Barclay James Harvest circa 1972.
Clockwise, from left: Woolly Wolstenhome,
Les Holroyd, John Lees and Mel Pritchard.

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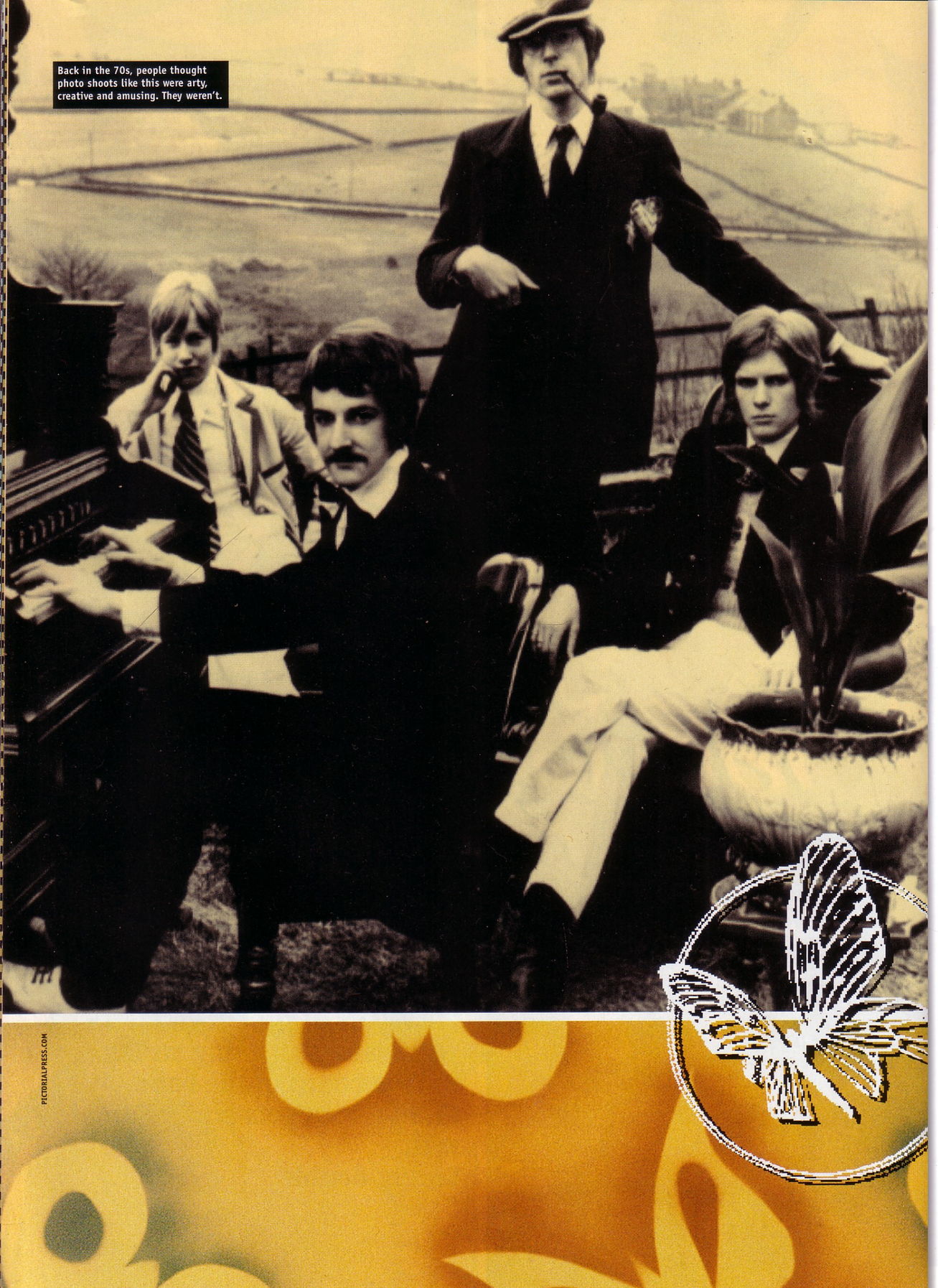
Don't Fear the Reapers

Purveyors of prog rock for 35 years, and still going strong – both versions of the band. Classic Rock gets schizophrenic with Barclay James Harvest. Seeing double: Malcolm Dome



Back in the 70s, people thought photo shoots like this were arty, creative and amusing. They weren't.

