

Venues We Love - THE BLACK SWAN, YORK

Oz Hardwick

It's a warm May evening and, while millions of Britons are voting for Simon Cowell's next cash cow, I'm one of the fortunate couple of hundred to be enjoying a pint of fine hand-pulled ale the City of York Folk Weekend at the city's Black Swan Inn. Invariably the pub's busiest weekend of the year, every room of this magnificent sixteenth-century hostelry is given over to singarounds, sessions and an all-day folk club, with a marquee out the back for yet more musical delights. And it's all free.

The event began a couple of years ago, a logical outgrowth from the Folk Day that preceded it, itself a development from the Thursday night Folk Club which has run since the mid-seventies and currently holds the prestigious BBC Radio 2 Folk Club of the Year award. This accolade was decided 'by professional working musicians to honour the often-lifelong contribution of those who run the venues which provide folk's lifeblood'. Just ask anyone who has played here (and pretty much *everyone* has) and they'll tell you how special the Wolfe Room – named after the famous 'Bold Wolfe' of the song, who lived here as a boy – with its wood panelling and leaded windows is.

Of course, it takes more than just the room to make a great venue and, though he may well shy away from acknowledgement, much of the club's success and longevity is undoubtedly down to more than twenty years of sterling organisation on the part of Roland Walls. Uncharacteristically for a club organiser, Roland is neither a singer nor a musician, but he has a passion for the music and an exceptional flair for organisation. Never one to venture within a mile of the limelight, he leaves the MC duties to an enviable roster of regular local singers. Always welcoming to newcomers – the Unthank Sisters remember their pre-Winterset visits with fondness and Bella Hardy was a regular visitor whilst a student in the city (and returned after her Proms gig) – many 'big names' such as Martin Carthy and Andy Irvine enjoy this atmospheric little room sufficiently to pencil it in as the smallest venue on their tours time after time. Crucially, this welcome extends to floor singers and listeners, too: there's none of the 'you're not from round here, are you?' atmosphere which can be found in some clubs.

Back at the Folk Weekend, nearly fifty acts from around Yorkshire offer a programme of ballads, shanties, bluegrass, blues, folk-rock and singer/songwriter material. And if the thought of two days of 'local acts' suggests fumbling amateur hell, forget it: you may have caught singer-songwriter and ace guitarist David Ward Maclean on tour with Jethro Tull last year; or, more recently, Edwina Hayes with Roger McGuinn (or perhaps you've heard Nanci Griffith's cover of Edwina's 'Pour Me A Drink'); whilst frequent club MC Phil Cerny is barely off the plane after sharing the stage with Jean Ritchie at the New Jersey Folk Festival and a 60s recording of long-

standing resident John Cherry has just been added to the British Library's National Sound Archive. Whatever Cowell and his cronies make of British entertainment, the artists gathered here offer ample evidence that York's got talent.

And so it is every Thursday at the Black Swan. Get yourself a pint of whichever brew takes your fancy and head up the impressive staircase to this historic little room where the regular pulse of 'folk's lifeblood' – courtesy of guests and locals – is as good an indicator as you'll get of the tradition's continuing rude health.

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Written by **Oz Hardwick** and first published in the series **Venues We Love** in eclectic music magazine **R2**, Vol 2 No 17, September/October 2009

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R2 (formerly known as Rock 'n' Reel) is published bi-monthly and covers "roots, singer-songwriter, folk, rock, world and blues". It is available through newsagents (distributed by Comag) or on subscription. Each issue includes a covermount CD.

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