



Jason Wilson, Dave Swarbrick and David Francey

Rebel Music

Iconic British fiddler Dave Swarbrick has a new lease on life, playing roots reggae with a couple of Canadians — musical visionary Jason Wilson and his new best pal, David Francey. Colin Irwin hears how they unite Robert Burns with Bob Marley.

Five years ago a painfully weak Dave Swarbrick couldn't even pick up a fiddle, let alone play one. When Dave Pegg, his old Fairport Convention partner in crime, visited him in hospital armed with strawberries, Swarb couldn't summon the strength to lift one to his mouth. ("Oh yeah," said another ex-Fairport mate, Maartin Allcock, when he came visiting and heard the story, "I had a strawberry like that once...")

In those dark days we scarcely dared imagine that Swarb, one of Britain's most dearly loved and iconic folk figures, would ever again thrill a live audience with his flying bow and his instinctive, wonderfully dextrous music. We certainly didn't think he'd ever get on a plane to cross the Atlantic to play on stage in front of Canadian audiences.

But during all those stricken weeks and

months suffering from emphysema, which ultimately led in 2004 to a double lung transplant operation—not to mention the long, dogged, painful, uncertain recovery that followed—one person never stopped believing it would end happily and he'd eventually make it back on the road: Swarb himself. You can't help but offer admiration for the courage and strength of character he drew on to overcome such traumatic health problems, but he's quick to cut you short.

"The thing is, all I had to do was be there. I just had to turn up. I didn't have a choice, I just had to go along with it. Yes, there were bad moments, but the human spirit forgets all that and I don't think about that at all. I wasn't able to run away from it and I didn't know if I'd come through it or not. I veered between extreme optimism and pessimism. It just seemed ridiculously crazy, this idea that you can fit body parts into another human being. I mean, I remember when Dr. Christiaan Barnard did the first heart transplant, but now I'm getting e-mails from people who had heart and lung transplants 22 years ago and are still going strong.

"But I never once thought I wouldn't play again or tour again. If I'd thought that, then I really would have got depressed. That kept me going in some ways. I'm just immensely grateful to have come through it. It is life-changing when something like

that happens and I don't take anything for granted anymore. I keep counting my blessings. I'd ask everyone, 'Please donate your bits', because they could help someone else to live."

Swarb is wonderfully animated. "I'm babbling," he admits, after a brief pause for breath. But it's the babble of a man enthused not only by a physical rebirth but a musical one, too, courtesy of Toronto's own Jason Wilson. Swarb has had many adventures with numerous bands, from his earliest days playing guitar with pianist Beryl Marriott, developing into the fresh-faced young fiddle maestro who stopped people in their tracks with the Ian Campbell Folk Group, to a long partnership—still revived at regular intervals—with Martin Carthy. And, most famously, in his decade with Fairport Convention (1969-1979) when he practically invented and defined the notion of electric violin.

Originally inducted to add a fiddle part to Fairport's recording of Bob Dylan's *Cajun Woman*, he joined permanently following Sandy Denny's departure to become the band's central pivot, taking over as lead singer and driving force and even writing perhaps their most ambitious work, *Babcomb Lee*, a concept album telling the incredible story of John Lee, the man they couldn't hang.

There have been various other bands and projects along the way since then, of course, like Whippersnapper (with Martin Jenkins, Chris Leslie and Kevin Dempsey), plus an underrated partnership with Alistair Hulett and the wryly named post-transplant outfit Lazarus.

He's played some extraordinary music through the years, put in some legendary live performances, and made any number of hugely influential records, but coming to Canada to play with Jason Wilson and David Francey is probably one of his most left-field projects... and one of his most inspirational. Swarb is blessed with a natural talent that enables him to slot with apparent ease into any musical environment. His longtime collaborator, Martin Carthy, still talks in wonder how Swarb would work in a new fiddle arrangement on the hoof on stage while Carthy played and sang. But, at the age of 68, double lung transplant and all, Swarb flew to Canada to play with a reggae band for a few dates in May—with a

return visit planned for August to star at the Edmonton Folk Music Festival. Swarb is tickled pink by this unexpected new career opportunity.

It happened through one of those happy coincidences that almost seem preordained. Jason Wilson, keyboard player and singer with reggae artisans Tabbaruk, is a musical visionary who refuses to recognize musical boundaries. Raised around a large Jamaican community in Keele and Finch in North Toronto, he grew up listening to reggae and was mentored by the late Jackie Mittoo of Skatalites fame. Reggae has always been part of his DNA, fully reflected by his bands and the five albums he's made (plus a six-track EP that featured Alanis Morissette at the same time she was recording the *Jagged Little Pill* album, which turned her into an international megastar!)

Yet while he is Toronto born and bred, Jason is also of Scottish stock and folk music is inevitably also part of his DNA, too, even if he didn't know it until his brother-in-law introduced him to Fairport Convention and that man Swarbrick.