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BARCLAY JAMES HARVEST: GENTEEL ENGLISHMEN WHO HAVE been making prog-style music for 35 years; rather staid; rather middle class. The last band you'd expect to come close to being arrested for treason. Yet, remarkably, it happened…

"It was the Festival Of London, in 1971," begins keyboard player Stewart 'Woolly' Wolstenholme. "We were asked to play at the Tower Of London. They drained the moat for us, and we played our full show at the time backed by an orchestra."

"That was the key to the whole affair," drummer Mel Pritchard continues. "The organisers of the festival obviously thought we were a cultural experience, having a triple-barrelled name and working with a proper orchestra, But they didn't realise the chaos we'd cause."

"Every night at the Tower there's a ceremony," Wolstenholme explains. "It's called The Ceremony Of The Keys. What happens is that one chap goes to the door, knocks on it, and when he's asked who he is he says: 'It's the keys.' The person behind the door then says: 'Who's keys?' And he replies: 'The Queen's keys.' Bloody daft if you ask me, because whose keys would they be?! But because we were so loud that night the ceremony was a disaster – for the first time ever. Nobody could hear what was being said. So we had all these beefeaters suddenly running around pulling the plug on us. We must have come close to being arrested and thrown in the Tower!"

Barclay James Harvest have had something of a chequered and contradictory career. And strangely, right now there are two bands operating legally under that name. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's go back to the beginning.

The band was born out of the union of two different groups in Oldham: The Keepers (which included John Lees and Wolstenholme) and Heart And Soul And The Wickeds (with Les Holroyd and Pritchard). In 1966, the two bands fused and took the name The Blues Keepers, a six-piece, but they were quickly reduced to a four-piece comprised of the above.

As the band strove for their own identity, the name, of course, didn't last too long. But exactly how they came to choose Barclay James Harvest remains unclear. Not for the first time in this story, there seems to be two sides. Supposedly the name was drawn at random out of a hat, which is the version that Lees and Wolstenholme back up.

"We just had so much difficulty find something we all agreed on," Wolstenholme recalls, "so in end we all put a load of names in a hat."

"But we hated all of them!" Lees adds. "In the end we came down to the last three in the hat and said: 'Right, we are gonna choose the three remaining names, in whatever order they come out of the hat'. And it ended up as Barclay James Harvest."

Wolstenholme: "Barclay was after Barclays Bank, James was from a guy called Rodney James, whom we worked with at the time, and Harvest because we were living on a farm."

Simple, eh? Expect that Holroyd and Pritchard aren't as sure about the way the name came about. "I know the 'Harvest' bit was linked to the fact that we were on a farm at the time," the drummer concurs, "but the other two… I'm not sure. And I don't recall us drawing names out of a hat, either! My memory might be playing tricks, but that's not the way I recall it happening.

Whatever. Having finally settled on the name, BJH then set about trying to impressing the music industry. It helped that they already had on board a manager, John Crowther, a very successful local businessman who'd made his money from owning a fashion boutique. "Which meant that we always looked really cool," says Pritchard. "He was the one who put us on this farm, called Preston House."

"Mind you, that caused us a few problems," Lees recalls. "Because of the name and the fact that we were on this farm, everyone thought we came from rich backgrounds. Which wasn't true. In fact we were from working-class families."

"There was this misconception that this was a hobby for us," Holroyd adds. "We were seen as these rich kids playing with daddy's money. Still, it did get us some cool gigs. We did the Oxford University May Ball – we were in one room, with Kenny Ball & His Jazzmen in another. Great fun."

BJH landed a one-off single deal with EMI in early 1968, and released the single 'Early Morning' in April that year. After that they were switched to the company's new imprint, Harvest, named after the band themselves. Or was it?

"Well, we reckon it was," Lees insists. "EMI decided to follow Decca's example and put all their 'arty' types on one label. Decca had Deram, and EMI came up with Harvest. They couldn't think of a name for the label, so they had a sheet of paper going around asking for suggestions. We put down Harvest as a joke, but it was chosen.

After the single 'Brother Thrush', in June 1969, the band finally got to record a full-length album, which was released in June 1970. Self-titled, it saw them work with Robert John Godfrey (who led the orchestra featured heavily on the album) and producer Norman Smith.

