



Fairport Convention

Maidstone 1970 [DVD]

(Isolde)

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by **Ryan Scott**

History has not been kind to British group Fairport Convention. While their once obscure label mate Nick Drake has become a posthumous legend, this formerly popular group is more familiar to folk enthusiasts and rock journalists. Even John Peel's approval, which has been a blessing for many bands, didn't save them from general indifference.

It wasn't always the case. During the late '60s and early '70s, Fairport Convention had a number of hits and a large following. Their attempt to reinvigorate traditional English folk music succeeded against a cultural backdrop of loud guitars and nascent stadium rock similar to the folk revival across the Atlantic. However, while Bob Dylan, Paul Simon, and Leonard Cohen went on to become legends, Fairport Convention slipped quietly away.

The DVD release of Tony Palmer's *Fairport Convention and Matthews Southern Comfort* should have rectified this situation. The footage is of Fairport Convention's appearance at the Maidstone Fiesta in 1970. Historically, the film is an interesting document of the time. The fiesta was a year after the Rolling Stone's infamous Altamont gig, which many music critics view as the end of the '60s idealism, but the images here suggest those ideals were alive and well.

More important is the musical significance of the film. It captures what is known to fans as the *Full House* line-up (so-called because the members performed together on the album *Full House*). Many consider this the band's best line up. Given that this is the only footage of them playing together, the DVD release should be something of an event.

Unfortunately it doesn't live up to expectations. First, the film is too brief. The total running time is just over 31-minutes. This includes the performance of supporting act, Matthews Southern Comfort, who contain former Fairport Convention member Iain Matthews. The brevity prevents the viewer from getting a feel for the band.

The crowds dance and twirl as the very image of 1970's *joie de vie*, but you don't quite share the experience. Concert films can't recreate the sensation of being at the venue. However, a good one should showcase the performers' talents and make you wish you had been there. Fairport Convention delivered a show that was tight and energetic and, as I said, it certainly had the crowd dancing, but still, you're not feeling you've missed the show.

Another problem is Palmer's distracting camera style. He often cuts quickly from the band to the audience. One moment we have a close up on band leader Richard Thompson, the next we see kids lazing in the sun, or the Fiesta attendees talking amongst themselves. He creates a broad picture of the day in which the band is only a part. This feeling is emphasized in the final shot when we see the whole crowd with the band barely distinguishable from them on the stage.

There is potential for an interesting social documentary, with the crowd's representation of a rich mix of classes and generations, but the way this is filmed, it pushes the band into the background. If this had been documentary about Maidstone, or the counter culture in Britain, the technique would have been justifiable. As this was a music documentary about Fairport Convention, Palmer needed to, figuratively, get on stage with the band.

He wasn't lacking subject matter. The band were in high spirits and good humor that day. When they had to stop their performance while helicopters took off, Richard Thompson joked that if the helicopters didn't leave at that moment they would get lost in the dark. Furthermore, this group was renowned for its live shows. They played driving upbeat folk far removed from the themes of whiskey and destitution, which have become so readily associated with the genre in recent years. Fairport Convention essentially played dance music of an earthy and emotive sort. It shouldn't have been so hard for Palmer to capture this on film.

If Fairport Convention's appearance is disappointingly short, Matthews Southern Comfort's is woefully so, as well. Despite some success in the '70s, Matthews Southern Comfort are even more overlooked in rock history than the concert headliners. Whereas Fairport Convention were more folk

purists, Matthews Southern Comfort showed a pop folk sensibility similar to the Byrds. They were not afraid to introduce elements from rock or country into their songs.

Perhaps for this reason their music better bridges the celluloid gap despite their short appearance. Their rendition of "Southern Comfort" is the best performance of the film. It switches from a lament to a blazing duel between guitars and pedal steel played by 42-year-old Gordon Huntley. Sadly, two songs are all we get. While their music held its own against the filming, we are only treated to a sample of what they were capable of.

Some of the problems with the film are hinted at in the interview included in the bonus material. Though Palmer was a fan of the band, the film came at the behest of Welsh actor Stanley Baker. According to Palmer, Baker was trying to spend money in order to lower his tax bill. A music documentary was a good way to do this. Plus it would lend Baker some kudos amongst the acting fraternity. If this were the case than it may account for the problems described. Even commercial blockbusters can be at least stupidly entertaining. But a film made as a tax write off...it's unlikely to have much heart.

The interview also contains an interesting tidbit of information for fans of the legendary Radio One DJ, John Peel, who introduced the bands in his famously dry manner. Palmer explains that Peel became involved in the film because he appeared on a political show Palmer directed for BBC television. At the time Peel was persona non grata with the station because of his involvement with pirate radio. Palmer reveals that in order to not anger the management, Peel was signed in under different names with each appearance.

However, the interviewer, like the film, suffers from its format and technique. Palmer is an articulate guest, but he has to struggle with the appalling interview skills of Jon Kirkman. Kirkman seems too eager to give his opinions and demonstrate his knowledge of the band and the era. Fortunately, Palmer is just forceful enough to express his thoughts and feelings above those of Kirkman.

Given the combined talents of Palmer and Fairport Convention, this film had the potential to be more than just a record of a band. It could have been a unique film in its own right, a meeting of a director's vision and the musicians' expression. But the final cut doesn't meet this promise. This is definitely one for the hardcore fans.

RATING: 

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