

Fairport Convention

Over The Next Hill

Compass 4391



Fairport Convention is:

Gerry Conway: drums

Chris Leslie: mandolin, fiddle, bouzouki, vocals

Simon Nicol: guitar, vocals

Dave Pegg: bass, mandolin, vocals

Ric Sanders: fiddle, mandolin

"Fairport Convention has always been a working band," muses bassist Dave Pegg. "We don't like being held up in the studio. We need to be on the road. We still love doing that – getting in the van and going."

It is this resolute drive and devotion, both to themselves and their legions of fans, that has steered folk-rock architects Fairport Convention through periods of uncertainty and transition that would have leveled lesser bands. Not only do they survive – they grow stronger, translating their experiences into consistently inventive art. Now entering their 37th year, the source of Fairport Convention's unyielding momentum is twofold. Part if it stems from their roots in English traditional song, the noble nomadic legacy of the troubadour is indeed deep in their collective bloodstream. The other key to their longevity is something few other groups can lay claim to: having persevered for nearly four decades, Fairport Convention has created their own tradition. They are the inheritors of their own legacy, a sound that is distinctly theirs but, like all traditions, thrives on innovation and reinvention.

The title of their latest album, *Over the Next Hill* (available via Compass Records on September 14, 2004), reflects their enduring commitment to continue on in the face of adversity. "The title sums up the record perfectly," says Pegg, who over the years has emerged as Fairport's shepherd and unofficial ringleader. "Even though this was a very difficult album to make," he continues, "the title implies a grand optimism."

Trials are nothing new to Fairport Convention, having been defined early on for their ability to emerge renewed from a variety of unfortunately circumstances. "There was a time," laughs Fairport biographer Nigel Schofield, "when Melody Maker magazine seemed to have the headline 'Phoenix Fairport' permanently typeset!" Beginning life in 1967 under the auspices of visionary bassist Ashley Hutchings (later of Steeleye Span, the Albion Band, the Etchingam String Band, and many others), Fairport shared bills with Sid Barrett's Pink Floyd and other early rock radicals. Their first sound was an inventive hybrid equally influenced by the American underground of the time, electric

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blues, and traditional and contemporary folk music.

The arrival of folk-steeped vocalist Sandy Denny in 1968, along with the blossoming of guitarist Richard Thompson's songwriting ability, pointed the future direction of Fairport Convention. Their two early 1969 releases, *What We Did On Our Holidays* and *Unhalfbricking*, saw traditional British ballads like "Nottamun Town" and "A Sailor's Life" sharing space with compositions from Thompson, Denny, and contemporary lights like Bob Dylan. A horrific motorway crash in May of 1969, which killed drummer Martin Lamble and Thompson's girlfriend Jeannie Franklin, sent the band into a sudden, reclusive spiral. Deciding for the first of many times to carry on, they returned in December of 1969 with *Liege and Lief*, one of the defining albums of British folk-rock. Epic traditional ballads were embroidered with electric fury, original compositions at last achieved the depth and weight of the folk tunes that inspired them, and fiddle – courtesy of new member David Swarbrick – was introduced to their sound.

What followed was decades of re-alignment, as members departed and returned with confusing frequency. The current lineup an ideal balance of seasoned vets and musicians young enough to have been originally inspired by Fairport's early albums, and has been in place for 6 years now. Bassist Hutchings left in 1970, allowing Dave Pegg to assume the role which he continues to hold to this day. Guitarist and vocalist Simon Nicol, present at the earliest gigs in 1967, is the band's link to its earliest days. Drummer Gerry Conway, a longtime fixture of the British folk-rock scene (that's him bashing the skins on Fairport spinoff group The Bunch's 1972 album *Rock On*), joined officially in 1998. Fiery fiddler Ric Sanders (previously of Soft Machine and Ashley Hutchings's Albion Band), signed on in 1985, while multi-instrumentalist, vocalist, and songwriter Chris Leslie hopped aboard in 1997.