"We worked at Abbey Road Studios," Pritchard says. "And that was an experience in itself. There was a canteen down there, which was literally like a factory canteen. It was run by this guy who wore a white coat, and he wouldn't stand for any nonsense. George Harrison was always in there with his guitar, strumming away, and you'd see John Lennon and Yoko sitting at a table. If anyone made a noise the chap in the white coat would say: 'Any more of that and you're out!' He didn't care who you were."

Touring that first album, the band got themselves into financial water,

"Woolly and I wouldn't be against it. It's down to the other two."

– John Less on the possibility of a BJH reunion

DICK BARNATT/REDFERNS

The DHL gold disc delivery men were out in force.

because they insisted on taking a full orchestra out on the road. "We did it long before ELP," Wolstenholme says proudly, "but it got us into so much debt. It was suicidal, really. In the end we had to go back out on the road without the orchestra just to pay off the money we owed."

By this time their manager, Crowther, had ditched the band, which led to them ending up in a series of ill-advised managerial situations.

"To be honest, we made mistakes," Wolstenholme admits. "We got involved with people we thought would be good for us, but it turned out that it made things worse. It got so bad that if anyone we didn't know approached us at gigs we'd immediately run away, thinking they might be bailiffs!"

Despite events away from the actual music, BJH managed to release two albums in 1971 – 'Once Again' and 'Barclay James Harvest And Other Short Stories' – both of which were critically well-received. But things for BJH didn't really take off as they'd hoped. They recorded more album for Harvest – 1972's below-par 'Baby James Harvest' – before the label decided to drop them.

However, being dumped by Harvest could well have been a blessing in disguise. They landed a deal with Polydor. And while 1974's 'Everyone Is Everyone Else' saw them return to form, it was with 'Barclay James Harvest Live' the following year that they finally broke through – BJH were a chart act at last.

In 1975 they released 'Time Honoured Ghosts', and 'Octoberon' a year later. But then the music industry was turned on its head.

"You know, punk wasn't about us," Wolstenholme insists. "I know the bands and the media attacked us and all our peers, but punk was younger people than us; we were too old to appreciate it. And now you've got the same people who put us down so badly back then admitting they'd go home and put on one of our albums!"

"Actually, we out of the country touring at the time, so it all passed us by," Lees says, before revealing that he's a big Billy Idol fan: "The first time I heard 'Rebel Yell' it really impressed me, especially guitarist Steve Stevens. I've bought everything he's released since. I reckon if I'd been around in the UK I'd have actually got into quite a few of the punk bands."

Holroyd's face suddenly takes on a combined look of bemusement and incredulity: "What?!" he laughs. "John is a Billy Idol fan! I never knew that. But of course, you can hear his influence on 'Mockingbird'!"

"I don't see the point. I'm certainly not prepared to do that"

– John Lees on the possibility of a BJH reunion

BY THE TIME WOLSTENHOLM HAD QUIT THE BAND IN 1979 (he gave up the music business and became a farmer), Barclay James Harvest had become one of the biggest bands in Germany, with 1977's 'Gone To Earth' elevating them to superstar status there. Quite why Germany took to them in such a way, however, is something that Lees, for one, doesn't have an explanation for: "I really don't know," he shrugs. "Maybe we hit a groove with the Germans, struck a chord. Whatever it was, I have to say I'm very grateful to them for sustaining this band. We've sold over 10 million albums in our career, but apart from Germany we've never enjoyed any sort of chart success or critical acknowledgement."

