

DAVID BISCHOFF

IN THE BLEAK MID-SOLSTICE

This stozy results from a long trip Dave Bischoff took last year in Europe. He notes that while in France, he sought out a CD that Norman Spinrad recorded with Richard Pinhas of the group Heldon. When Dave couldn't find it in the 'Rock' section of the record store, he turned a corner and discovered a whole area called 'Rock Progresif.' "I'd thought that this magnificent era of rock had died in the Seventies," Dave says, but the music is alive and well in Europe, and its presence got him thinking...

The sun had long since set over Cambridge, England.

No spires dreamed here, though the occasional church tower stood apart in the darkness like some stolid stone sentinel from the lonely medieval times, all its builders dust. The chimes of the Catholic church rang out the hour of eight in the evening as Roland Andrews rolled his bike out of its moorings by his basement apartment and started pedaling for the Rowers Return Pub to see a dead rock band.

Well, he'd thought them dead anyway.

As far as he knew, The Wicker Men hadn't recorded since 1978, and his feverish record and CD hunts of the last two months here in the British Isles had turned up nothing that he didn't have already on vinyl or CD reissues.

Now, though, it seemed that they would be playing a gig in Cambridge and the notion filled him with anticipation and excitement he'd not felt for some time, here in England. He'd made no friends, had Roland Andrews. The English had all been very polite, but below the politeness was a chilly aloofness. He could understand this, since his books and papers had all been inspired by English methods of cold and clinical analysis. He himself had no patience with whimsy or fantasy. His view of the medieval world was clean and clear and atheistic, just as was his view of modern life. Reason and logic and truth: these were the beacons of his life.

Somehow, though, the scholars here, despite his efforts, didn't seem to like him. He fancied they were laughing behind their backs at his Latin, chuckling at the very notion that a person who'd studied their field had done so at some inferior university in the wasteland of the United States -- a place that hadn't even had a medieval age, for God's sake!

Andrews felt lonely, and so he took great comfort at the notion of seeing tonight's show.

It was December and cold, with a chill that only Britain seemed to be able to conjure as Andrews biked past the huge spread of land called Parker's Piece,

named after a famous Cricketer. Beyond it and the faint, almost numinous glow of the city's center were the famous colleges that comprised one of the world's most famous universities. King's. St. John's. Trinity. Peterhouse. All a jumble of Medieval and Renaissance and Victorian glory of stone and old, lasting architectural concepts. A haze hung like a faint hood over the street lamp. There was the taste of frost and grass in the air, and the smell of winter. Andrews had seen a Father Christmas walking in the Market Square today, and Christmas ornaments were going up in Marks and Spencer's.

He shivered in the thick coat he'd just bought and pedaled on up the road, careful of the traffic that barreled past him. Cambridge was a town of bicyclists. Autos tended to treat cyclists far better than they did back in the Midwest, where he was from. Still, although there were very few collisions each year, he did not intend to be amongst them. Besides, tonight he had a mission. He was going to see The Wicker Men.

The pub was just short of Grafton Center, an unfortunate modern mall perhaps a mile from St. Mary's Tower and therefore a candidate for student housing. Alas, what it held were the usual shoe shops and cookie stalls, food court and multiplex cinema that the United States had spawned so successfully.

Still, the Rower's Return was a satisfactorily English place, growing from the side of the road like some unredeemed Edwardian mushroom. Sculled and sour, it sulked amidst a welter of KFC and fish and chips wrappers, beaten but unbowed. Dour lights glimmered from within like memories of illumination.

By the front door, a man stood, taking tickets or selling them. Andrews had already bought his up at the Arts Theater Box Office some weeks ago for the monumental price of four pounds, amounting to somewhat over six dollars, American. He felt somewhat guilty paying so little for his favorite progressive rock band of the seventies, but then he figured he'd splurge on any CDs or tapes they might have for sale.

There were already about fifteen people in the place. The pub was laid out for performances in a simple, Spartan fashion, like a stumpy T, with stage at one end, bar at the other and a small offshoot side room with an exit into an alley as dark and uninviting as sea coal. Posters announcing acts in the future or acts of the past were tacked in a haphazard fashion on the walls. The floors were bare boards. Andrews's experiences of pubs before this had been of plush, inviting places --cozy, warm, colorful. This had a stripped down, functional look.

