

**Tracy Grammer & Jim Henry - Live at Fulston Manor School, Sittingbourne, Kent**  
**- Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> December 2005, supported by Jack Harris**

There was a certain synergy, albeit accidental, regarding the billing of Tracy Grammer & Jim Henry and opening act Jack Harris, the connection being the Quiet Valley Ranch in the Texas Hill Country. Located ten miles south of the town of Kerrville, since 1974 and the third Kerrville Folk Festival, the ranch has been the home to this annual folk music smorgasbord. In late May 1998, Tracy accompanied her late musical partner, Dave Carter, when he was a finalist and winner of the annual Kerrville New Folk Songwriting Competition. Segue forward seven years and not only did Welsh born Jack Harris become the first non North American born winner of the contest, but I believe he's also the youngest ever - at the age of nineteen years, one month and one week.

As for the venue Fulston Manor head teacher Alan Brookes has been presenting around half a dozen roots music concerts each year, for the past three years, in the school's purpose built Millennium Performing Arts Centre. History will record that Tracy Grammer and Jim Henry, made their UK performing debut in Sittingbourne, in the county of Kent, in front of a capacity crowd of over 100. Further extending the Texas connection, I first saw Jim Henry display his skill with a *"piece of wood and steel,"* on the Quiet Valley Ranch, circa 1999, as guitarist for the Ithaca, New York based songbirds, The Burns Sisters.

Born in Builth Wells, Powys during April 1986, the oldest of three siblings, Jack Harris is currently a first year English Literature major at Jesus College Oxford. For three years, commencing at the age of eight, Jack took classical guitar lessons but as, Jude, his schoolteacher mother recalled, *"It was a sod to get him to practise."* Although he gave up the lessons Jack maintained an active interest in music, and went on to discover the music of blues artists Taj Mahal and J. J. Cale. Inspired, the youngster began writing songs soon afterwards.

Armed with a Taylor acoustic guitar, and with brother Harry on mandolin, Jack opened his Sittingbourne set with "Red's On The Bed," a tune that was recently posted at his "my space" web site, <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendID=41302170&Mytoken=A1FA4E12-03D7-4E95-B4C107EB8EFEE12788407328> . Jack's New Zealand born father, Russ, told me after the show that the title, although not the lyric, had been inspired by a poster that Jack saw one time that stated "Llanidloes Quilt Festival : Reds on the Bed." Extracting the latter part of the title, Jack added an apostrophe to Reds and wrote the song. After performed the song at home, having unknowingly employed similar words to the cold war spy syndrome of *"reds under the bed,"* Jack and his father had a conversation about that recent period in world history. As for the thrust of Jack's lyric, I guess the repeated line *"Think of colour baby, Think of passion"* hints at the song's content. On his own, Jack then performed "Oasthouses," a previously unheard composition – and, he noted, one of his latest creations. I have to say that Harris' lyric appeared quintessentially English, while, in terms of sound, the melody appeared to be, in equal measures, traditional and contemporary. It's a unique approach to song composition, one of its few proponents being the late Nick Drake. Prefacing the song Jack informed the audience that the lyrical images were inspired by the landscape he witnessed on a car journey from Wales to England, particularly over the border in Herefordshire and around Gloucester. Furthermore, he added, it was a journey where a tourist could be shown *"English things in quite a short space of time."* His poetic observations include *"I could show certain things that move like wind upon the conifers, Hear the seasons whispering"* and *"I could show you oasthouses, Look like crooked witches hats, And moss broken barns, Frequented largely by stray cats, And a kiln no one thought was there"* [\*]. Constantly on the look-out for the next goose-bump raising musical experience, "Oasthouses" has to be one of the finest *new songs* I've heard during 2005.

Next up, while raising a laugh from the audience, Jack recalled his time on Kerrville's Quiet Valley Ranch with *"The deal is, you're in a field in Texas for three weeks. There's none of that wussy, three day Glastonbury stuff"* [#]. On the ranch Harris witnessed three major thunderstorms and penned "The Devil And The Quiet Lightning." As a witness to such phenomena, I can attest that the power dispensed by these storms can be frightening, destructive even, and yet utterly beautiful. Harris has captured those aspect with *"I am the quiet lightning, smouldering electric and low, You can find me in valleys far below."* Although supported on a shoulder strap, while playing his guitar I noticed that Jack tended to it in an almost vertical position. His fourth selection of the evening was the already familiar blues based tune "Flesh & Blood." "A Plague On Both Your Houses" one of the songs that helped Jack to gain a winning

slot at New Folk 2005 followed and if you possess a knowledge of the works of William Shakespeare you'll recall that in "**Romeo And Juliet**," with practically his final breath, Mercutio delivers the frustrated curse "*A plague o' both your houses*" – subjectively, Jack's song possesses an equine focus. For his debut Sittingbourne rendition [of the song], Jack was joined on mandolin by brother Harry, with the added "*fringe benefit*" of a support vocal by Naomi Honour, a Fulston pupil. Having delivered the quip "*Thank you for being so kind and warm and welcoming. It's always good to show up and play a gig, and have people there,*" and [still] accompanied by Harry, this undeniably talented youngster closed his set with a cover of the Gabby Rodgers and Billy Ed Wheeler co-write "Jackson," which, as he recalled, scored Nancy Sinatra a U.S. Pop hit back in 1967 [@]. Delivered at a slow pace, the amusing lyric ridicules one man's attempt to prove that he is macho.

