rick, KGB long coat is just cloth, it will not set off metal detector.’

'No, it won't, sir, but the badges and buttons on the admiral's uniform in there might.'

He went white again.

'Not possible, Rick. How? Wait, let me guess: same man?'

'Same man. His other brother. He was an admiral and then ... er ... he wasn't.'

'I see. Follow me.'

It couldn't get much worse.

But it did.

As we were walking across the airport with these two highly illegal uniforms in a case that was about to be smuggled through customs by a security man from the KGB himself, a man from the TV company came running across and said, 'Rick, Rick, I have your passports and visas and I have got your \$2,000!!! I am good man, I make my word, Rick!!!' and promptly handed me a huge brown-paper bag stuffed full of one-and two-dollar bills.

Quick as a flash, Igor said, 'Hide it.'

I had to think fast. I looked at my three travelling companions from the band and they were like, 'We're having nothing to do with this!' so I stuffed the money down my pants and into my socks.

Best I could do.

When I looked up, the customs officers were just standing there across the hall, watching me.

I have to tell you, laugh as I might now, I was shitting myself.

Then, like a dead man walking, I trudged up to the customs desk. I handed them my ticket, exit visa and passport. The guy started to grumble something but then Igor took him into a little booth and whispered something in his ear. The customs man came back and waved me and my contraband suitcase straight through, unchecked.

Next up was the currency desk where they examined your money. Including, in my case, \$2,000 from a brown-

paper envelope shoved down my pants. I looked up – and I mean up – at a woman who made Giant Haystacks look feminine. She said, ‘You came in with \$100 and £130 sterling and you changed £30 into roubles and so you need to leave with £100 sterling and \$100. Or do you have any other currency on your person that you wish to tell me about?’

I was standing there, literally bloated with dollar bills rammed down every crevice and the odd orifice. Two minutes earlier, she’d watched me stuff all this money into my trousers.

‘Er, no, no.’

Cue Igor and his little whisper in the ear and, once again, I was waved through. Within five minutes I was sitting on a virtually empty plane, struggling to fit into the seat with all these dollars spilling out of my pockets and more intimate regions of my trousers. After a few minutes, a stewardess came over to me and said, ‘We are actually only here for refuelling, Mr Wakeman, we are not supposed to take passengers on board here. I’ve heard you had some fun and games – you must have a story to tell ...’

‘Yes, you could say that. And one day I might be able to tell it.’

EVER BEEN CONNED?

LONG BEFORE KGB uniforms, TV shows in Russia, before Yes, before touring the world, prog rock and all that jazz, I was just a kid who loved music and playing the piano. As Louis Armstrong once said, 'It's a wonderful world,' but for a naive sixteen-year-old trying to break through into the music business in the 1960s I don't think he was referring to the wonderful world of showbiz management.

At that age you have so much to learn.

Here's one of my very first lessons - how I met, worked for and subsequently wasn't paid by one of the greatest music-biz managers of all time.

In the mid-1960s radio was in the grip of a so-called 'non-needle time' controversy. With the explosion of vinyl sales and the prevalence of records rather than live tunes being played on the radio, the Musicians' Union were very worried that musicians were being forced out of work. They campaigned vehemently against this and, consequently, it was agreed that on Radio 1 there had to be a certain amount of what was christened 'non-needle time' - namely the broadcast of live bands rather than just vinyl. It's absolutely true, strange as it may seem now. DJs like Jimmy Young (who I think is about 128 now) would play the hits of the day and, every now and then, would have to throw in a live track. To be fair, although it sounds archaic now the practical reality was that this regulation did indeed create work for live musicians.

One of the most renowned 'non-needle time' artists was a great singer called James Royal. He was managed by Mr Mervyn Conn who, sadly, is no longer with us. To this day,

Mervyn's moniker remains the most appropriate I've ever come across in the business.

Mervyn Conn ... because so many of us were conned.

Despite this apparent managerial handicap, James Royal had made himself one of the most used non-needle-time artists around; it got to the point where James Royal and the Royal Set were getting more phone-in requests than artists with big record deals. I later found out that a large majority of these fan letters came from James's mum. She lived in south Ealing but wrote dozens of letters to the BBC – to avoid suspicion, she first mailed these letters to her friends around the country who posted them in from distant addresses to avoid detection. Before long, between his mum and the large amount of genuine fan mail and requests he received, James Royal was the most requested person on the radio anywhere in the world.