Back in the States it would have been called a "dive."

Nonetheless, the patrons so far looked typical enough of Cambridge. There were a few haggard hippie-looking souls in drab coats and stringy hair. But there were also a few academic and townie folk, bright-eyed and alert, sitting in the rows of folding chairs that had been set up, sipping at pints of cider or beer.

Andrews shook off the chill that still clung to him, draped his coat over a

chair positioned not too close to the stage and yet not too far. On the stage was a worn-looking drum set and a rack of Korg synthesizers with scabby peace stickers patched here and there, as though holding in the electronics. However, any kind of stringed instruments, usually found in this sort of rock garden assemblage like alert sentries to the proceedings, were notably missing.

Andrews put his notebook down on the chair, rubbed his hands together as much out of excitement as to get some circulation back into them. The place was warm and friendly enough, and though not exactly nice-looking, it had the sense of lots of good music still ringing in its rafters. There were spiffy amplifiers on the stage and racked on the ceiling, and a decently modern sound mix system in a booth to the side.

Andrews walked back to the bar. To one side was the one nod to a sense of comfort in the place: a sign displaying types of sandwiches and bottled beers sold amidst a bookcase of old books.

Above the bar were lists of ales and lagers and ciders sold, their price and their alcohol content.

The bartender, a chunky middle-aged man with no sign of gray in his thatch of black hair, eased forward. "Yes, please?"

"Hmmm. Just a John Smith's, please. That looks safe enough."

"Pint, then?"

"Yes. A pint."

The bartender picked a large glass directly from a cage drying rack, stuck it under a nozzle and proceeded to pull on a large wooden handle. Foamy dark beer whooshed out, laboriously filling up the glass.

"What time does the music start tonight?" asked Andrews.

The bartender glanced over at a clock. "Oh, I'd say about another half an hour. Yeah, half eight or so. These blokes though -- no support. Straight through till last call at eleven. Maybe a ten-minute break."

"You've heard them?"

"Oh yeah. They play here 'bout once a year."

"I'd thought they'd broken up long ago."

The bartender took Andrews's two pounds for the drink while he waited for the head to settle so that he could top it off. "You'd think so, wouldn't you. Naw -- they're like The Enid. Got their own studio and stuff But they pop up from time to time in this town or that --gigging."

Andrews knew the name well. The Enid. Robert John Godfrey, an art rocker who wouldn't say die. He and his group released CDs on their own label. Andrews got them through an import record service. But then, he'd never seen anything available from The Wicker Men. His heart raced.

"I never thought I'd ever have the chance of seeing them," he said.

The bartender smiled and gave Andrews his ten pence change. "Yeah, well, they're no spring chickens no more, that would be the truth," he said. "Roughest lookin' band I've ever seen. Still, they can play, there's no question about that-- and they've still got their fans. This place will start filling up pretty soon. Mind you, this ain't no Oasis or Blur gig."

"No. Guess if I wanted Britpop I'd go to the Corn Exchange or the Junction," Andrews said, citing the other, larger venues in town.

"You'd be an American then?"

"That's right. Professor on Sabbatical. Using the University Library for a few months. I'm doing a book on music in medieval literature."

"Well, the Wicker Men -- they go back to the Dark Ages, then, don't they?"

Andrews nodded and laughed. "Right. Like one of their songs... 'Renaissance Synthesizer.'"

"Well, you're in the right place for music of the ages...you can go to King's College for some Mozart or Purcell...come over here for some fifties rock and roll or Delta Blues...or groups from the sixties, seventies, eighties -- " A rueful smile. "Or, hell, even the nineties. They all want to come here. And you know why?"

"The decor?"

He laughed out loud. "Oh yes, right. That -- and the fact that the Rower's Return is a socialist collective. We don't stick pamphlets in your face, but we're all socialists here."

"And the Wicker Men...they're socialist?"

"Never asked 'em."

A few more people had straggled in and headed straight for the bar for drinks.

Andrews shook his head and got one more question in. "So why do you think I haven't heard about things like what The Wicker Men have been up to back in the States?"

The guy turned to him and gave him a piercing stare. "Mate, there's a lot that goes on here that you don't hear about in the States."

With that, the barman turned and took the first new order, his statement hanging in the air like a little puff of strangeness.