To date Jack Harris has released two CD EP's, "**Pathfinder**" [2003] and "**A Plague On Both Your Horses**" [2004] which you can order via his website at <http://www.jackharrismusic.com/> Next year Harris plans to record his first full CD, with Georgia born/Texas based singer/songwriter Eric Taylor scheduled to fulfil the role of producer. In a chain of seemingly endless links, the first concert presented at Fulston Manor Arts Centre in the Fall of 2003 featured David Olney and Eric Taylor.

Tracy and Jim took the stage shortly before nine 'o' clock and for the ensuing three quarters of an hour the pair delivered an energetic and musically varied [first] set. With Jim on mandolin and Tracy on her "new" fiddle [\$], they opened with the spirited instrumental segue of "Jackson's Tune"/"Tricksters Tale"/St. Anne's Reel," a track from Tracy's 2004 mini album "**The Verdant Mile**." While the latter pair are traditional tunes in terms of source, Tracy penned "Jackson's Tune" for Jim's young fiddle playing son. Both sets by Grammer and Henry principally featured Dave Carter songs, drawn from Tracy's 2005 solo album "**Flower Of Avalon**" and the Y2K sophomore album by Dave Carter and Tracy Grammer, "**Tanglewood Tree**." Taken from the latter collection, rhythmically speaking "Crocodile Man" is an infectious hoedown and with Jim on "sassy" dobro and Tracy on acoustic guitar, she prefaced the song with the insight that they had performed in Brussels the previous evening and had driven to the U.K., then added "*We got to use the Eurotunnel today*" while the ensuing "*I thought it would be a little more exciting*" brought laughter from the audience.

"Shadows Of Evangeline" the opening cut on "**Flower Of Avalon**" and the first of a segue of three selections from that collection, featured Jim on support vocal while playing his recently acquired light-green Albert Lee endorsed Music Man guitar electric guitar, with Tracy on acoustic guitar and lead vocal. Introducing the number Tracy delivered the insight "*The album has nine songs by Dave Carter, who was my partner for a number of years before he passed away in 2002. I made a promise to myself, on the day that I met Dave Carter, that I would do whatever I could to help make sure his songs got heard. My work isn't finished. Now we are in England, and I have Dave Carter right here under my fingers. Hope you like the writing. This song is kind of obtuse, but I think it's interesting.*" Retaining the same instruments, Tracy introduced "Hard To Make It" with "*This next song here is about a couple of folks at a bus stop. One is just a guy waiting for a bus, and the other is this girl – she's kind of hanging around the bus stop, and is not really interested in the bus - if catch my drift.*" Penned by William Jolliff, a lecturer at the Quaker founded George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, Tracy introduced the American Civil War song "Laughlin Boy" – about a real life conscientious objector to that war – by recalling that she first heard it many years ago at a house concert that Jolliff [and his son] opened for her and Dave. Grammer even induced the audience to sing the repeated refrain "Listen to me children I wouldn't tell a lie," after interjecting that, in terms of vocal participation by an audience "*I can tell you Holland does not – actually we had a great time in Holland,*" while Jim added, regarding the refrain, that "*You don't actually have to believe it, to sing it.*"

With Tracy once more taking up her fiddle and Jim on acoustic guitar, Grammer explained that they had "*met on the internet*" following which Henry delivered his first lead vocal of the evening, the traditional blues number "St. James Infirmary." Introducing the song, a track from his recent mini album "**One Horse Town**," Henry stated that following some recent research, in addition to its widely known New Orleans connection, he had discovered that the song was based on an old Irish tune. Retaining her fiddle and with Jim switching once more to electric guitar, the penultimate song in their first set was the Carter penned title track from the 2000 Dave and Tracy album "**Tanglewood Tree**," featuring a Jim Henry lead vocal. Tracy and Jim's debut first set [in the U.K.] closed with Carter's decidedly anti-war composition "Hey Ho." As Tracy noted prior to performing it "*This song is about the selling of war to children, the way it's pitched to our kids. What's really unfortunate is, the stuff is made in other countries*

by other kids. I'm not really in favour of that practice, given the state of affairs in the world. In 2002 Dave Carter wrote this song and I'm afraid it's going to be relevant for years to come." Needless to say rapturous applause followed Grammer and Henry's, respective acoustic guitar and mandolin, interpretation of the tune.