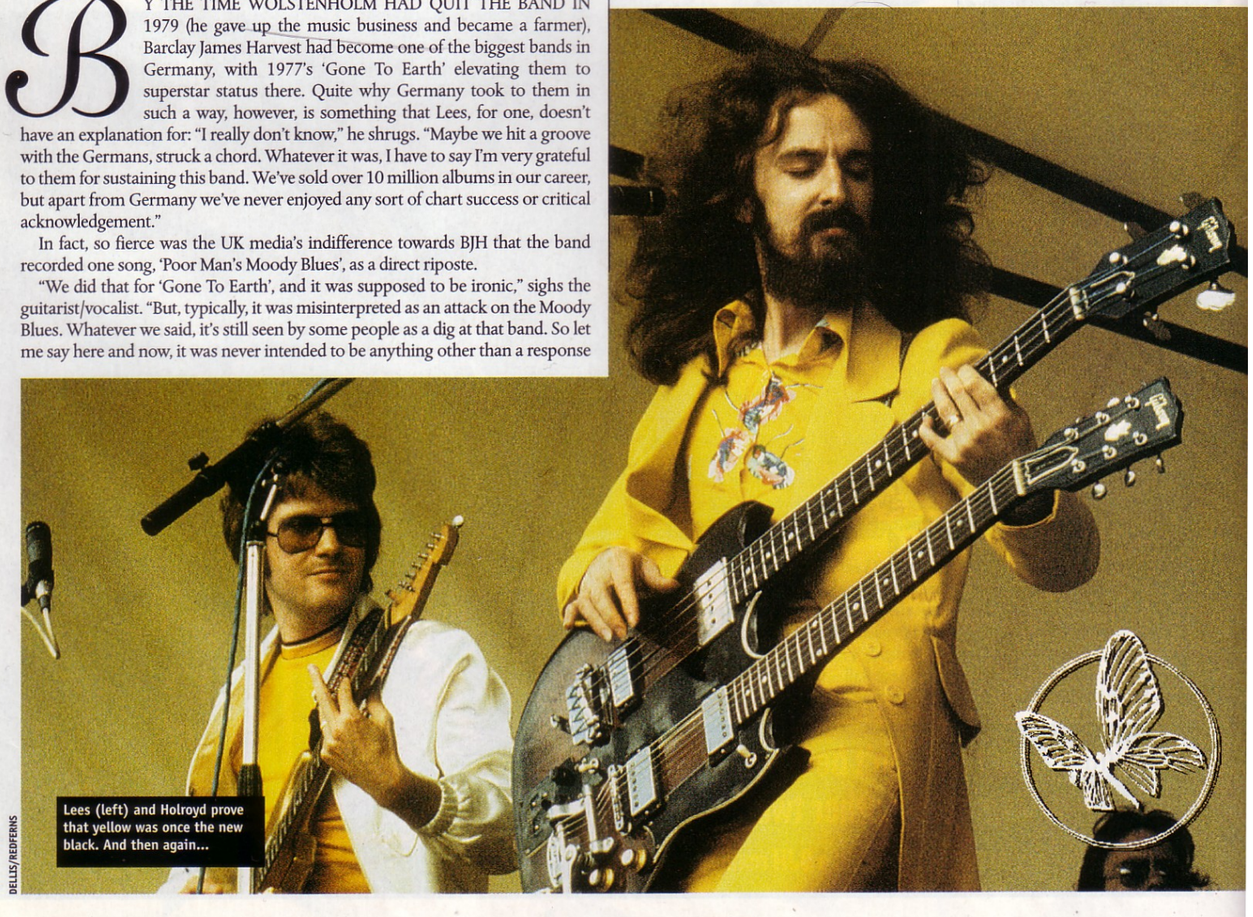
In fact, so fierce was the UK media's indifference towards BJH that the band recorded one song, 'Poor Man's Moody Blues', as a direct riposte.

"We did that for 'Gone To Earth', and it was supposed to be ironic," sighs the guitarist/vocalist. "But, typically, it was misinterpreted as an attack on the Moody Blues. Whatever we said, it's still seen by some people as a dig at that band. So let me say here and now, it was never intended to be anything other than a response to those journalists who said we were a poor man's Moody Blues. We love that band, and have nothing but respect for them."

In Germany, BJH continued to go from success to success during the 1980s. Perhaps the zenith came on August 30, 1980, when they performed a free concert in front of a crowd of 175,000 on the steps of the Reichstag in Berlin. That performance was recorded and released as an album, 'Barclay James Harvest – A Concert For The People', in 1982. Inevitably it reached the top of the German chart, and even, astonishingly, made the UK Top 20. That German live success was almost repeated in 1987 when, on the tour to promote the 'Face To Face' album, Barclay James Harvest performed in front of 170,000 people at East Berlin's Treptower Park on July 14. It was the first time a Western rock band had performed an open-air concert in East Germany; a live album and video of the performance, with the title 'Glasnost', were issued in 1988.