And he was right, Andrews thought as he made his way back to his chair. He sat down and thoughtfully sipped at his smooth bitter.

Andrews had been in England for close to three months now, and it wasn't getting that much more familiar. Of course, he realized that being from the whitebread Midwest had something to do with it. But dammit, he thought, quaffing the brew. He shivered. There was something elementally different here, and he couldn't precisely put his finger on exactly what.

He'd come in a hot, touristy August. England had been picturesque then, a postcard. Smiling bobbies, double-decker buses. Fresh-scrubbed monuments in London.

And Cambridge -- well, Cambridge had been perfect, just as he'd always imagined it would be. (Give or take a few thousand tourists, and the CamTour bus like a clot cruising the city's arteries.) Punts and pretty pubs on the Cam. Darwin's house! The exquisite lawns of college courtyards. He'd even once seen Stephen Hawking steaming along on his electric wheelchair, being pushed by the assistant he'd just married.

And the University Library! A scholar's dream, packed with books and manuscripts numberless and accessible. He could accomplish far more here in four months than would be possible in four years back at the University of Kansas. Each day he'd wake early, have tea and toast and be at the nine-thirty opening of the U.L. And he didn't have to venture outside again till the 6:45 P.M. closing, if he didn't care to. The tea room had coffee hour in the morning, "lunch time" in the early afternoon and "tea time" in the late afternoon. The very best and most famous scholars used it. Cripes, he'd just seen Germaine Greer in there today!

It was a scholar's paradise, and he loved it.

However, as the daylight hours shortened and autumn moved like a cold and humid specter across the fen-lands of East Anglia, instead of getting more familiar, England was getting stranger and stranger. The politeness of the people, at first delightful, seemed now to be merely a front for cold reserve and mystery, the eloquence of speaking a barrier. The buildings in their cold northern light seemed more like elaborate gravestones than monuments to architectural vitality. Cambridge, indeed all of England, seemed skewed and slanted into some different and not entirely healthy dimension. As the skeletal branches shook in the North Sea wind smelling of soggy East Anglia he could well imagine how the grim supernatural thoughts might have risen with the damp here over the many centuries, how tales of ghosts and fairies and weird wound their way through folk literature.

There was something slanted, canted here from the straight, what-you-see-is-what-you-get in the States, he thought. Resonances and dim

colors and stippling on this particular multileveled canvas of England that all the study in the world could never have prepared him for. The language, the knowledge, the study gave the illusion that Britain was comprehensible. Not so, he realized now. It was inimitably alien, coughing up color and processed culture to lure in money, but hopelessly foreign to those who cared to stay longer.

He was hopelessly fascinated by it all, yet somehow strangling for lack of oxygen. He felt cut off and alone in a subatomic land of strangeness and charm. His trip had been priceless, and yet for the first time he eagerly anticipated the bored, somnolent faces of his students again and the cheerful song of the prairie, comforting and solid and real.

In some Middle English readings on old manuscripts, he had come upon a fascinating passage: "The brownies and pixies and beasties live not just in the forest and glens, but in the pantry and the living room and in the streets."

As a Latinist, he was well aware from monkish writings and the grotesques in the margins of squiggling characters occasionally illuminated by real gold that many in the medieval ages believed that demons lived in their latrines, that those smelly portals were little Hellmouths that had to be dealt with gingerly and only at certain times of the day. Andrews could see aspects of this kind of unpleasant animation all over this odd island, and he longed for the simple, plain, and efficient toilets of home.

Still, there was art and mystery here

And that was why he was here to see *The Wicker Men*.

Somehow, all those years ago when he had first bought their records, they had intimated this bizarre, incomprehensible and yet starglow-majestic England.

As he pondered, he drank.

Dashed out of his reverie, he realized that he'd almost finished his pint. By now, the pub was half full, and people were still straggling in. Reckoning that the show was close to beginning, he went back, purchased another pint and then resettled, looking at the people around him. They were, for the most part, his own age. Fortysomethings, with glimmers of youth in their eyes. A few older, a few younger perhaps, but most clearly there from their memories of the seventies prog-rock glory days...and perhaps the shade in their presence of something more as well

They all had the range of Englishness in the aspects -- the cheekbones, the pale ghostly waspishness of thinning hair and prominent foreheads.

