

The first benefit concert for the Alan Surtees Trust took place in the fabulous Adam Ballroom at the Lion Hotel in Shrewsbury on 10th January 2020.

The room was full, tickets had sold out soon after the concert was announced shortly after the festival last August. Getting artists of the calibre of John Jones, Steve Knightley, Phil Beer, Hannah James and Grace Petrie onto the same bill for an evening concert is testimony not only to the purpose of the trust but also to the standing of Alan himself. All the artists gave their time for free.

The concert was introduced and compared by Dave Cowing, the chairman of the trust and a friend of Alan for over 30 years.

First to perform was Hannah James. She had known Alan since first performing at the festival aged 14 when a member of Kerfuffle. Alan had encouraged Hannah to develop her ideas around music and dance. She instigated the idea of the trust soon after Alan passed away and emailed her friends to help make it happen. For this gig, Hannah had flown over specially from a winter sojourn in Slovenia.

Perched on a chair, Hannah played a piano accordion almost as large as herself. She began with a song from that first set with Kerfuffle and continued with some tunes, two yodelling songs she learnt from Austrian friends and finished with a very moving song she wrote last year about the shootings in a school in Florida: "... *friends fly high and dreams run deep* ...".

The second part of the first half saw Phil Beer join Steve Knightley to re-form the original Show of Hands duo for one evening only. They opened with 'Are We Alright' then Phil sang his favourite Sydney Carter song 'Crow On The Cradle'. They then brought Cornish Reggae to Shropshire with Steve's song 'Dreckly', taken from their recent album. Phil then went back to a song he'd hardly played for some 30 years since his duo with Paul Downes: 'My True Love'.

Steve and Phil discovered folk music as teenagers living around Exeter. They met John Jones at a local folk club when John was studying at Exeter University. Now, John joined Steve and Phil on stage to sing a song from their folk club days, learnt from Tony Rose: 'Twas On One April Morning'.

Back in 2011, Alan Surtees, together with EFDSS, commissioned a project to celebrate the life of Cecil Sharpe. Steve was a member of the project and wrote the song 'Aunt Maria' inspired by an encounter Sharpe had while touring the Appalachian Mountain area in the USA. Very appropriately, this gave the opportunity for Hannah to join Steve and Phil and demonstrate Appalachian clog dancing.

The whole audience then joined Show of Hands in the chorus as they finished their set with 'Cousin Jack'.

After an interval, Grace Petrie, another founding trustee, started the second half. She introduced herself as a left-wing protest singer and warned the audience that they might feel upset at some of her songs and were welcome to leave. No one did. In fact, she caught a mood of a majority of the audience with her observations and out-spoken lyrics about life in Britain today. She is very passionate about her beliefs with a powerful voice and also able to be great fun and make her audience laugh.

She took a song from the late, great Roy Bailey and re-wrote the words as looking back on her life and giving advice to her 16 year old self. She sang her alternative national anthem 'God Save The Hungry' and finished with 'Black Tie', a cry for young people to be and dress as they really are. This contained a rhyming couplet of which she is very proud and can't be printed here. You will have to go see her perform yourself.

The final set of the evening brought John Jones back to the stage, accompanied by Al Scott on guitar and Tim Cotterell on fiddle. John is the original patron of the festival whose band, Oysterband, were the underlying reason that Alan started the festival in Bridgenorth some 22 years ago. They performed a set of John's songs: 'No Ordinary Girl', 'River Runs', 'Ferryman', 'Henry Martin'. They finished with the resounding 'She Wrote Her Name Today' which had the audience singing along. In the middle of the set, Tim Cotterell led a set of fiddle tunes supported by Al Scott.

A raffle had been held to raise funds and to round off the evening, Alan Surtees own guitar was auctioned. This had been signed by both patrons of the festival – John Jones and Steve Knightley. During the performances, the guitar had been placed behind a curtain at the back of the stage. Spookily enough, while John and Steve were singing together during the Show Of Hands set, the wind blew open the doors behind the curtain which threatened to take the guitar away into the night air. Thankfully a man in the second row saw the danger and dashed onto the stage to retrieve the guitar. John, Steve and Phil continued the song without any of them really knowing why a man had dashed on to the stage, gone behind them and then returned to his seat.

Steve Knightley conducted the raffle in style and, alongside some dubious bidding aimed at raising the price, the guitar was bought for £300.

John Jones then invited all the artists on to the stage to join in the classic Oysterband closing song 'Put Out The Lights'. While this closed the first Alan Surtees Benefit Trust concert, the organisers hope to be able to hold another one around the same time next year.

The event raised around £4,000 for the trust which allows grants to be made to four young folk musicians.

Tom Povey