

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Further Adventures of a Grumpy Old Rock Star

Rick Wakeman

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About the Book

What do Postman Pat, Tommy Cooper, Norman Wisdom and George Best have in common with being abandoned in a Costa Rican jungle after a severe bout of flatulence? Indeed, how are they also connected to trying to buy an Australian brewery just to get a beer, owning twenty-two cars, an American soccer team and a Swiss mail-order pornography company?

The common feature is of course a certain Richard Wakeman.

The Further Adventures of a Grumpy Old Rock Star takes you, the privileged reader, on a trip of absurd excess, a cultural car crash of side-splitting hilarity and an unforgettable glimpse (again) into the life of one of Britain's most legendary showmen, rock stars and all-time great raconteurs.

About the Author

Rick Wakeman is the most gifted keyboard player of his generation, as at home on stage 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 number one bestselling author who has written books on music, entertainment and youth culture.

Further Adventures of a Grumpy Old Rock Star

Rick Wakeman
with Martin Roach



arrow books

SIGNINGS

LET ME TELL you about Bob Flett and his wooden leg. Life out on the road in a rock 'n' roll band is full of practical jokes. When I do my one-man show it's a fairly modest affair with only four crew but they *love* to play tricks on me. Often, when I arrive at a dressing room, there's always a few letters and mementoes to sign; one of the crew's favourite tricks is occasionally to write a fake fan letter. These are always very easy to spot because they're invariably ridiculous. One particular night we were at the Theatre Clwydd in Mold and I was sitting on my own in the dressing room opening a few of these letters. One of them was from a certain Mrs Flett.

Dear Mr Wakeman,

I thought you'd like to know how much your music has played a part in the lives of my husband and I. Bob had a very bad sporting accident many, many years ago and has suffered great pain with his leg ever since. So much so that for some time now he has been desperate to have his leg amputated . . .

Oh, this is good, this is one of the crew's best-ever letters . . .

At first, Mr Wakeman, the hospital would not let him have it amputated because it was not considered to be life threatening. However, because Bob was in so much pain, they eventually agreed to do the operation. One of the most precious things to him is your music, so he insisted that the hospital actually pipe some of your albums into the operating theatre as his leg was amputated . . .

By now I'm howling, this is definitely their funniest one yet . . .

Bob chose various songs from The *Aspirant* Series and specifically highlighted one particular piece because it was ideal for the exact moment when his leg came off . . . so we look forward to hopefully meeting you afterwards, where Bob can show you some of the artificial legs he's had the design of your album covers painted on.

This was genius. I stood up and went out to the backstage area to find the crew and congratulate them on their creative writing. My tour manager at the time was Mike Holden so I found him and said, 'Nice one, Mike, this is an absolute cracker!'

'What is, Rick?'

'You know, this letter about Bob Flett and his leg . . .'

'Not me, Rick - I'd love to take the credit if it's that good but it isn't me. Besides, it's not my handwriting.'

'Well, who was it? Doom? Ian? It can't be Malcolm because there are words with more than three syllables . . .'

I went out to the front of house and Doom was soundchecking the keyboards.

'Great letter, Doom, really made me laugh.'

'What letter's that, Rick?'

I went to all of the crew and no one would take credit for this little masterpiece. So I decided to play along with their charade and said nothing more. Then, during the interval of the show, there was a knock on the door and Mike came in, looking a little unsettled.

'Rick, you're not gonna believe this but there's a bloke outside says he's called Bob Flett and he'd love to meet you after the show.'

Admiring his persistence, I played along some more and said, 'Yes, of course there is, Mike, and I'd love to meet *him*. Just the one leg is it?'

Anyway, the show finished and I went out to meet a few fans. Then Mike took me to one side and walked us over to a couple.

'Rick, I'd like you to meet Bob Flett.'

He was for real. There, standing in front of me, was a man who'd had his leg cut off to my music. Put yourself in my shoes (or, in his case, shoe). What do I say?

All I could think of was 'Hello', but Bob, bless him, was absolutely lovely. He immediately started telling me all about his leg, while I stood there in this theatre in north Wales thinking I'd just entered the Twilight Zone . . .

