

FIELDNOTES  
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Bill DiNome, my friend and UNCW colleague, consulted Wikipedia, the Library of Alexandria of our time, to find out what happened in 1983 that nearly turned us all into turkey burgers. (In a recent issue of Fieldnotes, I mentioned the event but could not myself remember anything about. Several of you, as in the dark as I was, requested me to pass along any further information I might acquire.) So what happened was that a handful of high-tech, nuclear-armed U. S. Air Force bombers, on a routine constabulary patrol over the Arctic, suddenly changed course and began making a beeline toward Moscow, to drop their nuclear payloads on the Soviet Union. Now who in the U.S. government, or military chain of command, would have ordered such a thing...and why? Well, no one “ordered it.” A minor, virtually undetectable flaw in the wiring of the electronic communications systems *specifically designed to prevent that very malfunction*—caused the....

Oh, hang on...I’m confusing the plot for *Failsafe*, 1964’s Hollywood bleak, apocalyptic thriller, with what happened in 1983. Late in ‘83, a U.S.S.R. early-warning system alerted the Soviet military that the U.S.A. had just launched ICBM missiles at Moscow. In response, the Reds declared—to quote Bugs Bunny—“Of course, you know that *this...means...WAR!*” Fortunately, though, it turned out to be a *false alarm*, thanks to an electronic glitch in the Soviet air-defense communications systems. The misunderstanding got ironed out and we all made it through the ‘Eighties.

But enough about nuclear terror and Cold War! Would you attend a tribute to Welsh superstar Tom Jones by a Tom Jones impersonator? I would—and did. Last Thursday, a small poster advertising a local “Charity Night” concert caught my eye. Among the acts (four or five singers, and one comedian, who also served as the emcee) was a fellow named Dean Jones, billed as a Tom Jones impersonator. I had always liked Tom Jones in late 1960s and early ‘70s. His enthusiastically robust machismo went appealingly over the top. I long ago had incorporated several of his hits into the repertoire I perform on long solo drives on the freeway.

Charity Night took place right on Thursday night, at St. James’s Social Club, located in St. James’s Crescent, in the hilly Uplands entertainment district above the city centre. Inside, the establishment looks something like a U.S.A. veterans’ club or Midwestern grange hall: a large rectangular space sectioned into front and rear sections; a compact but adequately stocked bar tucked into one corner as you enter,

a pinball game console alongside, its bank of multi-colored lights flashing; and nearby, a bulletin board clotted with handbills, business cards and a variety of Pinterest-like ephemera; in back, a function area, ringed by restaurant-style booths, opened out from a small stage nestled at the vertex of two walls. The stage and booths enclosed a couple of rows of folding tables and rickety wooden chairs, and a couple of weight-supporting pillars that obscured some sightlines.

Charity Night's proceeds would benefit the Wales Air Ambulance and a major local hospital. The event had drawn a nicely-dressed, well-behaved, relatively older crowd: Most attendees appeared to have living memory of Tom Jones's heyday; and some, I suspect, also had living memory of, say, the abdication of Edward, Prince of Wales, and his marriage to Mrs. Simpson. Many gents in attendance looked like formerly hardscrabble guys—perhaps they had worked as miners prior to the end of the South Wales's mining industry.

At 7.30, the emcee, a comedian named January Rees, started the show. She favored blue humor—and I mean bright, Pan American Airlines blue—in her opening and, throughout the evening, her patter between acts. January told exactly one clean joke all night. It was: “Me grandfathe’ was a hand grenade instructo’ with the Forces. Dreaded him changing me nappy—he’d pull the pin and chook me out the window!”

The Tom Jones tribute was in fact the last of the six or so acts. Dean Jones did not flawlessly channel Tom, but he enjoyed himself while giving it everything he had; and his basic talent enabled one to listen to him comfortably and feel entertained. He sang several of Tom Jones's signature tunes—“Green, Green Grass of Home,” “She's a Lady”—and invited the audience to sing along, which we did. Near the end of his set, Dean announced, “Two years ago, you'd never have caught me doing this. I was petrified of the public. But now...here I am. So, you can do it—you can do it!”

Other performers were also pleasantly talented amateurs or semi-professionals. Two performers each sang a different hit associated with Bonnie Tyler, the veteran rocker who lives in Swansea. (Bonnie unfortunately chose to stay home that night, though.) Bonnie's “Total Eclipse of the Heart” is on my top-five list of guilty-pleasure songs and Eve Sharratt nailed it dramatically. Christian Rae, exceptionally charismatic, sang “At Last,” the Etta James chestnut, and “Cry Me a River,” the old 1950s Julie London torch song. The showstopper of the night, though, was Liza Starlight's rendition of “Myfanwy,” a beloved Welsh song, which always appears in U.S. American movies about Wales (e.g., *How Green Was My Valley*)—films the Welsh tend to think are rubbish, by the way. Liza's interpretation brought a tear to my eye,

as well as to many other eyes in the room, and the singer earned an extended standing ovation.

This past Friday, the international students, among them UNCW's study-abroad participants, registered for classes (which are called *modules* here). At Swansea University, a student must visit a faculty member's office to solicit the instructor's signature on a form, which thereby registers the student in that module. An administrator explained to me that the university's budget has not yet allowed for a conversion to an online registration system. Reliant on shoe leather, pen and paper, Swansea Uni's registration process had long caused much stress for international students. Many departments now arrange for that department's professors to assemble in one room for an hour or two on internationals' registration day, to sign forms for the students. Indeed, on Saturday, during our excursion to Bath, England, several UNCW students told me that registration went smoothly for them.

Bath—a lovely city, once the site of a Roman settlement—was completely packed on this chilly, misty, rainy winter Saturday. The U.S. American students visited Bath to explore the town in general, and in particular, to inspect the Roman bath, long ago an opulent Roman meeting spot for gossip, relaxation, exercise and, of course, communal bathing. But actually, it seemed, the primary attraction for most visitors to Bath is shopping. Mom-'n'-Pop stores, international chains (The Gap, L'Occitane, etc.), British chains constituted perhaps the densest concentration of retail opportunity I've seen outside of Freeport, Maine. At about 2.00 p.m. I began searching for a quiet tea room where I could warm up and read the newspaper. Every one of them: overflowing, 20-minute waits. I finally ended up at a Costa Coffee (the Starbucks-like British chain) and secured the very last seat available.

Back to Friday morning: I visited the Psychology Dept., located on the eighth floor of Vivian Tower, one of the tallest buildings on campus, about 10 or 12 stories high. Inside the main entrance, no elevator could I see. Oh, well, I thought, so I'll walk, get some exercise. Well, by the fourth floor, I was slowing way down. By the sixth floor, I felt the burn in my thighs and calves. Finally, on the eighth, I found the Psych. Office. Perspiring, I asked for the information I sought, and tried to catch my breath. I asked the admin assistant, "So do you hike up and down to and from this office every day?"

"Oh, no," she assured me, "I take the lift."

I suddenly remembered the old bit about the French Foreign Legion recruit and the camels.