Meanwhile, over in Birmingham, England, the Campbell family were having a parallel experience. They'd moved from Scotland into a district of Birmingham with a strong Jamaican community with the result that folksinger Ian Campbell's sons, Ali and Robin Campbell, formed a reggae band. They called themselves UB40 and went on to become international superstars. Their keyboard player throughout their spectacular rise was Michael Virtue, who just happened to be Jason Wilson's cousin.



David Francey

"It's lovely playing with young blokes again... with all their intensity and energy. It reminds me so much of the early days of Fairport. Just rehearsing with them is great, the energy they create keeps me going."

— Dave Swarbrick

There's a real synchronicity here, not only between folk and reggae but the Wilsons and the Campbells. Ian Campbell was a prominent and influential figure in the early days of the British folk revival, both as a singer and songwriter. His band, featuring Dave Swarbrick, was one of the U.K. folk scene's biggest attractions in the 1960s. Jason Wilson's UB40 connections and his desire to introduce more of a folk edge into the reggae mix led him to wonder about the possibility of getting Swarbrick to play on his CD, *The Peacemaker's Chauffeur*, a double album set into two sections, *War and Peace* ("it took as long to make it as it took Tolstoy to write the book.")

He'd decided to reflect his own disparate roots in a series of collaborations. His mom, Jessie Wilson, opens the album playing bagpipes on *Flowers of the Forest*, and with Ernest Ranglin, Jackie Mittoo, Pee Wee Ellis and Brinsley Forde of Aswad on board he decided to approach Swarbrick, too.

The track he wanted him on was the classic murder ballad *Marry Groves*, which Fairport Convention had seminally recorded on *Liege & Lief* in 1969, with Swarb's soaring violin runs a key element of the track's epic stature. Would Swarb care to reprise that part, albeit in a jazz/reggae style? He'd



Dave Swarbrick



Jason Wilson

never met Swarb and thought he might get his ear chewed off. Swarb was mad for it.

"I wasn't sure what his reaction would be, but he loved the whole idea. We've done it with a straight reggae rhythm with an epic ska ending in double time. The horn guys are jazz musicians and there are some strange chords in there but Swarb just slotted into it superbly."

Not only that, when Jason said he also wanted to cover Ian Campbell's epic anti-war tale *The Old Man's Song*, Swarb not only agreed to play on that also, he volunteered to row in Ian Campbell himself to sing on the track.

"I just couldn't believe it. Duncan Campbell drove Ian to Swarb's house and he recorded his bit and sent it over—it sounds great. I don't see a problem with merging these different sorts of music. I think reggae and folk speak to each other, they're both rebel music. I'm a white Scottish guy playing reggae music for a living and I make no apologies about that. It's not like I'm singing about Rastafarianism or obtuse Jamaican things. I'm doing stuff relevant to me.

"We went to Jamaica recently and the Jamaicans didn't have any problem with it. Musicians don't have a problem with it, so I don't see why anyone else should. I did this thing with Sly & Robbie where I was musical director and was counting them in. If I can get a seal of approval from Sly & Robbie I don't really care what other people think."

Dave Swarbrick clearly has no problem with it either. "I'm enjoying it immensely," says Swarb. "Jason is a wonderful keyboard

player and they've got this great reggae beat. But the horn section are jazzers and it's lovely to play with them. I find myself bending the notes a bit and play to the back of the beat but other than that I play in my usual style and it's great fun and very relaxed.

"It's something I've never done before... and I've never heard anyone else do it before either. Jason does this version of *My Love Is Like A Red Red Rose*, which suddenly goes into *No Woman No Cry*, and it's beautiful, the join is seamless. It's really off the wall but it's a breath of fresh air, and even lyrically it works. And then they launch into *It Suits Me Well* (the Sandy Denny song), which is also amazing.

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Joining this improbable pairing: Scottish-born, multiple Juno-award winning songwriter David Francey. Who, oddly enough, was brought into the world by the same doctor who delivered Jason's dad.

"I saw David perform at Hugh's Room in Toronto a few years ago and instantly fell in love with his songs, his presentation and his incredible command of storytelling," says Wilson. "So I, because I have no shame, introduced myself to him and told him we shared the same heritage. We've been friends ever since."

Jason later recorded a version of Francey's *Borderline* and sent it to him. He was thrilled.

"I suppose that's really where the idea germinated, namely, what would a set of David's songs sound like with our reggae treatment? Still, I must say that I pinch myself to think that David actually agreed to go for it—I mean, he's really stepping out of his comfort zone. I don't think he actually had ever played with a full band replete with horns."

Swarb himself is planning a solo album later this year of 17th and 18th century English music, but having "de-resurrected" his last band Lazarus, he's keen to do more recording and touring with Jason Wilson to explore the further possibilities of combining reggae, jazz and folk.

"I'm in good health and playing this stuff I feel like a teenager—I can't believe my luck," he says.