'Oh, Rick, it's so nice to meet you in person. I can't tell you how much of a relief it was to have my leg off. It was fantastic. I was in so much pain, I can't tell you. And the actual moment it came off was brilliant, Rick, they were playing your music just like I'd asked and I could almost *feel* the leg when it fell on the floor. One of the nurses almost fainted but I was ecstatic - it was gone, clean off. No more pain, Rick!'

I had to ask the question.

'That's great, Bob. And that bit in your letter about the album covers . . .?'

Without being asked, Bob proceeded to roll up his trouser to reveal a full artificial leg, festooned with artwork from *Journey To The Centre of the Earth*.

And, yes, I did sign it.

Bob and Gina his wife became really good friends and Bob now does a lot of work helping kids who are amputees. He is a tremendous source of encouragement for them and I take my hat off to him. He's a very special guy.

Signings are a very important part of a musician's life. Some bands love them, others consider it a waste of valuable drinking time. Well organised they are great. You get to meet the real fans, many of whom have become friends. Badly organised, which basically means being told at the last minute, is a curse. Of course, like many bands, Yes were not immune to such last-minute curses.

The best of the 'Curse of the Signings' was at the now-defunct Tower Records on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles

some time around 2002. I don't think anyone had told Chris (Squire), our bass player we were doing a signing so he had been out for a very long liquid lunch. We all arrived and Paul Silveira, our tour manager said, 'We have a little bit of a problem, Chris is here, but he's basically paralytic.'

It wasn't his fault – no one had told him about the signing – but the fact was that he was barely able to stand, never mind sign anything. We tried coffee and water but all to no avail. He was very jovial though and I tried to help out by giving him a hair of the dog in the form of a nice bottle of Chablis. The Chablis went down very well, and Chris went down very shortly after it.

'Not a great idea, Rick,' one of the band said to me.

We eventually had to start so we went down the stairs into the main part of the store to find about 1,500 people queuing round the block to see us. We sat Chris down and he immediately put his head on the table top and went to sleep. Nothing would rouse him. So we started the signing but people seemed totally oblivious to the snoring and were actually trying to get him to sign their albums.

'Chris, Chris, it's so cool to meet you, could you sign this for me, please?'

We were in stitches. Poor old Chris. I even tried to lift his wrist and shove a Sharpie pen in his hand but I ended up scrawling across the table cloth. Eventually we had to say, 'Chris isn't signing anything today. He's not feeling himself.'

I did have a great deal of sympathy because in my drinking days I had regularly found myself in a similar situation to that in which Chris now found himself.

The best moment, however, was reserved for when Chris woke up.

He had absolutely no idea where he was or why there were 1,500 people queuing in a line and parading past him. Not a problem, he simply put his head back on the table and started snoring again.

Around 2003 we had a phase of signing tits. I don't know where that came from (the phase, not the tits); it was all very bizarre and very 'un-Yes-like'. Needless to say, it did not go down well with the wives and girlfriends.

It all started off somewhere down in California after we'd played an open-air show as part of a big festival. We were all seated on this small stage and the fans came up and had a quick chat, then we signed a few album sleeves and whatnot. Then a somewhat buxom girl stood opposite Jon, who very politely said, 'But you haven't got anything to sign . . .?'

She promptly lifted up her T-shirt to reveal a rather large pair of breasts and said, as cool as you like, 'Sign these!' I wasn't married at the time so I found it all most amusing and couldn't wait to sign. We all signed them, even Steve, although his writing was a little bit shaky. Within minutes, the word had spread and every fourth or fifth woman was hoiking her top up for us to sign her breasts. Chris was probably the most imaginative as he found a way of writing Chris Squire over both breasts and at the same time being able to not have to dot the 'i' in either his forename or surname by using the nipples. An absolute work of art.

There was a period when I was doing both *Countdown* and *Live At Jongleurs* (an alternative comedy show for ITV), which had the effect of really mixing up my audience and bringing people in to see me who'd never come to one of my concerts before. One particular time I'd just done a show at the Southend Apollo and as usual they set up a table in the foyer so that afterwards I could chat with people and do a little bit of a signing. The 'security' was drawn from the Friends of the Theatre group and the three of them had a combined age of around 248.

Here's hoping it doesn't kick off, then, I thought to myself.

I looked along the line and there were a couple of hundred people in the line but nobody I recognised. Quite close to

the front were what appeared to be a mother and daughter and directly behind them a pair of very elderly ladies looking quite bemused. *They must be Countdowners*, I can remember thinking. I made a mental note to have a nice little chat with them when they reached the front of the queue.