Naomi Honour vocally assisted Jim and Tracy at the outset of their second set on "Preston Miller," a Carter composition whose ne'er-do-well main character is *"the secret son of a chambermaid and master,"* and, therefore, a reincarnation of his father. With Jim on his Weber mandolin and Tracy on her Martin acoustic guitar, prior to performing the song, referencing Naomi, Tracy commented *"She's been doing her homework. She picked one of the weirdest and wordiest songs to sing along to. She picked a murder ballad. Should we wonder about her?"* Naomi having exited, stage left, the duo tore into the traditional toe-tapping instrumental "The 28<sup>th</sup> Of January," featuring Jim on mandolin and Tracy on fiddle. The **"Tanglewood Tree"** collection features a trio of songs where the titles begin with "farewell." At Sittingbourne Tracy and Jim performed a pair of them, and on the first, the fair and tender "Farewell To St. Delores," Jim played electric guitar and Tracy acoustic. Introducing the song, Grammer offered *"This song is kind of influenced by Townes Van Zandt, filtered through an Oklahoma/Texas bred mathematician/evangelist/ shaman/Buddhist kind of guy that Dave Carter was."* Jim took the lead vocal on his song about *"small towns everywhere in the States,"* "One Horse Town," following which the pair went straight into a guitar n' fiddle reading of the *leaving love behind* song "Farewell To Fiddler's Rim."

Tracy explained that while making **"Flower Of Avalon"** two studio versions of "Gypsy Rose" were recorded, one fast the other slow. The fast version made the album, and with Naomi up for another harmony vocal, with Jim on mandolin and Tracy on acoustic guitar, the threesome delivered a slow rendition of the sad and beautiful "Gypsy Rose." While introducing "The Power And The Glory," the sole selection from Dave and Tracy's 2001 disc **"Drum Hat Buddha,"** Tracy took a moment to recall first hearing the music of Jack Harris. *"I was aware of Jack Harris because a woman named Linda Silas in Texas, who is a big fan of Dave Carter's songwriting, brought him to my attention. Jack may not know this, but there are copies of his Kerrville performance circulating around the United States. He totally stuck out for me, and what I loved the most, was a poetic sensibility that I don't hear in a lot of songwriters - a really beautiful use of the language."* Having invited the audience to give Jack [and Harry] another round of applause, which they promptly did, Tracy added *"With all those nice things said you know it takes ten years to be an overnight success so just hang in there."* Merging his electric guitar with her acoustic, Jim and Tracy performed "The Power And The Glory," Carter's recollection of his mid-nineteen nineties pilgrimage to Nashville.

In a performance that contained a few cover songs, for the penultimate number Tracy chose Slaid Cleaves' "Key Chain," which featured Jim on dobro while she sang and strummed acoustic guitar. This country sounding tune first appeared on the Mainer's debut solo album **"Life's Other Side"** [1992] and reappeared on his commercial breakthrough Rounder/Philo release **"Broke Down"** [2000]. The duo's closing song, "The Verdant Mile," a fond recollection of her late partner that includes mention of Carter's songs "The Mountain" and "Gentle Arms Of Eden" and also name-checks friend and fellow sing/songwriter Richard Shindell, is the only Tracy Grammer composition to officially enter the public domain [to date], and featured Jim on dobro with Tracy on acoustic guitar and vocals. Following a clear minute of sustained applause [leavened with the occasional "more" and a few squeals!], the pair returned to the stage for their single song encore, and accompanied vocally by Naomi, they picked [excuse the intentional pun!] what is probably Townes Van Zandt's best-known composition "Pancho And Lefty."

Although it's been well documented on the web based Tracy Grammer Digest that microphone and monitor sound problems dogged the evening's proceedings, for me, it was never less than a magical musical event. One where Jack Harris confirmed what I had suspected from listening to his recordings – that one day he'll perform in the world's major concert halls. As for Tracy and Jim they lavishly brought to life their own melodies and lyrics, threw in a few covers and instrumentals, but, in the main, focused on the music of the late, great Dave Carter.

#### **Note.**

[\*] – An oasthouse is the name given to a hop drying kiln. Hops being a constituent element in the brewing of beer.

[#] – Glastonbury is a legendary, almost annual U.K. pop festival held on a Somerset farm.

[@] - Sinatra's version, performed as a duet with mentor Lee Hazlewood, peaked at # 14 on the Billboard Chart and later appeared on her album "**Country My Way.**" Johnny Cash and June Carter scored a # 2 Country Hit Single with the song, in the Spring of the same year.

[\$] – In the Spring of 2004 Tracy retired her long-time violin, which she had played for 20 plus years, aka The Wounded Healer. In a matter of days fans and supporters raised \$10K for the purchase of the "new" instrument.

Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles 12/05

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