This new lineup shone brightly on 1999's *The Wood and the Wire* and 2002's anniversary collection *XXXV*, but truly assert themselves on *Over the Next Hill*. The album was born amid much strife, as upheavals in Dave Pegg's personal life (addressed candidly on the band's website, www.fairportconvention.co.uk) forced him to sell Woodworm Studios: the band's home base for over 20 years. Along with the studios, Pegg was forced to dissolve the management and record companies that had handled the band's annual Croperdy Festival, casting that treasured ritual into uncertainty. The creation of *Over the Next Hill* demanded that the band to overcome once again.

"It was done under the cloak of some very strange things," reflects Pegg, "We pulled the band together and went into Woodworm one last time to prove that we still had a future. Over two and a half years of touring, we arrived at a great unity: the sound that came out was a very different Fairport."

Despite the difficulties surrounding its completion, *Over the Next Hill* is a refreshingly ebullient collection – palpably conveying the optimism inherent in the title. It's Fairport

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at their most rock-tinged, sporting a ragged, bracing overall sound. "It was recorded quickly," says Pegg, "mostly live in the studio, without any click tracks or anything. We went back and revised some things, but that live spirit shines through. It's up and rocky."

"The first thing that comes to mind about *Over the Next Hill*," Pegg continues, "is that Chris Leslie's songwriting has hit a whole new level. He is writing about true events and people – in effect creating real, modern day folk songs." Leslie's contributions, "I'm Already There," "Over the Falls," and "The Fossil Hunter" are detail-rich narratives that are still profoundly musical. He also takes lead vocal on Ben Bennion's "Wait for the Tide to Come In," an item unlike anything in Fairport's catalog: a streamlined, pulsating Lydian pop song. Muscular and melodic in turn, it is already turning heads in Fairport's set. "That's Chris on electric mandolin," Pegg says, beaming. "Sorry guitar fans."

Simon Nicol is featured on several lead vocals, while underpinning the band with tasteful rhythm guitar throughout. His is the first voice heard, on Fairport friend Steve Tilson's title track. The song's positive, forward-looking message is balanced by a series of sly musical and lyrical allusions to the past ("So far I've found 19," says Nigel Shofield) acknowledging the roads traveled before while still looking ahead. Tilson's other contribution also features Simon. "Willow Creek" is a charged retelling of the classic folk tale of the girl on the nut brown mare. "That one is very percussive," chuckles Pegg. "We're still taken folk-rock in strange new directions!"

Fiddler Ric Sanders contributes a suite of instrumental themes called "Canny Capers," which begins with Pegg and Leslie dueting on mandolins, followed by Sander's entrance on fiddle, all with tasteful percussion in the background. The song soon builds to a thrilling series of instrumental breaks, with charged drumming from Conway pushing Sanders to ever-more daring flights of virtuosity. Sanders goes in the opposite direction with his other composition, "Some Special Place." "Ric has lost several people close to him in the past months," says Pegg. Clearly their memory inspired this lovely, touching twin-fiddle instrumental.

While traditional themes work their way into several of the original songs, "The Wassail Song" is the sole purely traditional tune on *Over the Next Hill*. Debuted on the last Fairport tour, it is a typically stunning revision. "People may have heard 'The Wassail Song' before," says Pegg, "but they haven't heard it in 5/4 time!" Brisk and rich with tricky meter shifts, it sports a daring and musicianship reminiscent of Fairport's early years. Speaking of, they do revisit one chestnut from their past...

"Ah yes," says Simon Nicol, "our re-interpretation of our 'hit,' 'Si Tu Dois Partir.'" Originally recorded in 1969, the song is a curious translation of Bob Dylan's "If You Gotta Go, Go Now" into an ersatz Cajun romp. It remains one of Fairport's best known

songs, having reached #21 in the charts of the day. "I never expected we'd be re-recording this," Nicol continues, "but, but it seemed to go so well on the winter tour that we had to give it a go. Don't tell Island Records, but I nicked a sample of Martin Lamble kicking over a pile of plastic chairs and smashing some milk bottles from the original version, and I've slotted it in. Shame on me – but nice to have him back," says Nicol of Fairport's first drummer, who was killed in that tragic motorway crash of 1969, "What a life he would have had." It is the life that the current members of Fairport Convention have inherited: the sum of their tragedies and their persistence, blended with their own musical ingenuity and the bottomless well of tradition.

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