Eventually the very attractive mother and daughter reached the desk. The mum was in her late thirties and her daughter was probably in her late teens. When they got to the front, the mum looked a little sheepish and so I spoke first to the daughter.

‘How old are you?’ I asked.

‘Nineteen,’ she replied.

‘Wow,’ I said. ‘I wouldn’t have thought my sort of music was your cup of tea . . .’

‘Oh, I mainly like *Live At Jongleurs*, to be honest,’ she said, ‘but actually I did enjoy the concert. I came mainly for Mum, you see.’ Then she turned to her mum and whispered, ‘Go on, Mum, ask him.’

‘I don’t want to,’ she said.

‘Go on, Mum, ask him,’ she insisted.

‘No, I don’t want to.’

‘Well, if you won’t,’ the daughter said, ‘then I will.’

I smiled at the daughter and said, ‘Ask me what?’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘you met my mum about twenty years ago at one of your rock concerts.’

It became very quiet in the queue and I went a considerably whiter shade of pale.

‘No! Nothing like that,’ she laughed.

The queue laughed uproariously.

I laughed somewhat nervously.

The daughter then explained to me that at the concert twenty years ago, I’d signed a pair of her mum’s knickers and she carried on by saying ‘Mum wondered if you’d sign another pair for old time’s sake.’

A little chuckle went down the line and I laughed myself; it was all very friendly and good fun.

‘Yes, of course!’ I said.

The mum undid her handbag and took out a felt-tip pen. I then waited for her to take out a pair of knickers, but no . . . she stood up, promptly undid her belt, unzipped her jeans and dropped them to her ankles, revealing the skimpiest of thongs. Although my hand was shaking a little, I did the best I could and signed my name slowly and methodically. It was not an easy task to accomplish and it took me ages to write my middle name – Christopher!

It was now very quiet in the queue, but the silence was broken by one of the elderly ladies who were next in the queue, turning to her friend and saying, ‘Oh dear, Ethel, we don’t have to do that, do we?’

Thankfully, they didn’t.

Having these more ‘mature’ fans is wonderful, but can sometimes be one of the most hilarious aspects of my career. Working in Yes as well as on my own solo stuff and the one-man show, plus the *Live At Jongleurs* comedy acts, which I host, and then appearing on *Grumpy Old Men* and *Countdown* means I do get a rather eclectic group of people asking for signatures. The Countdowners are generally a little older than most. One particular lady, well, I’ll tell you how old she was: she called me ‘young man’ . . .

‘Young man, I’ve very much enjoyed your concert tonight.’

‘Well, thank you very much, thank you for coming along.’

‘I had no idea you played the piano. You’re really quite good.’

‘Well, thank you very much – I have been playing for a while now.’

‘Oh, splendid, well done, you are a talented young man. Have you made any discs?’

‘Yes. One hundred and thirty-six.’

Seemingly impressed, she turned to go. But then she looked back at me and said, 'Have you sold all of them yet?'

It's not just knickers or breasts that you get asked to autograph. It can be even more glamorous and rock 'n' roll. Like signing keyboard manuals. Because some of my music is reasonably complex and obviously in the 1970s I was renowned for having pretty state-of-the-art technology on the road, the assumption is made by a certain type of fan that I have some deep passion for the technical side of music. To be honest, I don't really; I have a passing interest because it can help you write and perform better music sometimes, but I'm not a technical person - I just play the piano and keyboards.

A typical signing conversation with one of these techie fans goes something like this:

'Hello, Rick, nice to meet you. Can you sign this, please? It's the ultra-rare manual for the 1971 deleted classic synth, The Bumble Bluebottle Mark 2 - do you know it?'

'Er . . .'

'You know, the analogue module with the calibrated capacitors?'

'Oh, yes, *that* one, very good . . .'

'Well, what do you think of it?'

'A superb machine for its time'

'Really? I thought it was crap.'

And off they go, straight on to eBay no doubt, to buy up some old relic because I had basically endorsed it as the finest rare synth ever built.

Apparently.