Where did I fit into all this and how did my path cross with that of Mervyn Conn?

Well, my path to James Royal's door came via the Red Lion pub in Brentford, a great, old-school rock 'n' roll pub where musicians from all over the place used to congregate and jam together on a Thursday and Friday night. Loads of amazing players, like John Entwistle (from The Who) and James Royal. For me, as a sixteen-year-old hopeful, it was an incredible privilege to play alongside the likes of these people. I used to go down there in my mate's battered old Land Rover with my battered old Hammond in the back and spend all night playing with these big-name session musicians. I just loved it.

James Royal was a really nice guy and I was very flattered one day when he said, 'Would you like to come in and play a Radio 1 session with me?'

I nearly fell over in shock.

'And here's a list of the session guys who'll be playing with you ...'

It was just about every top name I admired.

‘And you’ll get paid £2 a session.’

I was in heaven. You could fill your car up with petrol in those days for £1.

When the day came I made my way excitedly to the old underground Maida Vale Studios in London which were made famous during the Second World War. It was a fantastic little labyrinth, with a tiny control booth and recording room. They recorded each live session direct onto quarter-inch tape – there was no mixing, it was done as quick as that. I say ‘live’, they would actually bring in about half a dozen musicians who’d play together for around three hours, performances which were recorded and then used for the non-needle time. For some reason, there was always a woman sitting in the corner knitting. With cotton wool stuffed in her ears.

Later, I asked why she was there and it turned out that her presence was a throwback to the war. Apparently, during the conflict there had been a shortage of skilled producers and technicians, largely because they were all being killed in action, I suppose. So the BBC had brought in a lot of women to do what had previously been seen as ‘men’s jobs’. These women were given permanent contracts so after the war finished the BBC had little choice but to keep them on. These old women would sit in the corner of the studio with their ears blocked against the ‘noise’ of the band ... and knit.

Anyway, my first session went very well and, thankfully, James was really pleased with my playing. I was delighted to be asked back and before I could catch my breath I’d done six weeks of sessions. I couldn’t believe my luck. It was great fun.

Then I realised that I hadn’t yet been paid. I broached the subject with James and he told me that his manager looked after that side of things.

It was time to go and meet Mervyn Conn.

His office was up near Leicester Square, so I filled up my little Ford Anglia – you'll learn more about this legendary automobile later – and drove to London for the very first time. I shat myself – I'd never seen so much traffic in my life and had no idea where I was going. Although I only lived five miles or so outside London, it was in a quiet leafy suburb surrounded by fields and it might as well have been another planet. I vividly remember heading along the A40, my mind a blur, as the chaos of the city enveloped me.

Somehow, I eventually found Mervyn Conn's office, right in the middle of the West End. I walked up to the door which had a little sign bearing the inscription – no word of a lie – 'Mervyn Conn Artists'. At the top of a very narrow staircase there was a small reception area with a girl sitting behind a desk.

I nervously said, 'I've come to see Mr Conn. I'm Ricky Wakeman.' (People used to call me Ricky in those days. An early girlfriend said it sounded more American and cool because Richard sounded like an old fart's name. Perhaps I should be called Richard again now?)

So ...

'What band are you from?'

'James Royal and the Royal Set.'

She went through a door to her left and closed it behind her. Then I heard her say, 'I've got a Rocky Wigwam outside, says he wants to see you.'

'Send him in.'

I was very nervous as I sat down opposite Mervyn Conn. He was sitting behind an enormous old oak desk, flanked by four walls crammed with gold discs. I remember thinking to myself, *Wow! I've hit the big time!* He was very friendly.

'I've heard all about you, Rocky.'

'Er, it's Ricky, Mr Conn.'

‘Yes, I’ve heard all about you, Ricky.’ He clearly hadn’t got a bloody clue who I was or why I was there. ‘I’ve heard all about what a great player you are.’

‘Thank you, Mr Conn.’

‘James speaks very highly of you and tells me you are one of the country’s best young guitar players.’

‘I play the organ, Mr Conn.’

‘Yes, one of the country’s best young organ players.’

