# Contempt for the Warmongers

## **Review: Richard Thompson Band, Bristol Beacon, Sunday 26th May 2024**

## by Paul Farmer

A UK concert by Richard Thompson is an occasion and there was a real feeling of excitement in the wide-open vestibules of this newly-refurbished (and renamed) venue.

This powerful performance began with the sinuous Freeze from new LP Ship to Shore, Thompson sporting a fetching pink Stratocaster and his familiar starred beret, alongside Taras Prodaniuk on bass, Zak Hobbs on guitar and mandolin, Zara Phillips on vocals and acoustic guitar and the legendary Dave Mattacks on drums.

Richard’s first LP Henry the Human Fly was released in 1972 and it’s hard to count the number of albums he has released since–quite apart from the five he released with Fairport Convention. He is one of the great songwriters, and the scope of this back catalogue creates a repertoire that is astonishingly rich: next came the uncompromising sneer of 1999’s Hard On Me, with Thompson laying back while Zak Hobbs took a solo, then the country-like swing of Withered and Died from 1974 and his days partnering wife Linda. Then we are bang up to date with The Old Pack Mule from the new album and it is a measure of the strength of Ship to Shore that its songs stand up so well in this company.

Great song succeeds great song. At one point the band leaves Thompson alone on stage–‘Think it’s some sort of industrial dispute’ he says–to perform the beautiful, heart-breaking Beeswing, his love story about a laundry girl who breaks free to roam the roads, determined to achieve freedom whatever the cost. It begins in 1967, as did Thompson’s career when Fairport Convention was signed by hip Svengali Joe Boyd, astonished by the teenage Thompson’s playing. He is a genuine guitar hero and when he stretches out this evening his solos seem almost verbal, often ironic, sometimes a howl of despair and then a shout of defiance.

With his work rooted in the period of a counterculture that laid claim to a life beyond profit and class, Thompson’s songs have much to say about the ways we live together and the things that happen between us. In a moving tribute Thompson and band played a magisterial rendition of John the Gun, a song by his friend the late Sandy Denny, its contempt for warmongers a significant choice in a time of nihilistic mass slaughter. The same was true of Thompson’s own Guns Are the Tongues, about people driven to armed resistance because it’s ‘the only sound that will reach their ears’.

Powerful, magisterial, genuine, beautiful–yes, and funny too. Thompson and band are touring the UK now and you should seize the chance to experience them. There’s not much that can compare.