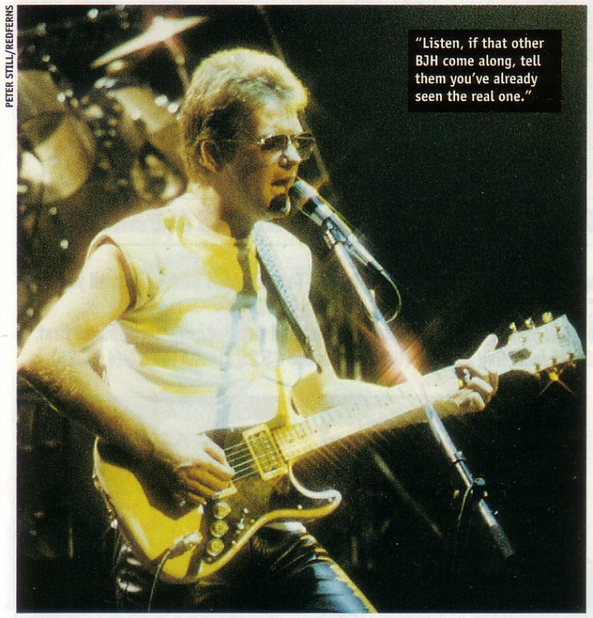
For the most part, however, the subsequent 15 years or so have been fallow indeed for BJH. A messy court case (relating to their first album) brought against them by Robert John Godfrey threatened to bring them to their knees (the case it was dismissed in 1995). In '98 the band announced they were taking a break. After the break, two bands emerged. One was called Barclay James Harvest Through The Eyes Of John Lees (which also featured the returning Wolstenholme), the other was called Barclay James Harvest Featuring Les Holroyd (which also included Pritchard). The former released the album 'Nexus' in 1999, followed by the live 'Revival'; the latter have just released 'Revolution Days'. What, you may feel inclined to ask, is going on?

"I don't really know," Lees says, shrugging his shoulders. "All I can say is that one of us just seemed determined to go in a different direction, and nothing we did seemed to satisfy him."



DELLS/REDFERNS

Lees (left) and Holroyd prove that yellow was once the new black. And then again...



PETER STILL/REDFERNS

"Listen, if that other BJH come along, tell them you've already seen the real one."

"I even left the band in 1979, and that made no difference," Wolstenholme adds. The person they're talking about, by the way, is bassist Les Holroyd.

"I felt we needed to develop," Holroyd explains. "I wanted to take the band in a different direction, but neither John [Lees] nor Woolly [Wolstenholm] were interested. I guess that was the big sticking point between us: do we carry on experimenting and progressing, or do we stay with what we know?"

"The reason there are two bands who have the right to the name," Holroyd explains, "is that John, Mel and I formed a limited company some while ago. And we all have an equal right to the name."

With two versions of Barclay James Harvest knocking around, and both using the name, the confusion seems likely to carry on for some while. And there appears to be little or nothing on the horizon in terms of a reunion.

"Well, Woolly and I wouldn't be against it," admits Lees, on the subject of hatchets being buried and BJH becoming one again. "It's down to the other two."

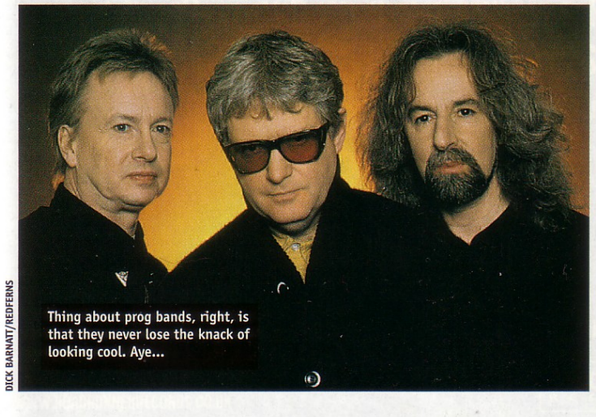
"I don't see the point," is Holroyd's view across the same reunion landscape. "We moving in different musical directions that we'd both have to compromise too much. I'm certainly not prepared to do that."

Right now, the only way you'll get to hear the four members together is on BJH's reissued EMI back catalogue (remastered, with bonus tracks). There are also plans for a DVD/longform video. As for the future of the two bands…

"I don't know what we're going to do, " admits Lees. "Our record label, Eagle, just sent me a cheque to cover the cost of recording a new album. I returned it. I simply don't think we can do ourselves justice on such a small budget. So right now we're in hiatus."