Last month, Andrews had gone to Guy Fawkes Night and watched as fireworks had smashed the sky with disquieting closeness, shedding pieces of dazzle onto the wet grass. And then: a huge bonfire had been lit, gobbling up a huge effigy of an eerie man: *The Guy*.

He could still remember the reflections of the flames in those eyes of the English, and the savage cheers of the children as the blaze danced and cavorted. They seemed to be peering back across the ages to another time --

He was half through his second bitter when the Clockwork Orange version of Purcell's "Funeral Dirge for Queen Anne" started playing from the loudspeakers.

Fifteen seconds later a voice erupted over the loudspeaker:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, from the bowers and bosom of The West Country --The Wicker Men."

A group of four men emerged from the shadows. They all wore cloaks and floppy, conical hats, from which could be seen long spills of hair. They all carried instruments -- even the drummer held his drumsticks. The keyboard player held a portable piano, which he strapped down onto the top of the synthesizer. A cable ran off from this to a box on his belt. As the others plugged in, Andrews could see that indeed they all had these boxes -- even the drummer's drumsticks cabled down to one.

No sooner were these surprisingly energetic fellows strapped in than the "Funeral March" was swallowed by the somber tones of the keyboard, starting a declaration of the dominant theme of their fifth album, "Albion Aluminium."

The drums launched and one by one the bass and guitar joined into the music, steadying it and launching it forward onto its sprawling, magisterial, epic, lurching way.

It was a full fifteen seconds into this before Andrews realized that he was holding his breath.

He exhaled and leaned forward, taking in the amazing wash of sound. He'd always loved the splendor of a full orchestra playing some item of timeless Bach or Mozart, Beethoven or Bartok. But somehow, this rough and smooth blend of amplified instruments, this bastard child of Benjamin Britten and Chuck Berry rattled his heart and soul to the very core.

The musicians were murkily lit and kept to the shadows as they played the ten-minute piece. Like much of the best of progressive rock, it was a blend of hard rock, jazz, symphonic music, folk, and perhaps even other music styles not invented yet, peering in from the future. By Andrews's lights it had, like so much other music of the past thirty years, started with the Beatles with their blend of orchestra and electric guitar, their fiddling with electronics and phasing. However, the mutant results were far stranger, and yet more familiar. The key instrument perhaps was the various permutations of synthesizer, organ and electronic piano, allowing the keyboardist to launch his fingers at the flick of switch into arpeggios of different sound. True, the bass pedals were amazing, and the guitar synthesizer was able to do wondrous things -- but it surely all began with the possibility of one man's talent turning into an

orchestra. The Mellotron -- that bizarre yet aurally delicious instrument -- had been launched by the Moody Blues, but then appropriated by King Crimson, perhaps the first true "progressive" group, the first "art rockers" coming into view about 1969. Then, of course, there was Procol Harum, whose blend of classical music and rhythm and blues had lit up whole vistas. Then the early seventies groups like Yes, Renaissance, Pink Floyd, Gentle Giant, Camel, and, above all, Genesis with Peter Gabriel had turned much of the rock scene into a glittering Venice of musical invention and delight.

So many other wonderful groups -- not just from England, but from other European countries as well. Groups like PFM and Banco from Italy. Tangerine Dream and Kraftwerk from Germany. All sorts of permutations like the medieval rock of Gryphon and the Elizabethan rock of Jethro Tull.

All this incredible combustion of styles and genius! This strange interweaving of psychedelia and classics and rock was a veritable explosion of musical evolution.

Then came 1977, when the garage reclaimed rock, stripped it down to attitude held together by sneers and safety pins -- and punk was born.

But before that, The Wicker Men arrived on the British scene.

When the first number ended, the audience exploded into applause and Andrews joined them.

There was a brief "Thank you" from the stage, and the band launched into "Glastonbury Fog." Another of Andrews's favorites, with a wonderful acoustic heart, surrounded by fairy harpsichord frills. He sipped at his beer throughout, and, finding it empty at the end of the number, went back and got a refill.

The Wicker Men were from the heart of Cornwall, and in their music was the sea spray of the Atlantic and the heart of the Celts. If Merlin the Magician had decided to join a rock band, Andrews had always thought, then surely this was the music he would have played.