‘I’ve been told to come here to collect my session wages. Six sessions at £2 a session which makes £12, Mr Conn.’

‘They are fabulous sessions, aren’t they? Very popular too, you know ...’

I just kept saying ‘Yes’ and ‘Thank you very much’ to pretty much anything that came out of Mervyn Conn’s mouth. He kept talking and then suddenly stood up from behind his gigantic desk. Automatically, I stood up too. Mervyn was smaller than I thought, so when he came around by my side he had to reach up to put his arm round my shoulder. He slowly walked me to the door and said, ‘You have a great, great future, Rocky ...’

‘Ricky.’

‘Yes, a great, great future, Ricky. From what I hear, you are going to be up there with all the big names.’

‘Thank you, Mr Conn.’

As we stood in reception next to the girl on the front desk, he took my hand in both of his and said, ‘Any time you need to chat to me, you know where I am, come and see me.’

Then he turned, walked through into his office and shut the door.

I smiled at the girl, delighted by how well the meeting had gone, and made my way down the narrow staircase. I strolled to my car and, just as I was getting in, thought, *I haven’t got my money!* I walked back up the street, back to the office door, up the narrow staircase and into reception.

‘Can I see Mr Conn again, please?’ I said.

'I'm afraid he's gone out to a meeting.'

I'd literally been out of the office for thirty seconds.

'When will he be back, please?'

'In a week.'

'Oh. So how can I get hold of him?'

'Just give him a ring.'

I rang for weeks and weeks but never got through.

Mervyn Conn.

I never got paid.

I took a view on it: I was young, inexperienced and here was a chance to play sessions for the BBC with some of the world's top players. The £12 would have been wonderful but I still thought I was doing well.

Years later, I bumped into James and we were laughing about Mervyn and the non-needle-time days. These revered veterans had a genuine affection for those days and felt privileged to have learned so much from them.

'You know, James, I never got paid ...'

'You know what, Rick? Nobody did!'

How did a sixteen-year-old come to be playing in a pub with some of the country's best musicians, you ask? It is a tawdry tale of crap equipment, a riot and an alcoholic baptism of fire, so bear with me ...

By the time I was getting 'paid' work from Mervyn Conn I was already the veteran of several working bands. Let me tell you first about the fabulously titled Atlantic Blues. Back when I first started, being a pianist posed a practical problem for simple monetary reasons. You could pick up a guitar for about a fiver, but a little electronic piano would set you back about £50 or £60. Given that the average weekly wage was about £14, and my pocket money was 25p in today's money, this was an astronomical cost. Also, there was no affordable or readily available form of amplification for electronic pianos, so even if you did save up for one the

chances were that no one would be able to hear you anyway. The practical repercussion of all these problems was that you ended up making do by playing old-fashioned acoustic pianos.

Quite often, the line-up of a band was decided more by what gear someone owned than by their actual musical ability. For years, it was said that Bill Wyman first joined the Rolling Stones because he had more equipment than the rest of them. Ken Holden from the Atlantic Blues was the same, although that's where the similarities between us and the Stones ended. Ken was, by his own admittance, a pretty inadequate drummer behind a full kit, yet oddly, due to him being in the Boys' Brigade, he was a brilliant snare drummer. He was aware of this foible and even tried to make up a kit out of a Boys' Brigade snare and a bass drum, but he only had one cymbal. Then he upped the ante by purchasing a Gigster drum kit – it only cost £12 from Woolworth's and was the cheapest, nastiest, flimsiest kit imaginable. It was so weak that when you hit the foot pedal the bass drum actually went completely oval. On average it took just over twelve seconds to assemble. I believe they are quite valuable nowadays because so many of them didn't last. Back then, they were shambolically poor but *it was a kit* so Ken was suddenly in demand. Ken was very like Keith Moon – not in terms of his drumming ability, God no, but due to the fact that he was totally unaware of anything else going on around him.

Then he pulled a masterstroke.

He bought a van.

Never mind: do you want to be in the band? If you had a van, it was your band!

With Ken's friend Derek on bass guitar, myself on piano, Ken on drums and a really good rock 'n' roll guitarist called Alan Leander, we formed the Atlantic Blues in 1963. Ken painted our name down the side of his battered old van and we were in business. We even had a manager, Paul Sutton,