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## Fairport Convention

### Fairport Convention 35th Anniversary Concert [DVD]

[35th Anniversary Concert]

US release date: 10 October 2006 (Music Video Distribution)

UK release date: 27 June 2005

by **Dan MacIntosh**

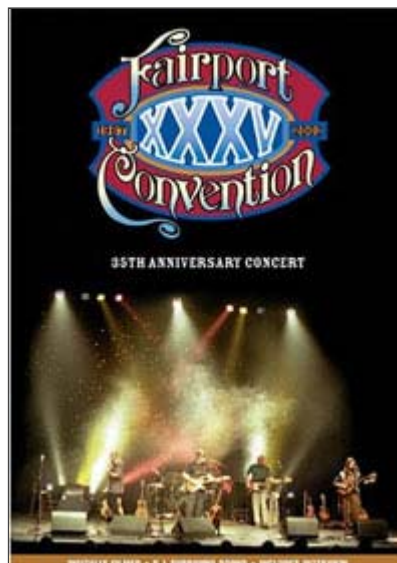
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### Fairport Convention shows no signs of slowing down.

Let me first confess that my initial appreciation for Fairport Convention revolved around master guitarist Richard Thompson's early association with this groundbreaking folk-rock outfit. And secondarily, Sandy Denny's early vocal contributions also had a little something to do with it, too. But Thompson has long since left the group, and Denny passed on way before her time. So this 35th anniversary concert is hardly the original lineup. But if you put all prejudice aside, as I did, you'll likely find much to enjoy about this excellent DVD. It showcases a nearly middle age group in fine form—still.

While there is no Thompson or Denny these days, the group's current lineup of Simon Nicol (lead vocals, rhythm and electric guitars), Dave Pegg (backing vocals, bass guitar, and mandolin), Ric Sanders (violin), Chris Leslie (lead vocals, fiddle, bouzouki, and mandolin) and Gerry Conway (percussion and drums) sounds truly inspired much most of the time. Anna Ryder also adds accordion and harmony vocals to "The Crowd".

Multi-instrumentalist Leslie shines particularly brightly during this concert DVD. He sings in a few places, adds colorful bouzouki and mandolin often, and creates dual fiddle moments when joining in with Sanders at key junctures. One memorably fine fiddle section occurs during "Everything But The Skirl", which finds Leslie and Sanders squaring off with each other for



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some fiery give and take. It is Nicol who sings lead most of the time, however, and he also explains many of the songs. In fact, hardly a song goes by without a funny or touching Nicol introduction.

This DVD covers much Fairport ground, stretching all the way back to *Liege & Lief* for “Matty Groves” and “The Deserter”. The elderly “The Deserter”, sadly, is as relevant with its empathy for conscientious objectors to today’s Iraqi war, as it was during the Vietnam era when the group first recorded it. There are also newer songs included too, such as the title track from “The Wood and the Wire”.

Contrary to its folk-rock genre label, this band has always been much more folk than rock. They were originally compared to The Byrds back when they first started, but there’s nothing along the lines of “Eight Miles High”, that psychedelic Byrds’ classic, to be found in Fairport’s entire catalogue. The Byrds evolved from Beatle-inspired jangle rock to back-to-country roots. Fairport Convention, on the other hand, looked back to old English folk music and basically stayed close to those beloved guidelines for over three decades and counting.

This unique outfit may have strong folk roots, but they are by no means simplistic one-trick-ponies. In fact, there is a distinctly progressive feel to much of these songs, especially because of Pegg’s fluid bass work. Saunders also amps up his violin playing in multiple places, which give some of his solos a jazzy, Jean Luc-Ponty feel.

One of the few low points on this disc is Gerry Conway’s drum solo during “Let There Be Drums”. Granted, drum solos represent one of rock music’s most staining clichés, even at their best. But Conway’s skin work here is basic and predictable, and doesn’t do anything except slow down the show’s momentum. Furthermore, it comes off like a stripped down surf song, which is hardly the musical style Fairport does best. Another problem with this DVD has to do with its production. The spoken introductions are extremely quiet, and must be cranked up many remote notches between song performances. But as soon as the music starts, the volume simply booms. Had the producers gotten the balance right, viewers wouldn’t need to keep their hands on the trigger (their remotes) so readily.

George Michael once titled an album *Listen Without Prejudice, Vol 1*. It seemed a little strange at the time, especially considering how Michael was one of the biggest pop stars of his era. Furthermore, his music was neither difficult nor underappreciated. Perhaps, Fairport Convention should have similarly called this anniversary DVD “View Without Prejudice”, especially for people like me who have trouble letting the past die. It’s best viewed without any preconceived ideas. (And no, it shouldn’t remind you—shiver, shiver—of George Michael!)

Watching this band in action ought to give you the inarguable impression that Fairport Convention as at the top of their game. Sure, Saunders—and especially Leslie—look like old hippies with their dated long hair. But in the same way their hair continued to grow, their love for improvisatory folk music grew right along with it

As good as this DVD is, however, it sometimes makes me salivate to imagine what Richard Thomson would sound like backed by this stellar cast of musicians today. But *Fairport Convention 35th Anniversary Concert* shows that this veteran act is still standing tall on its

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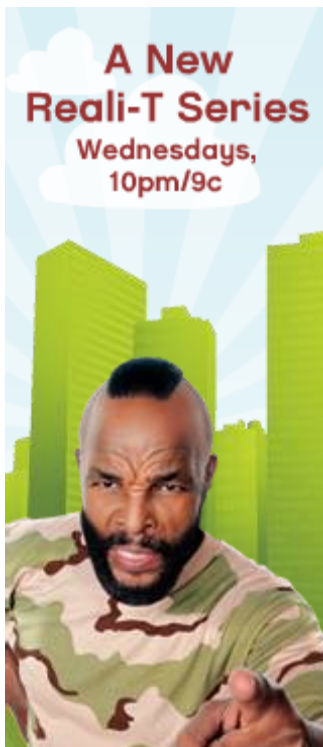
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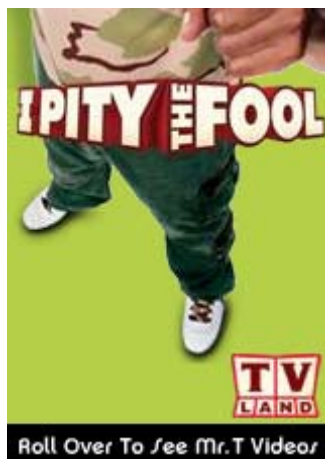
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— 17 October 2006

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