Chimes and mandolins and krumphorns sounded from the keyboards. Intricate harmonies and counterpoint underpinned delightful and unexpected melodies. The music was a compendium of styles, but the heart seemed to be an English mysticism, speaking of primordial enchantments and startling discoveries of sonics and textures and intricate movings and churnings between volume and subtlety.

After a startling and resounding finale to "The Midwives of Bath," featuring a virtuoso bass solo that wound the throbbing theme into knots and then magic-tricked the rope of music once more into linearity, the lights rose a bit, and Andrews could see the faces better.

He was shocked.

Despite what the bartender had said, he was unprepared for how bad the band looked. The last pictures he'd seen of them had been from almost twenty years before, and they'd not exactly been young looking then, and one of them was already balding in a Phil Collins kind of way. However, it wasn't the aging that started him, the stringy gray hair and the wrinkles, the pot bellies and the saggy faces.

No, it looked as though the members of The Wicker Men had been in some sort of accident involving acid, fire, and explosives, and then had been pieced back together.

That was the first impression, anyway.

As he looked closer, as they launched into the spacier electronic number, "Rocket to Camelot," he saw that it was a trick of harsh light upon creases and hairlines and wrinkles -- and enhanced by makeup.

It was like that cover of Jethro Tull's first album, *This Was*, where Ian Anderson and cronies, all in their early twenties, donned old age makeup.

Only here it was like some George Romero flick.

Day of the Living Druids, perhaps?

That the effect was mostly brought on by makeup was encouraging. Nonetheless, the look somehow made Andrews more cognizant of his own encroaching middle-age. Still, the effect was mitigated immensely by the vitality, exuberance, mystery, reverence, and exhilaration of the music.

At this point, the band did a few numbers not on their seventies recordings, music with every bit of the melodic and inventive values, and yet a little more jagged with jazz, time changes, a little harder edge. Bitterness at popular rejection? A possibility, but for all the crunching and snarling of the guitar and the snap of the drums, there was still a magisterial sense of music as...as...

For these several numbers, Andrews groped for the right term, the proper concept.

With the tinkling of synthesizer chimes in a particularly poignant tune, and then the harmonic convergence of bass and lead guitar to lead to an almost celestial gasp of awe, he realized what it was:

Transcendence.

Woven from the mists of this strange island life, its history and mystery, its mingled peoples, somehow this music manufactured a kind of spell of explanation.

It said: There are more things in heaven and earth, Andrews, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

A rock critic friend of Andrews's had this theory:

The Brits, he said -- The Brits love music. The Brits love all kinds of music, from around the world, from their own islands. And when they have the talent to play instruments and sing, all they want to do is to imitate that music. But they are so odd, so peculiar, that the music comes out twisted and warped and wonderfully and inimitably their own.

This was the case with The Wicker Men, certainly, and yet there were things in the music that touched chords of the bizarre beyond even this insight.

You could climb inside the music and stand on an ethereal plane of myth and imagination made real, with twinkles of wonder and hints of scuttling night creatures in the caverns of the majesty beyond.

For an hour and a half more the band wove a tapestry of sound and texture. By the ringing cymbals of the encore, Andrews was blissed out of his skull -- and not just by the music. Somehow several more pints of bitter had found their way into his system.

A brief announcement that CDs were available at a table to one side was made, and then the band was gone, victims of the coming of that pumpkin-turning time in English pubs, eleven P.M. Andrews wished that they would play for hours more. Their music was so much more splendid and resonant live than recorded.

Nonetheless, the notion of CDs for sale -- albums he did not have in his collection -- was a satisfactory and thrilling one. Fortunately he'd just used his ATM card to get a healthy amount of money out of the bank. British CDs tended to be expensive and he braced himself for paying a lot of money as he took the last of his beer up to the table with the sale material. He'd already discovered an incredible amount of music simply unavailable in the States and could not help but buy it, even though it generally cost about fifteen pounds per CD -- over twenty-two dollars apiece, in U.S. money.

There were four CDs available with which he was not familiar, and at only eight pounds apiece, a bargain.

He bought them all, along with a T-shirt, and put his name on a mailing list.

As he made a large buy, the fellow behind the table was very friendly to him.

"I don't suppose," said Andrews, "there's any more coming out."

"Hmm. You know, actually, the band themselves might have another CD in a case we didn't get up. Called Equus Magister, as a matter of fact. Said that if anyone was interested, they could come up for the first fifteen minutes after the show. While you're at it, they'll probably be quite happy to sign these for you as well."