Those of you who bought my first collection of stories, *Grumpy Old Rock Star* (still available from all good bookshops, and the odd crappy one too, I suspect), may have even had the misfortune to come and hear me tell some of the stories on the promotional tour I did. I loved

doing the literary festivals and found the bookshop events were all highly entertaining. One of my favourites was probably the one in Ely. A lovely man called Robert Topping runs a few bookshops and he is always a pleasure to work with, plus I love his store. (Once I'd finished the tour, I realised I'd spent a fortune on buying other books while waiting to do my own book signings.)

I couldn't see a table in Robert's store but he explained that the signing wasn't going to be in the bookshop itself. I was quite pleased, because I was essentially doing a bit of stand-up and, although my routine isn't exactly full of effin' and blindin', there are quite a few stories that you wouldn't necessarily want your grandmother or any passing child to overhear.

Robert also explained that he'd had to find a bigger venue because the demand for tickets had been huge. 'This is largely due to Ian Rankin,' he explained, 'who did a reading here a couple of weeks ago and told the audience not to miss your evening under any circumstances. Tickets then went like wildfire and we needed to find a bigger place.'

'Great. Where did you book?'

'The Catholic church.'

'You haven't heard me speak before, have you?' I retorted, not a little concerned.

'Oh, don't worry, it will be a lovely evening. And besides, the priest is really looking forward to it - in fact, he'll be sitting in the front row. And you'll be speaking from the pulpit.'

Great.

We walked round the corner to the Catholic church and sure enough, there was the priest sitting in the front row. On the journey over, I'd been thinking through all my stories, trying to work out in advance what I could and couldn't say. Within minutes, I'd realised that I couldn't really do about 95 per cent of my material in front of a priest. So, in the face of certain humiliation, I decided to throw caution to the wind

and just do the best I could under the circumstances. I strode up to the pulpit, said hello and then for reasons still unbeknown to myself, launched into a completely different opening gambit to my usual beginning.

‘I’m actually a Baptist, but I have been in a Catholic church before, you know,’ I started, looking across at the priest. ‘Yes, I went in for confession. I stepped into the confession box and the old curtain went back and I said, “Forgive me father for I have sinned.”

“Confess your sins, my son,” came the retort from the other side of the confessional box.

“Last week I had a wild orgy, lasting four days, with seventeen virgins which included the use of handcuffs, whips and vast amounts of melted chocolate.”

(Cue a few uncomfortable shufflings in the church pews.)

‘There was a short pause and then the voice on the other side of the confessional said, “I know that voice. You’re Rick Wakeman. But you’re not a Catholic, you’re a Baptist, so why are you telling me this?”

‘To which I replied, “I’m telling everyone!”’

The whole church just fell about laughing, no one more so than the priest in the front row. This was like a red rag to a bull so I proceeded to tell some of my most inappropriate jokes, gags and stories. I pretty much got away with everything. It was a very funny evening, probably one of the most enjoyable stand-ups I’ve ever done.

You never know how many people are going to turn up at a signing. When I was promoting an album called *Silent Nights* I had several signings to do and it was, to be fair, a mixed bag. On one particular day I had two stores to do, the first one in Birmingham and then I was due to race down the M1 for a signing in High Wycombe. The one at the HMV store in Birmingham was fantastic: there were about twelve hundred people and an absolutely massive queue.

The second signing of the day in High Wycombe had, by way of neat contrast, no queue at all. In fact, no people at all. A grand total of zero. A real first. Not one solitary person turned up. It was in Woolworths and they'd made a really big effort, there was a huge table with a lovely red carpet in front of it, there were towering piles of albums ready for me to sign, posters, iced water, there'd been adverts on local radio – it was all perfect.

Apart from the fact that no one had come.

I'd actually phoned my record company on the way down the motorway to ask how many they were expecting in High Wycombe but they'd been evasive and said they couldn't really tell. Sometimes, if the prospects for a signing are looking bleak, record companies might get a 'Rent-a-Crowd' in. If you are not a rich record company, then you'll basically get all the shop's staff to go along at lunchtime to queue up and do exactly the same thing. As the artist, you'll eventually end up recognising these 'fans' in the queue; I've even become quite chatty with some of them, none of whom were remotely interested in my music.

I'd been a little bit ahead of schedule for High Wycombe so I took the manager to one side and said, 'Maybe I'm too early – perhaps you're expecting a late rush?'

'Er, no, we aren't.'

