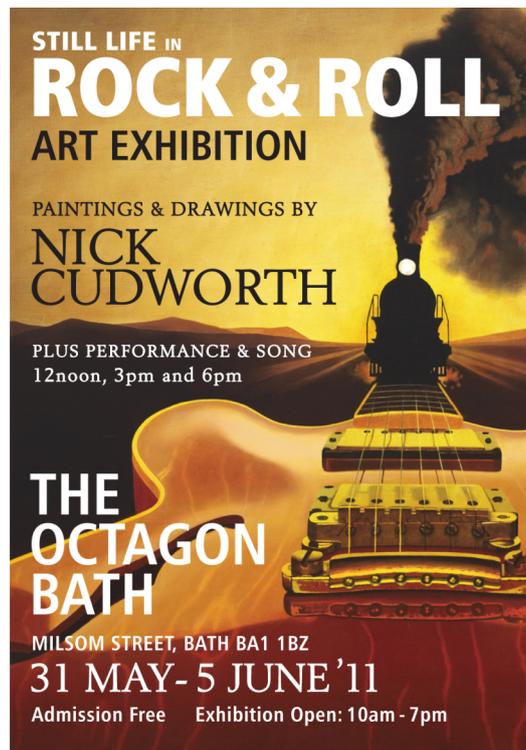


Still Life in Rock & Roll



There were these three men in a pub... It could have been the beginning of a thousand bad jokes (and a handful of good ones) but instead it has ended up as Still Life in Rock & Roll, a series of large-scale oil paintings, a coffee table book and a collection of songs, which will all be unveiled to the world during the Bath Fringe Festival at the Octagon Gallery in Milsom Street in the first week of June.

The pub in question is The Bell in Walcot Street and the three men are artist Nick Cudworth (whose gallery is a stone's throw from The Bell in London Street), writer Matthew Zuckerman and graphic designer Peter Slucutt.

The three started meeting in the pub at lunchtime half a decade ago and pretty soon the freewheeling conversations – a page from Hemingway's moveable feast in their own minds but more like an episode of Last of the Summer Wine to any curious observer – started to fuel their collective imagination.

So which came first, the paintings, the stories or the songs?

“The stories for sure,” says Matthew, who is putting the finishing touches to *You Never Can Tell*, the first volume of tales to appear from the project. “That’s where it all sprang from.” Nick is not quite so sure.

“We certainly batted the stories back and forth in *The Bell*,” he says, “but it was with a painting called *Roll Over Beethoven* that the whole thing really began.”

And as is often the case with the three men, it is up to Peter to complete the picture.

“It not easy to talk about beginnings because we were halfway into the project before we actually knew what we were creating. The paintings inspired the stories, the stories inspired the paintings, and they both went on to inspire the songs.”

The songs, all three agree, were the last to appear, although music – and specifically the rock & roll music of the 1950s – was always the core of the project.

Nick Cudworth’s life has always been mixed up with music, first as a Chuck Berry fan in the late 1950s, then a decade later with his mate from Derby Art College, Kevin Coyne in *Siren*, recording three albums for John Peel’s Dandelion Records between 1969 and 1971.

Nick then switched careers midstream, dedicating himself to the visual arts. His work has been exhibited widely, from London and Milan to Winnipeg and New York, as well as at his own gallery on London Street in Bath. He has also had portraits commissioned by Philip Larkin and his old boss John Peel, while a portrait of Ken Loach is in the permanent collection at the National Portrait Gallery.

Music remained one of Nick’s deepest loves and it has been a constant theme through a number of his paintings, so he is excited about bringing both his obsessions together.

“The songs were the unexpected part of the project,” he says, “but as soon as they started to appear, they seemed inevitable.”

The first song, *Roll Over*, was far from inevitable, though. It came about as an act of desperation after Matthew came across an article by Blake Morrison in which the novelist recounted his shock at the sums of money he was required to pay for the rights to quote just a few lines from a handful of songs.

However, song titles, Matthew discovered, were not protected in such a way, and an idea of how to save a bit of money occurred to him. He took down his boxed set of the complete Sun recordings of Jerry Lee Lewis and proceeded to shuffle titles around: “A whole lotta shakin’ goin’ on down the line,” he typed. “Lovin’ up a storm, breathless, all night long...” Four verses later, the first song was born.

“I’d almost given up playing the piano,” says Nick, who is a fearsome exponent of the 12-bar boogie, “so it’s a real joy to be creating on both fronts – at the canvas and the keyboard.”

As well as a CD of the songs Nick and Matthew have written together, there will also be a DVD with slideshows of the paintings and songs.

As for the book, Peter has brought together the stories and paintings in a freewheeling collage that brings new life to both.

“I was determined not to have any retro stylings in the design,” Peter says. “Ever since American Graffiti and Happy Days, the rock & roll of the 1950s has been stuck in a time warp, but these are contemporary paintings, new stories, 21st century songs, that just happen to have been inspired by music that was created 50 or more years ago. We’re concerned with what was timeless about the music – we’re not interested in trying to relive some imagined golden age.”

So from a table at the back of The Bell to the beautiful Georgian surroundings of the Octagon (remembered by many as the home of the National Photographic Society), *Still Life In Rock & Roll* brings the enduring power and majesty of rock & roll to life in paintings, in print and in live performance. The gallery is open from 10am to 7pm, 31 May to 5 June, with performances each day at 12noon, 3pm and 6pm. For further information, call 07779257989.

A selection of pictures with captions:



Mystery Train

by Nick Cudworth (oil on canvas): a detail of this painting is used for the book cover of *You Never Can Tell* by Matthew Zuckerman.



Good Golly Miss Molly

by Nick Cudworth (oil on canvas): featuring Jayne Mansfield and Little Richard and all the fun of the fair.



Still Life in Rock & Roll I

by Nick Cudworth: this is the image that lent its name to the exhibition, and which caught the eye of a passing Robert Plant, who came into Nick's gallery to share his enthusiasm for old record covers with the artist... and also to buy a few copies of the print.



Loving You

by Nick Cudworth (print on canvas): Nick was just ten when Elvis's first iconic film came to the Derby Odeon and much to his chagrin, he was only able to gain admittance accompanied by his mother – as it turned out, he was as startled by the couples kissing in the dark around him as by the still untamed majesty of the singer.



The artist at work: Nick Cudworth at the back of his gallery in Bath, up the road from The Bell where the project began. (Photograph by Matthew Zuckerman)

For hi-res jpeg versions of these pictures and other images, please contact gallery@nickcudworth.com or call 01225 445221 or 07779257989