Normally, Andrews was rather shy about this sort of thing. He had to force himself to go up to authors who were selling their books and have them sign, even though they were there for that express purpose.

However, now, emboldened by the large amount of beer swilling about in his abdomen and brain, he followed the pointing finger of the guy behind the table to a door just a few feet away.

This he opened and found a worn staircase leading up to the second floor. The only lighting was a dim low-wattage bulb hanging forlornly from the ceiling.

Andrews, gripping his recent acquisitions in one hand and his half-empty pint of bitter in the other, walked up the steps.

It was like entering C.S. Lewis's Wardrobe...only quite a bit more worn and tacky. Faded posters of past performances, mostly ripped and patchy, were tacked onto the walls. He reached the top of the stairs and he heard voices from an adjacent room.

He negotiated carefully past a table.

He took one more long gulp from his bitter and then set the glass down. He took a deep breath and headed toward the open door through which the voices filtered like whispers from an alternate dimension.

He leaned in slightly, and rapped the door politely.

Inside, the band members were sitting at a table in front of a collection of opened and unopened beer cans. They were laughing amongst themselves at some joke, and, for all their exertions upon the stage, seemed not a bit tired. Towels about their necks, but they had not yet taken off their makeup. Andrews felt as though he was intruding upon an after-concert meeting of Kiss and Alice Cooper at some golden anniversary concert. They still held their instruments in their hands. Even the drummer gripped his drumstick in one hand, a beer can in the other, as he swung around to greet the visitor.

"Lo, mate," he said, showing a grim set of teeth. "Got some stuff for us to sign then?"

The keyboardist smiled as well, showing another set of bad teeth, many missing. Andrews had noticed this during the set, but he had thought that they'd been blacked out. The rotten teeth, closer up, were very real. "Come on in, then," the keyboardist said. His name was Gabriel Dickens, Andrews remembered. "Let's see what you've got here."

"Good Lord," said the bassist, Burr Larkin. "'E's got them bloody all!"

"Well, all that I don't have at home," said Andrews, emboldened by their friendliness. "I didn't even know these were available."

"All yes -- compact disks," said the lead guitarist, Roger Banham, wiping beer foam from his mouth with the sleeve of his jacket. "They brought us back from the grave, they did."

The others chuckled as though with some private joke.

"Actually, I understand that there's one that's not down there. I mean, they told me that I could buy it up here."

That caused a commotion and smiles all around. "You mean Equus." "Equus Magister, yes."

"You bought the other four...maybe we should just give it to 'im," said the bassist, the fretboard of his guitar wobbling excitedly.

"No, really, that won't be necessary," blurted Andrews. "I mean, eight more pounds won't make any difference "

He caught himself. The English were funny about money. Money was something rather impolite.

Still, The Wicker Men seemed to not be too bothered by the notion of either giving away the CD -- or taking the money. "Well, if you insist." The drummer got up and headed over to a cardboard box, still holding his drumsticks. He began to root through the box.

"Buy another in advance and we'll tell you the story of 'The Bloody Troll and the Frenchmen,'" laughed Gabriel Dickens. "You're American, then?"

"Yes, that's right...uhm...a professor from the Midwest. Here at Cambridge to research." He took a breath. "You know, it's such a treat for me to hear you. I know you Brits get embarrassed easily, but I have to say, I've been a fan of yours since the seventies."

"You're the guy, then!" said Larkin, and the others started laughing so hard Andrews thought they might fall apart. For all they were animated enough, up close they looked much more frail than they had on the stage.

"Actually, one of many -- maybe you should tour the States."

The others looked at each other, and the smiles momentarily faded.

"Here you go," said the drummer, coming back and holding a CD in his hand. Inside the plastic cover was the pictograph of a horse with a rider holding a spear and a drum, with the title and "The Wicker Men" spelled out in runish letters.

Andrews fished out his eight pounds and then took the CD.

"Have a seat!" said Dickens.

Andrews sat in the fatty chair that the man pointed at. It was covered with strips of masking tape and it wobbled, but Andrews was happy to have a place to perch. He felt a bit dizzy what with all the alcohol he'd consumed. There was a sour smell to the room, which didn't help, but his enthusiasm drowned all that quite well enough. Nonetheless, he couldn't help but feel as though he'd just dropped down a hobbit hole, and its odd occupants with their lilting West Country accents were welcoming him with decidedly peculiar tea and crumpets.