'But are people maybe more likely to come a little later, after work's finished?'

'Probably not, no. Most folk round here just go straight home.'

Great.

'Right,' I said, trying to remain positive, 'how do you normally do with signings?'

'Not very good, really – pretty awful, in fact. I'm not sure people round here really like 'em.'

In the face of adversity, I refused to give in. 'I tell you what,' I suggested, 'I'll go and sit at the table anyway, and

let's see what happens. You never know, there might be a mad rush in a minute.'

'I doubt it,' the manager said forlornly.

So I went and sat on my own in the middle of the High Wycombe branch of Woolworths, with a long, empty red carpet in front of me and about two hundred unsold albums behind me. The manager put the record on the shop's tannoy but it didn't even fall on deaf ears of any kind because there weren't any ears in the shop.

Then I saw a middle-aged lady making a beeline for me. She stopped halfway across the store to look at my poster, then continued heading towards me. A punter at last! Normally, a turnout of one would have been a catastrophe, obviously, but somehow, refusing to be beaten and taking my seat at the long table of loneliness regardless of the colossal odds stacked against me, her approach felt like a victory, a vindication of my spirit, a pat on the back for the good old British bulldog.

With possibly my biggest-ever smile and my unused felt-tip pen quivering at the ready, I said hello to this woman as she reached the table.

'Oh, hello, dear,' she replied. 'I wonder, can you tell me where the baby clothes are, please?'

I didn't know where the baby department was, so I got up and went to find the manager. He didn't offer to come over and help her, so I trudged back, took my seat in front of the non-existent queue of non-existent fans and said, 'It's up the back.'

'Thank you.'

'You're welcome.'

As she trundled off to buy nappies or whatever, the manager came over to me and, without a hint of regret for my cringe-inducing predicament, said, 'I'm going to stop doing these. They're a bloody waste of time.'

POSTMAN PAT, OAPS, HELLS ANGELS AND A DOG

RATHER THAN SIGNINGS, it is the afternoon performance – the matinee – that is the bane of a road crew's life. If you are on tour doing the theatres and you suddenly find there's a matinee going on – the crew *hate* it. We always ask promoters not to book us into theatres where there is a matinee scheduled, but inevitably – either through oversight or deliberately! – we always end up with some clashes.

Take Canterbury and Postman Pat. It was the early 1980s and we were due to play a show in the Marlowe Theatre. I was at a service station on the A2 heading down to the gig with my singer Ashley Holt. We were in plenty of time so we'd stopped for a sandwich when my phone rang. This was in the early days of mobile phones so there was nothing slimline about this model – it was literally the size of a brick with a military-sized antenna. I think the battery life was about eight minutes. Hardly anyone had a mobile at the time so the entire cafe in the service station was looking at me and listening in.

'Rick, it's Doom.' (Doom was my keyboard tech and studio engineer at the time.)

'Listen Rick. We got a problem.'

This in itself was not unexpected. Let me tell you about Doom. His actual name is Stuart Sawney. He is a lovely guy, really hard-working and excellent at his job but he became known as Doom because his favourite expression is, 'It's all gone horribly wrong!' If you said, 'Isn't this a gorgeous day, look at the sun shining and the blue sky,' he'd go, 'Yeah, but

it'll probably rain tomorrow.' So he is universally known as Doom.

Back at the A2 service station.

'Hello, Doom. What seems to be the problem?'

'I'm not happy, Rick, not happy at all.'

'Really? You do surprise me. Why's that, Doom?'

'I'm not happy, Big Ian isn't happy either (Big Ian – Ian Barfoot – was, and still is, my out-front house engineer). Rick, none of us are happy.'

'Okay, Doom, I get that you're not happy. Perhaps you could tell me why?'

'It's Postman Pat, Rick.'

'Right. Perhaps you should start at the beginning . . .'

Doom proceeded to explain to me in his most miserable tone how the crew had arrived at the theatre in the early afternoon only to find there was a matinee show by Postman Pat. Worse still, Postman Pat's gear was all over the backstage area, there was more stuff in the loading bay and the clock was running.

'There's a bright red van on stage and everything, Rick . . .'

said Doom.

'And a black and white cat?'

'Yes, Rick, how did you know?'

'Never mind, Doom. Listen, I'm sure you can work something out between you.'

