

'Rock and roll was a lot sexier than skiffle'

Rosy Moorhead talks to Quarrymen founder member Rod Davis about the days before The Beatles

MUSIC

THIS month is the 50th anniversary of the release of Love Me Do and this week would have been John Lennon's 72nd birthday. To mark the occasion there are documentaries, news reports, a new West End musical and tribute concerts by look- and sound-alike bands galore.

Honouring the date in a slightly more unique way, at a gig at The Castle Rocks in Childs Hill, are The Quarrymen - 'The band that became The Beatles'.

The Quarrymen was a skiffle band formed by John Lennon in 1956. Paul McCartney joined in 1957 and George Harrison in 1958, the name changed to the Silver Beatles - and then The Beatles.

The remaining founder members reformed in 1997 for the 40th anniversary of the now legendary Woolton village fete where John Lennon and Paul McCartney first met, and have been playing across the world ever since. Their shows focus on the skiffle and early rock and roll they played between 1956 and 1958.



The Quarrymen: John Lennon (front left) and Rod (right), snapped by Rod's father in 1957

Rod Davis, who was the original banjo player and is now on vocals and guitar, first met John Lennon at Sunday school when he was six and John was seven, then they all moved up to the same grammar school.

"When I was 14, in 1956, all the kids were inspired by Lonnie Donegan," says Rod. "I found a second-hand banjo for five pounds and turned up at school the next day and told my mate Eric Griffiths and he said straight away: 'Do you want to be in a group?' That was the group he'd formed with John. They were all about three chords ahead of me and had to teach me the tunes."

Rod remembers John and his best friend Pete Shotton at school. "John was always a bad influence! He and Pete used to walk to Sunday school together and he'd persuade Pete to spend his pennies on bubblegum instead of the collection. In religious instruction one week he brought in a load of bits of old cardboard and made 32 dog collars for the whole class."

To us, more than 50 years later, the days of the original Quarrymen and The Beatles take on almost mythical qualities, but at the time it was just like being in any other teenage band.

"We played at the local youth club and a few parties," says Rod. "We got a gig at the golf club - the zip on my jeans broke and I had to hold



The Quarrymen with Rod Davis second from right

the banjo in front of me the whole time - and the Liverpool Empire and the Cavern Club. It was a whole load of fun. We were just doing our damndest to impress the young ladies.

"John was very good at fronting the band. He wasn't much of a guitar player but nobody was in those days - except George Harrison. We usually had only one mic and John would do all the singing because none of the rest of us were any good. He'd snap a string and take my banjo and I'd take his guitar and replace his string and then we'd swap back again. At the time it was cutting-edge!

"I was there the day that John met Paul McCartney but I don't really remember it! You think there must have been trumpets and angels, don't you? Their meeting must have taken place between our afternoon and evening sessions, when I'd probably

gone home for my tea."

Paul joined The Quarrymen in 1957, the same year that Rod left - because they were moving away from skiffle and too much into rock and roll for his liking, plus Rod wanted to concentrate on getting through the sixth form at school.

"The banjo doesn't fit in a rock and roll band and John had really got his teeth into it," recalls Rod, who has lived in Uxbridge since 1968, "and it was a lot sexier than skiffle. I thought, pompously perhaps, that rock and roll was more commercial, less pure - I found the blues and country side of American music much more interesting."

Rod lost contact with the rest of the band when he left, only seeing them from time to time. The last time he saw John Lennon was Easter 1962, when Rod bumped into him on the street in Liverpool. "He asked me what I was playing these days and I said guitar, mandolin, all sorts of things. He said it was a pity I didn't play the drums as I could have gone back to Hamburg with them."

Since The Quarrymen reformed in 1997, they have been playing regularly all over the world. "People really love The Beatles and are interested in where they came from," Rod says. "We're there to show people what they were like 50 years ago and the sort of music their heroes started out playing."

● **The Quarrymen play The Castle Rocks, Finchley Road, Childs Hill on Friday, October 12 at 8pm. Details: 020 8455 3501, www.thecastlerocks.co.uk, www.quarrymen.co.uk**

➔ **Did you get to see the original Quarrymen? Share your pre-Beatles memories at: times-series.co.uk**

Cabaret stars and comedians take on climate change

THEATRE

WHO would you turn to for advice on averting the end of the world? A Korean burlesque comedienne who's also the Alternative Miss World? A drag queen with a penchant for gardening? Or an experimental video artiste who has investigated Elvis impersonation? Yep, me too.

Which is lucky really, as these are just the people who will be offering their thoughts on the subject in *I Love You But We Only Have 14 Minutes To Save The Earth*, a collusion of cabaret, live art and film conceived by performer, director and producer Nathan Evans, which arrives at Artsdepot this month.

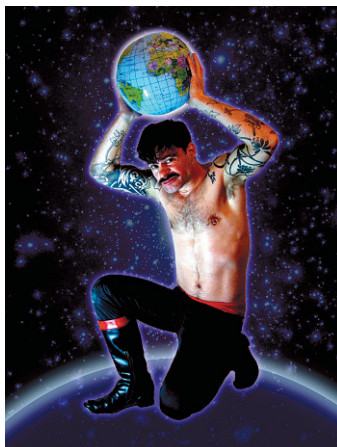
"Each performer has 14 minutes to tell us how they would save the earth," Nathan explains. "It's entertaining, very funny but also quite serious."

Nathan got the idea for the show from the TED Talks - Technology, Entertainment, Design, a website providing 18-minute talks by industry

experts - and Flash Gordon.

"I wanted to do something similar but with performance rather than talks," says Nathan. "And then Dale Arden's voice popped into my head hollering, 'Flash, I love you but we only have 14 hours to save the earth!' and I had it. I don't really know how I made the link to Flash Gordon - some weird processes of synapses in my brain."

The show features performances from Avant Guardian Angel, David Hoyle, the reigning Alternative Miss World, Fancy Chance, and Eco Worrier Extraordinaire, Timberlina. It serves up serious subjects such as ecology, spirituality and politics, injected with a shot of anarchic humour and a dash of



Director and performer Nathan Evans could be our only hope

radical glamour.

Nathan worked with each of the performers to create their slot. "Initially I chose people I'd been involved with in the wonderful world of cabaret and artists I wanted to work more with," says Nathan. "I thought someone like Fancy Chance had huge potential and I wanted to stretch her a little bit. And she had a fascinating history, which I wanted to bring in."

Fancy Chance is a burlesque comedienne, who made her way to the UK via Korea and the USA and has starred in shows and festivals all over Europe and the States. Her show focuses on her background and career. She was an orphan, found in a box and brought up in America. She now lives in the UK.

Timberlina's piece focuses on environmental issues and is based around

audience interaction.

"He's what I call the entree," says Nathan, "and David Hoyle's piece is more spiritually focused on transcending the earthly plane, if you like."

As well as these three main performers, there are also two films from theatrical radical Bette Bourne and experimental video artiste Kate Pelling. Bette Bourne was the pioneering leader of the Blue Lips cabaret group in the 1980s and his piece focuses on the Cuban Missile Crisis.

"His solution to the end of the world would be to have lots of sex," says Nathan, "but he doesn't put it as politely as that."

"Because of the performers we've got, it has an appeal to a queer and a cabaret clientèle but we're interested in expanding beyond that," says Nathan, "we want to bring it to a wider audience."

Rosy Moorhead
● **I Love You But We Only Have 14 Minutes To Save The Earth is at Artsdepot, Nether Street, Tally Ho Corner, North Finchley on Saturday, October 20 at 8pm. Details: 020 8369 5454, www.artsdepot.co.uk**