"Now that 'Revolution Days' is out, we want to tour, tour and tour," Holroyd reveals. I hope we'll get to play some British shows towards the end of the year,"

It's a long way from that farm house to the mature musicians of 2002. But with a 40th anniversary just around the corner, who knows what surprises might be in store. Maybe a revisit to 'True Thomas'? Be afraid… ■



DICK BARNATT/REDFERNS

Thing about prog bands, right, is that they never lose the knack of looking cool. Aye...

Harvest festival

The essential Barclay James Harvest albums.

'Once Again'
(Harvest)

Recorded: October-November 1970
Released: February 1971

Their second album really establishes the band's style, fusing lush harmonies with clear-sighted melody and the occasional glint of rhythmic steel. It still stands out as a masterclass in using an orchestra to the fullest extent without diminishing the rock value of the music. Definitely English prog rock, without a doubt.

Standout tracks include 'She Said', the environmentally aware 'Happy Old World', Lees's anti-war 'Song For The Dying', 'Galadriel' and the timeless 'Mockingbird'.

'Everyone Is Everybody Else'
(Polydor)

Recorded: March-April 74
Released: June 1974

Producer Rodger Bain made his name with heavier bands like Black Sabbath, Judas Priest and Budgie, but he adapted well to the differing demands of BJH.

The album's highlight has to be 'Child Of The Universe', which still retains its political relevance nearly 30 years on. Despite its inspirational setting, the band were never happy with the way it sounded here, mixing and remixing it several times. But the fans never complained.

Elsewhere, 'Negative Earth' was inspired by the near tragedy of Apollo 13 in 1970, while 'The Great 1974 Mining Disaster' was a comment on the miners' strike that year, which brought down the Tory government.

Wonderful stuff all round.

'Barclay James Harvest Live'
(Polydor)

Recorded: June 29 and 30, 1974 at Liverpool Stadium and London's Theatre Royal, respectively
Released: November 1974

This was to prove a landmark release for the band, reaching number 40 and giving them their first chart album.

It was really a 'best of' record, underlining the band's recording career to date, and included all of their popular tunes at the time, including 'Crazy City', 'After The Day', 'Negative Earth', 'Galadriel and, of course, 'Mockingbird'. Aficionados are convinced that the vast majority of the album comes from the Theatre Royal show.

In many respects, this is where the band's commercial story begins. The irony is that much of what's here comes from their less than successful period with EMI.

'Gone To Earth'
(Polydor)

Recorded: March-June 1977
Released: Sept 1977

This was the record that broke the band in Germany, and contains some quite breathtaking BJH moments. Woolly Wolstenholme's 'Sea Of Tranquillity', about the space race, is one of the best songs he ever wrote for the band. And if you want further proof that the band had a social conscience, check out 'Spirit On The Water', which slams animal abuse and fur trading. Again, BJH were ahead of their time.

In many respects, this was to be the last truly great BJH studio record.

'A Concert For The People'
(Polydor)

Recorded: August 30, 1980 at the Reichstag, Berlin
Released: July 1982

This record captures arguably the most important show in the band's lengthy history: a free show on the steps of the historic Reichstag, in Berlin, in front of 175,000 fans. Due to problems on the night, a number of overdubs were needed, but this doesn't detract from the essence and spirit of the occasion.

Most of the BJH classics are here ('Mockingbird', 'Child Of The Universe', 'Hymn'), and although the UK version has nine tracks, two extra ones – Love On The Line' and 'Rock 'N' Roll Lady' – were added for the German release.

Perhaps not the greatest live album of all time, but the significance of the moment makes this a compelling, essential part of the BJH collection.

'Face To Face'
(Polydor)

Recorded: late 1986
Released: January 1987

This saw the nucleus of Holroyd, Lees and Pritchard joined by a number of top session musicians for a record that's the best of their post-Wolstenholme output (the keyboard player left after 1979's 'XII'), and sees the band finding their feet again after a succession of disappointing albums.

Lees's 'Alone In The Night' stands out as of the guitarist's best moments, being a supple combination of rhythmic force and melodic sensitivity, while 'Kiev' was Holroyd's lament for those who suffered in the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986, and 'African' sees Lees returning to the political sphere with a furious anti-apartheid message.

The album ends with 'Guitar Blues', which is said to be Lees's tribute to the departed Wolstenholme.