

Richard Dawson: Live from the Barbican

Doors: 7.15pm

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 60 minutes, no interval
Latecomers may not be admitted to the Hall.

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Richard talks to Martin Aston about creativity in lockdown and the pertinence of his album *2020*.

Just as the UK's live music scene fell victim to lockdown in March 2020, Richard Dawson was due to perform at the Barbican, an indoor extravaganza of handpicked guests that mirrored the breadth of his interests: Finnish, French and Japanese brands of avant-rock, British electronic pop and progressive folk, Georgian folk and improvised jazz. With that particular line-up to be rescheduled for 2021, Dawson is now performing solo, to a limited audience in the Hall and a live stream, but the show will still incorporate all those disparate elements that make his music a uniquely time-traveling, shape-shifting entity.

Dawson wouldn't wish it this way, but he admits that playing solo is, 'more my natural state. I formed bands at school, but otherwise it's how I started, until I toured my album *Peasant* (2017) with a band. I really love playing solo, though it's horrendous as well: you never know what your fingers are going to do! Every album I make, I try and push my technique, so when I play live, I'm a little outside my comfort zone. But I like that too, because mistakes can happen, which makes it more interesting.'

Dawson's approach to mistakes is part of a sui generis sound and vision that defies the concepts of normality and convenient categorisation. Initially a heavy metal fan, Dawson's teenage obsession with music led to working in record shops for ten years, which introduced him to a vast range of sounds, radically altering his tastes to experimental and improvised rock and multiple strands of folk music.

Through four albums Dawson developed an elemental and primeval feel to guitar and vocal; angular, ebb-and-flow dynamics, often at length (tracks over ten minutes are common); uncanny tunings, timbres and chords; an often coruscating and direct perspicacity with words that draw on everyday scenarios and intimate revelations. *Peasant* was Dawson's great leap forward, both in terms of wider critical and audience recognition, and its epic tales, set between the years AD400-600. Then, in 2019, he released an album he called *2020*, with more contemporary tales – a patchwork of joggers and civil servants, Kurdish refugees and UFO enthusiasts, zero-contract workers and empty nesters. In all of them, you could see something of Dawson himself, but also the state of a disunited kingdom.

Not that Dawson wants to align himself with any folk-troubadour tradition, past or present. Asked if the *2020* album represents, 'an unflinching meditation on contemporary Britain's psychic crisis?' as one reviewer heard it, and you can almost hear him shift uneasily in his seat.

'It's good to draw attention to the fact we're in a crisis,' he begins. 'But when I did interviews about *2020*, I realised I had nothing to add about my music, otherwise it's just an exercise for my ego. When I've spent so much time getting the words right for a song, to toss off words that end up in print can do damage. All I can say is that songs to me are like spells, and they can be very powerful. Rather than think in terms of genre, I place a lot of weight on the song, which is linked strongly with folk music, so I'd say I come from a song place rather than a folk place. I think it's an important distinction.'

Of course, if the year 2020 was a crisis, what do we call 2021? 'Not calling the album *2020* would have been helpful!' he says. 'But I hope the record is still relevant. The things people are going through are still the same, it's just that the pandemic has magnified everything. At least, that's how it's affected me. My good days are intensely good, and the bad are really bad.'

When lockdown hit, Dawson recalls, he and his partner Sally Pilkington (both current members of the band Hen Ogled) set up in their dining room, and recorded 49 albums - yes, albums, not just 49 songs - under the band name of Bulbils, all of which are available to download for free (but donate to charities

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if you can) [at their Bandcamp page](#) 'We tried to make an album a day,' Dawson says. 'They're very simple, lo-fi and ambient. Lots of synths and drones. They're to help people work, or just relax. For company, or for comfort.'

The early days of lockdown, Dawson recalls, 'were horrendous, but they had a certain novelty, like an adventure. Come June, when we had some big shows like Glastonbury cancelled, it started to hit home, and the last six weeks have been really rocky. It's all so ungraspable and unknown. But I've been reading a lot, and writing new music, and I'm trying to make a start on the lyrics.'

Dawson's next album will doubtless be as adventurous, spellbinding and tapestrial as its predecessors. In the meantime, his Barbican show will get him out of the house – and, in line with his embracing of mistakes, he will be dispensing with a set list for the night. 'Well, maybe I'll know just the first song!' he backtracks. But otherwise, I decide as it happens.'

Performers

Richard Dawson guitar, vocals

Stewart Lee interviewer

Created and produced by the Barbican



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