"Ere you go. P'raps you'd like a beer."

A large can of Ruddles County Ale was clobbered down in front of him. He really had had enough, but figured it would be impolitic and impolite to refuse.

"Yes, and if you'll just sign these, I'd really, really appreciate it." He tendered the CDs, and accompanied them with his Bic ballpoint. "The one I just bought too, please."

"Right. Seeing as you're the only one that's accepted our invitation, I suppose we can take some pains 'ere," said Dickens, starting the process.

An uneasy silence fell on the assemblage.

Andrews popped the top of his Ruddles, lifted the heavy can and drank, and two of the band members grinned at him approvingly, lifting their own drinks.

When he could drink no more, he put the can down. What to talk to them about? Who were they? He was terrible at making small talk, awful at cracking jokes. He'd already burst out with what a fan he was...what could he add to that?

Ah...the old failsafe...a question.

"Erm Do you tour much?"

It seemed extremely rude to ask if they had day jobs. Surely they didn't make enough from touring small clubs like this one and releasing self-issued CDs. Studio time, instruments, travel expenses: all that must eat money up. It seemed that it all must be a labor of love...and it must hurt terribly that they didn't receive proper compensation for their remarkable mystic accomplishments.

"Ah..." said the drummer, accepting the first CD and signing it with a pen from his pocket with his right hand. Still he clung to his drumsticks with the other. "Well, I suppose you could say we tour when the spirit moves us...and that would be about this time every year."

"Aye, the two weeks before the winter solstice," said the lead guitarist, "With the ghosts of Christmas in the air!"

"Aye. That seems about the right time for us," said the bassist, taking out the sleeve from one of the CDs and affixing his signature to it. "The moonlight

wears well."

"And the drink tastes right."

"It's really lovely, incredible music that you make, I must say. What would you say is your greatest inspiration?" asked Andrews.

"Well, it certainly isn't pound notes!" said the bassist.

That brought about laughter all around.

The keyboardist turned. His seemingly half-ruined face took on a thoughtful cast. He took a sip from his can of Ruddles and he held the small keyboard case close to him, like some sort of talisman.

"Aye. The moon and the stars, the sand and the sea. The roots and the hops, the sun and the freeze of ice rind on the leaves at the edge of the forest, and the shivering hare there. These islands have known wave after wave of peoples and souls and languages, and all of them had their musics and their magics. And then technology invaded And the musics and magics made that its own. But you know, Master Andrews, it is said that there were beings here before the first humans, beings of moon dust and starlight. And like the Celts, the Angles, the Saxons, the Jutes, the Vikings, the Romans, and the Normans, they mixed their blood and dreams and power with each succeeding wave -- and yet remained very much their own selves. Perhaps that is who we hear then, whispering in the brooks and pubs of our homes...singing in the telephone wires the old songs to the beat of electricity and internal combustion machines... perhaps we only play the music that these creatures of Britannica whisper in our ears."

There was total silence for a moment, except for the scratching of pens as the others signed the progression of CD sleeves.

Andrews felt again that he was in the presence of strangeness beyond telling.

"And then again," said the bassist. "We're just the progressive Spinal Tap and don't know when to throw in the fuckin' towel!"

Again laughter, and Andrews felt relief.

"Rock and roll imbeciles, heh?" said Gabriel. "Well, at least we make a joyful noise going out."

He held up his can of beer and saluted the assembly. They all dropped their signing pens and saluted as well.

Andrews picked up his own beer. He was so shaken, he found himself finishing it.

He waited patiently as the others scratched out their names upon the CD sleeves. Finally, when they were finished, he put them all in a stack.

"And if you'd care to stay in touch," said Dickens. "There's an address."

"You'll let me know if a new CD's coming out?"

"We'll let you know when the new CD's coming!" barked the bassist, still gay.

Andrews blushed with embarrassment. "Yes, of course there's going to be one..." He tucked the CDs under his arm and stood. "Thanks very much and it's really been great to meet you."

Farewells were made as the others returned to their beers and discussion. Andrews exited as Dickens lifted a wrinkled hand and gave him a nice toodle-oo.