'I don't think so, Rick. Postman Pat has told the theatre he won't be coming off stage until five o'clock at the earliest. That's far too late for us to get loaded in and set up.'

'Okay, but why don't you reverse up to the loading bay and start getting the gear in somewhere backstage while Postman Pat's finishing off?'

'Can't do that, Rick, Postman Pat's bloody great lorry is in the loading bay and they won't move it.'

'All right, let me speak to Postman Pat.'

'He's not here, Rick. They said he's gone over to the hotel, the same one we're staying at.'

‘Well, why don’t you go and find Postman Pat and ask him if he could kindly arrange for his stuff to be moved a little earlier so we can start loading?’

‘I’ve done that already Rick.’

‘And?’

‘Postman Pat was asleep in his room and had left strict instructions he wasn’t to be disturbed.’

‘Well, *somebody* must be around.’

‘Yes, Rick. Jess the black and white cat.’

‘Okay, so did you ask Jess the Cat if he could kindly organise to have their lorry moved?’

‘I did, yes, Rick.’

‘And what did he say, Doom?’

‘He told me to fuck off.’

I have to admit, I was falling about laughing. God knows what the people at the service station were thinking, hearing half a conversation about Postman Pat, Jess the Cat and some bloke called Doom.

Doom somehow got round the problem and the show went brilliantly. I actually felt sorry for Doom because the whole Postman Pat incident had really stressed him out and he’d done rather well getting it sorted. I took him to one side after the show and said, ‘Listen, Doom, you’ve done very well, superb, that was a mess and you sorted it. You managed to talk some sense into Jess the black and white cat and the show was fantastic. I take my hat off to you.’

With a wicked glint in his eye, Doom said, ‘Thanks, Rick. I’d love to be backstage for Postman Pat’s next matinee, though!’

‘Why? What have you done?’

‘Well, let’s just say that Postman Pat’s bright red van might smell for a few weeks. The dressing rooms were locked all afternoon and we couldn’t get in them to use the toilets.’

‘You didn’t.’

‘Might have done.’

‘Oh God . . . you wee’d in Postman Pat’s van.’

‘You’ll never know but it could have been worse. Big Ian had a curry at lunchtime and only just managed to contain himself.’

Fast-forward to the opening night of my Classical Connection Tour a few years later. I was due to play in Yeovil at the Octagon Theatre but I was running early so I arranged to play a game of golf with a friend before going to the venue. By the time I got to the sound check, it was Big Ian’s turn to square up to a favourite children’s character.

‘I’m not happy, Rick. Doom’s not happy, none of us are, Rick.’

‘Why, Ian? What’s up?’

‘Ever heard of Fireman Sam, Rick?’

‘What?’

‘There’s a matinee, Rick. Fireman Sam. It’s full of kids, we can’t get anywhere near the stage. Worse still, there’s only one big dressing room so you’re in there with Fireman Sam.’

It turned out that Fireman Sam and his various friends were all actually frustrated Shakespearian thespians.

We decided to make the most of a tricky situation. We couldn’t set up our gear until they’d finished, but truth is, we didn’t have much for this particular show and so we decided to make the best of a bad job and booked seats for Fireman Sam’s matinee performance. We even bought ill-fitting yellow plastic Fireman Sam hats for a quid each (they were actually made for four-to-six-year-olds and so they perched rather precariously on the top of our heads). Six grown men in bright yellow plastic fireman’s helmets then took their seats amongst all the mums and very excited kids, most of whom were also wearing yellow plastic helmets.

It was *hilarious*. The would-be thespians weren’t sure if they were at Stratford or Yeovil, if the truth be known. There seemed to be a lot of, ‘Alas, poor Yorick, pass me the fire

hose' going on and we were in stitches. Fireman Sam was more akin to Fireman Hamlet than to any kids' character. Every now and then among the 'Quick! There's a fire on Pontypandy Mountain!' you'd hear a little snippet that sounded like *Henry V* or *King Lear*. The kids were completely bewildered but didn't seem to mind. They cheered Fireman Sam's every movement and hung on to every sentence, even though none of us understood a bloody word.

