

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Roger McGuinn

Governor Hindmarsh

I first heard of Roger McGuinn when he was known as Jim. He was the serious young ectomorph in the houndstooth coat and little black lozenge spectacles on the cover of the first Byrds album. Foppish in their American Carnaby gear, singing harmonies four and five deep, the Byrds swooped on Bob Dylan songs and showed there really was another side to them. They layered and enriched the sketchy sound of early acoustic Dylan and with their careful diction raised up his poetic lyrics like jewellers setting gemstones. And the sound they added, like a dozen golden hammers, was Jim McGuinn's chiming Rickenbacker twelve string guitar.

McGuinn already had a career before the Byrds. As a kid barely out of high school he had been recruited to both the Limelites and the Chad Mitchell Trio, riding high on the hootenanny craze of the early sixties. Growing up in Chicago he had been drawn to the folk scene, had attended the Old Town School of Folk and, at clubs such as the Gate of Horn, learned from such luminaries as Bob Gibson, Josh White and Odetta.

Performing at the Governor Hindmarsh, Roger McGuinn's solo show is a return to his folk origins, a mix of songs from his long and varied career, garnished with a likeable amount of reminiscence and commentary. Dressed in black t-shirt and jeans, sporting a goatee beard, and looking a good deal less than his fifty-nine years, he opens with *Chimes of Freedom*. His Rickenbacker ringing like a hurdy gurdy, McGuinn adds his distinctively reedy tenor, not a strong voice but memorably plaintive, and, in times past, the perfect foil to the more orthodox sweetness of David Crosby and the sturdy refrain of Chris Hillman. Another Dylan song follows - *The Ballad of Easy Rider*, written by Bob on a paper napkin with the tune provided by McGuinn.

Taking up his twelve string he sings a Brill Building classic - Goffin and King's *Wasn't Born to Follow* - a reminder that McGuinn himself wrote songs for Bobby Darin and later The Turtles. Then, delving back further, he sings several songs from the Harry Smith Treasury which McGuinn, like a musical Johnny Appleseed, has recorded for free downloads from his website. The first is from Rabbit Brown - *James Alley Blues*, the other is

an homage to the original twelve string mastro Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Leadbelly.

Generous to his old comrades from the Byrds, McGuinn pays tribute to the late Gene Clark with *I'll Feel a Whole Lot Better* and the lesser known B-side *My Love She Don't Care About Time*. Readily charmed by his relaxed manner the Gov crowd is drawn into some singalong with *Dog named Blue* and even *Hey Mr Spaceman*. The excellent David Whiffen song, *Driving Wheel* is given a lovely reading and also on twelve string, the poignant coalmining anthem *Bells of Rhymney*. McGuinn notes that thirty years after first recording this Pete Seeger song the people of the town told him it is properly pronounced Rhumney, which he now dutifully remembers.

Another Dylan song, *My Back Pages*, is a reminder of the Byrds' pre-eminent claim to his material, demonstrated even more amply by, first an acoustic, then a full throttle Rickenbacker version of *Mr Tambourine Man*. *Turn Turn Turn* follows, with a splendid twelve string solo and a strong sense, as with *Bells of Rhymney* that McGuinn has himself turned full circle to become, like Pete Seeger, an advocate for the preservation of American folkways. There is perhaps no more apt song to close the set than the trippy classic *Eight Miles High*, the Clark, McGuinn, Hillman composition that surely rates with Pet Sounds Brian Wilson and Beatles of the *Revolver* period.

Roger McGuinn takes several encores - *So You Want To be a Rock and Roll Star* and *King of the Hill*, co-written with Tom Petty - but he closes with the traditional Irish blessing, *May the Road Rise to Meet You*. May the road rise to meet you/ may the wind be at your back/ may the rain fall soft upon your face/ may God hold you in the palm of his hand. Certainly Roger McGuinn, in the excellent and ever hospitable surroundings at the Governor Hindmarsh, has held his audience spellbound with both his amiable conversation and his accomplished musicianship. Like that much mentioned tambourine man, it was a jingle jangle evening well worth following.