"And could you just close the door behind you as you depart?" said Dickens. "There's a good fellow."

Andrews did so. Afterward, he had to stand for a moment in the hallway to allow his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

In the room behind him, one of the men started singing. Andrews recognized the words. "Where the bee sucks, there suck I." Shakespeare. A Midsummer Night's Dream. Puck's speech.

Andrews shook his head.

When he got back to the Midwest, the first thing he was going to do was go to Harry's Diner, get an American hamburger (he was avoiding the burgers here not just because they were bad -- but because of something called "mad cow disease" that was affecting British cattle), real American fries, a vanilla milkshake. He was going to look out to the vast panorama of prairies and wallow in the normality like a sweet lukewarm bubble bath.

There were a few stragglers left in the pub, and a guy was going around picking up empty glasses, stacking them one upon another and then carrying them behind the bar.

Just at the exit, Andrews thought to stop for a moment to examine his prizes before he took his bike ride back home.

The CDs looked wonderful, with vibrant, colorful artwork. No Roger Deans, of course, but it was the thought that counted. Across these were scratched signatures. At this point, he really couldn't tell which was which...but it really didn't make any difference. He'd gotten that other CD...

Or had he?

He didn't see Equus Magister right offhand.

Hastily, he shuffled through the lot.

No, not here.

Damn. He must have left it back upstairs!

He looked back toward the dark stairway that he'd just come down. How embarrassing!

However, he couldn't just leave it there. He wanted the CD desperately. Perhaps, in a more sober state, he would not have had the nerve to go back up and intrude upon the group. However, emboldened by drink, and desperate for the album (unique now, after all, because of the signature and the memory) he tilted toward the stairs once more.

After all, they had been friendly enough, he thought as he started padding up the dark and dreary stairs. They'd understand, and in fact be alarmed themselves that he'd left it behind.

"Look 'ere!" he could see them saying as they popped another bitter can top. "The American's left behind his CD."

"Oh dearie me! Absent-minded lot, aren't they?"

"Perhaps we should bring it down to him."

Yes, that was what they'd say, he thought as he reached the landing. Only he'd save the time for them.

Even though he thought he'd closed it, he saw that the door was open. Soft light seeped out, and there was that sour smell again, accompanied by strands of tobacco smoke drifting out.

Soft voices whispered and cans clinked.

Relieved that the door was open (a sign of welcome, surely) he stepped forward and entered the room.

"Pardon me," he said. "But I left --"

He stopped, stunned by the sight before him.

Three of the members of the band were sprawled upon the couch, like abandoned mannequins. No, they looked like corpses, mummified, dried with strips of skin sticking out willy-nilly.

The fourth was slowly sinking to the floor, slipping down from a bass guitar suspended in the air, gleaming as though in starlight. From the base of the guitar, legs like those of a hairy frog had grown, with webbed feet. From the frets now extended wings of fairy gauze. Mothlike antennae rose up from the tip, with big, shining, alien eyes, glowing with phosphorescent intelligent light.

Behind this creature of pixie technology stood the other instruments: the drumsticks, having grown butterfly wings and lemur eyes, fluttered above like a moth about a candle; long spider-legs had grown from the keyboard, and spangled eyestalks wobbled as they turned to look at Andrews, eyelids heavy with a diamond dew; and finally, the lead guitar, batwings aflap, a stem but not unkind elfish face turning around, eyes twinkling as though peering in from a different dimension.

For a moment a twitch of consternation trembled through this arbor of alien, fairy vines. Tinkling communications were made and for a moment Andrews felt a terrible sense of danger.

But then green leaves seemed to sprout from the lead guitar, studded with flowers.

They said something, and it sounded like a waterfall of cascading musics, dancing in a rainbowed glade: not words at all.

A tendril wrapped around a CD, lifted it. It seemed to float in the air, borne by moonbeams and mist, then hung suspended in the air before the astonished professor.

The voice sounded like a Mellotron attempting to speak.

"Please do keep your gob shut, eh?" it seemed to say.

"Yes," said Andrews. "Yes, of course."

He grabbed the CD, turned and hastened back down the stairs. Fairy music twinkled and glittered and laughed behind him like the voices of the spheres, divesting themselves of the garments of the moldy and rich earth.

--For 128 Harvey Road.