At various points, one of the props would explode with a few firecrackers and the crowd would gasp, Fireman Sam/Hamlet would rush to the rescue and save the day, then every kid would clap frantically as if he had actually saved the theatre from burning down. However, towards the end of the show one of the pyrotechnics wouldn't go out and the box it was in actually caught fire. The flames were only about six inches high but Fireman Sam/Hamlet shat himself! He was leaping around the stage shouting, 'Fire! Fire!' but everyone just thought it was part of the show. We were crying from laughter. Eventually, while Sam was dancing round like some sort of deranged elf, a theatre attendant came on with a tiny fire extinguisher and put out the flames in about two seconds. The kids were totally bemused now, they could see this fire but didn't understand why Sam wasn't putting it out. Quite a few were devastated, and more than one shed a few tears.

Then about a minute later, the sound of sirens was heard in the street outside and a real-life fireman stormed on to the stage and sprayed even more foam at the small amount of wispy smoke still coming out of the stage box. Meanwhile, Fireman Sam/Hamlet was standing there, shoulders drooped, head hung in shame. Kids were crying and so were we . . . with laughter!

To be fair to Fireman Sam, my own live shows are never particularly straightforward. Take the shows for my album *1984*, which I released in 1981. Ahead of the game, you see.

That album was done at completely the wrong time for what was happening in the music business. To record this big extravaganza – a concept album with orchestra, choir and the kitchen sink thrown in for good measure – was a complete misnomer at that time. But fortunately the wonderful Tony Stratton-Smith at Charisma Records hated conformity and absolutely loved the idea, so I wrote and recorded this epic rock opera with the wonderful Sir Tim Rice.

We all agreed that despite our grand designs, it was crucial that the record was promoted with a series of great concerts. The problem was that we genuinely didn't have the money to go out on the road with an orchestra, it just wasn't possible. So we decided to get together a big band and stage a series of shows at the Hammersmith Odeon. My manager, Brian 'Deal-a-Day' Lane, started making some phone calls (you will have already met him if you've read *Grumpy Old Rock Star* – still available all over the country in both good and bad bookshops everywhere as well as online, both paperback and hardback. My publisher asked me to get the plug in). Pretty soon we had a cracking line-up: Steve Harley was coming along to sing, I'd got Kenny Lynch as well, a fabulous big band, a lighting rig to die for plus laser lights, a huge PA, three girl singers called The Lillettes, it had all shaped up very quickly as a really big, loud, bombastic rock 'n' roll event. Everything I could want. So we were all set.

This coincided with a period when I was doing what was incorrectly called 'New Age' music – these gentle instrumental pieces would really fit more accurately in the genre of 'New World' music. I'd been asked to create some new acoustic instrumental material and it was selling really rather well. One album that did particularly well was called *Country Airs* which had a track on it called 'Waterfalls', which was undoubtedly my mum's favourite.

Now, my mum, bless her, she loved all this gentle piano stuff; however, she didn't really like the rock music much at all. Truth be told, she never even liked Yes very much. But to her credit, she always supported me in everything I did, regardless of whether she liked it or not. A true mum.

So imagine my surprise when she phoned me the week before the *1984* shows at Hammersmith.

'Hello, Richard.'

'Oh dear.'

I knew I was in trouble the moment she called me Richard.

'Richard, you never told me you were doing concerts in Hammersmith.'

'Well, I didn't think you'd be interested, Mum.'

'Don't be silly, Of course I want to come to one of the shows, Richard. Luckily I phoned up your manager's office, spoke to the secretary there and she said they'd put twelve tickets to one side for me . . .'

'Twelve tickets? There's only you and Dad and you'll hate it.'

'I've invited ten friends, Richard.'

'Friends?'

'Yes, I'm bringing ten people from the Northolt Old People's home (at the time, my mum worked there as a volunteer). They'll love it. I've even played them *Country Airs* and "Waterfalls" and they just loved it. Well, they said they did anyway. A change of scene, the tinkling piano, it's going to be so nice for them, they don't get out much and it'll be such a treat.'

'Mum, this show is not a piano concert.'

'Well, what is it then?'

'It's the rock opera I wrote with Tim Rice . . . you know . . . *1984*. There'll be my full-on rock band, a brass section, girl singers, a laser light show and it will be very loud - Mum, you can't bring them, they'll die.'

'You mean it's not a piano concert?'

'No, Mum.'

‘Well, you’ll just have to change it, then.’

‘I can’t change it, Mum, we’ve sold out all the shows.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure, Mum.’

‘Well, you will have to sort something out, Richard, because they are all coming and the youngest is eighty-two.’

I felt it best not to bring the subject up again in front of my mum and so I concentrated the next few weeks on the preparation of the shows. The day of the first show arrived and all the band and I were in the same dressing room getting changed ready for the show. Then the dressing-room door opened and in walked my tour manager at the time, Funky Fat Fred. He had a huge grin on his face.

‘What’s amusing you, Fred?’ I asked.

‘Your mum’s here.’

‘Is she on her own?’

‘Nope.’

‘Oh God, how many with her?’

‘Living?’

Oh great.

‘Come on, you know what I mean.’

‘Ten, I think, Rick. Your dad’s already found his seat. You do seem to be attracting an older crowd these days,’ said Fred, unable to resist.

‘Piss off, Fred.’

At that moment, in walked Mum and ten extremely old residents of the Northolt Old People’s Home. My band was watching this and they thought it was hilarious – they couldn’t wait for any outcome. I could: I’d never had a death at one of my shows before!

The old folks all lined up and, to put it mildly, they were completely bewildered. My mum led me down the line, like the backstage aftershow at some bizarre Royal Variety Performance, and I was introduced.

‘Richard, I’d like you to meet Elsie, and this is Rose . . .’

I eventually made it to the last man standing. Almost literally. Albert.

‘It’s no good talking to me, mate,’ he said, rather loudly.

‘Oh, really?’

‘What?’

‘Why’s that?’

‘Pardon?’ He twiddled with something in his ear and then said, ‘You’ll have to excuse me . . . I’m almost completely deaf. Even with my hearing aid turned up full I can’t hear *anything*.’

‘You’ll have a nice night, then,’ I said.

Anyway, I put all this to the back of my mind and did the show. It was *brilliant*. I absolutely loved it, to me it had everything you would expect from a prog-rock concert: epic music, laser lights, a loud sound system, huge sets and amazing lighting – it was fabulous. Afterwards, we were all getting cleaned up in the dressing room when Funky Fat Fred came in again.

‘Rick, your mum’s here again.’

‘Are they all with her?’ I asked worryingly.

‘Oh, they appear to be, Rick. Shell-shocked, perhaps, but they’d like to have a word.’

So Mum traipsed in again and lined them all up to talk to me once more. I started my way down the line, fully expecting a barrage of criticism. The first lady said, ‘Rick, we really enjoyed that. It was wonderful.’

‘Really? You’re just saying that because you like my mum.’

‘No, it was brilliant – the lights, the girls singing, the set, amazing.’

It seemed that they had all actually loved the show! I was so shocked.

‘What were those red things zooming around the air?’ asked another of the old folks.

‘Lasers?’

‘Yes, lasers – those are rather fabulous, we liked those.’

‘And I haven’t heard a drum solo like that since the Glen Miller Band were here in the war . . .’ said another.

I chatted with them all for some time and was so relieved. Then I made a very simple and common mistake.

I stood in front of one lady with the compulsory cauliflower haircut and obligatory blue rinse. She was about four foot ten.

‘I’m so pleased you enjoyed the show. I would have thought that people your age wouldn’t have liked it at all.’

With that, the mood darkened instantly and she walked right up close to me, her nose almost wedging itself in my navel, and started prodding me rather firmly, pushing against me to emphasise her words.

‘That’s just it, “people our age”, you all think when we get to our age that all we want is to be wheeled out in the garden with blankets over us and given endless cups of tea. No wonder we are all bloody incontinent.’

I thought to myself, she’s absolutely right. When you get to a certain age, why are you meant to dress in a certain way, behave in a certain way, and only listen to music ‘for your age’. It’s absolute rubbish.

I was mortified and I apologised. I hadn’t intended any offence but I could see why my remarks were insensitive. She gradually warmed up and eventually they all congratulated me again and readied to leave.

At the last moment, a voice at the end of the line spoke.

‘I heard everything. I didn’t even have to turn it on.’

It was Albert.

Six weeks later, the same ten old folks headed back to Hammersmith Odeon for another show.

This time it was to see Status Quo.

The Classical Connection tour that had seen us fall about laughing at Fireman Sam was just myself on two keyboards and a bass player called David Paton (who’d had a band called Pilot and famously wrote ‘Magic’ and ‘January and