

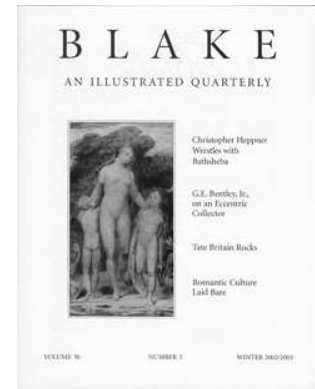
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

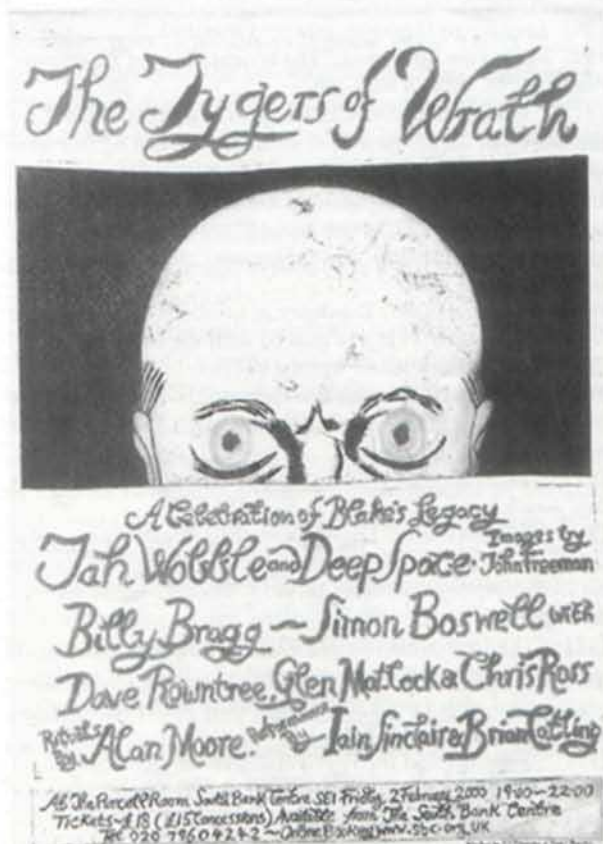
R E V I E W

The Tygers of Wrath, A Concert

David Minckler

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 36, Issue 3, Winter 2002/2003, pp.
106-107





The Tygers of Wrath. Concert held in conjunction with an exhibition of Blake's works at Tate Britain. 2 February 2001. Purcell Room, South Bank Centre, London.

Reviewed by DAVID MINCKLER

Originally envisioned as a weekend-long conference to promote, celebrate, and expand the huge Blake exhibition at Tate Britain, this eclectic finale to that exhibition took Blake's aphorism ("The Tygers of Wrath are wiser than the Horses of Instruction") as its polestar: if the exhibition, with all its attendant courses, conferences, lectures, workshops, films, and readings, appealed to the scholars (the horses of instruction), then this conference would appeal to the counterculture (the tygers of wrath).

The initial plan included sounds and images of Allen Ginsberg performing Blake's songs, a session or two on Blake, jazz, and rock, Van Morrison singing some of the Blakean songs from *Veillon Fleece*, singer-songwriter Billy Bragg and Blake's relationship to radical politics, Jim Jarmusch's strange western, *Dead Man*, starring Johnny Depp as an accountant named William Blake, some musings

on Blake, Huxley, and the drug culture, the presence of Blake in Thomas Harris's first Hannibal Lecter novel, *Red Dragon*, Blake and the sexual revolution, etc.

But booking this hodgepodge suffered from the usual show-biz problems: Harris is a notorious recluse; Van Morrison is impossible to reach and anyway far too expensive; *Dead Man* was booked by a related film series; certain rights and releases could not be negotiated, etc. After the dust settled, the conference became a concert with little resemblance to the original concept.

The Purcell Room is an intimate auditorium of a few hundred seats in the massive South Bank Centre arts complex (Royal Festival Hall, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Hayward Gallery, National Film Theatre, Museum of the Moving Image, etc.) across the Waterloo Bridge from Blake's last abode at Fountain Court. When the lights come down, not all the seats are occupied, but the room is full by the end of the night.

First up is long-time Blake fan, Billy Bragg—easily the best known name on the program, especially for his commitment to political and humanitarian issues. Many Brits consider Bragg's piano-accompanied rendition of "Jerusalem," the unofficial British national anthem, to be the most moving version of this oft-recorded verse. Initially surfacing during the Thatcher years, Bragg first received major recognition in the U.S. when his album of previously unrecorded Woodie Guthrie songs, *Mermaid Avenue*, was nominated for a Grammy in 1998.

Bragg strides onto the stage carrying a guitar and Blake's bust ("... our sponsor ... in case he wishes to communicate with us"). Although he sings only three songs, Bragg sets the tone by reminding the audience of the "infinite challenge" of Blake's vision: "It's not the artist's job to change the world. It's yours." Then he sings a new song about being English, an old love song, "New England," before finishing with the affectively Blakean "Upfield" from his 1996 album, *William Blake*:

I dreamed I saw a tree of angels, up on Primrose hill
And I flew with them over the Great Wen till I had seen
my fill
Of such poverty and misery, sure to tear my soul apart.
I've got a socialism of the heart, I've got a socialism of
the heart.

Next is a collaboration between writer (*Lights Out for the Territory*), poet, and book dealer Iain Sinclair, and poet, performance artist, and sculptor Brian Catling. Standing on either side of the stage at podiums, Sinclair and Catling introduce their performance piece by talking about their travel experiences on various Blake excursions and the importance of influence and possession when it comes to Blake—Milton's spirit visiting Blake, Blake inspiring Ginsberg, etc.

An odd and intermittently affecting recital of Blake's "Mental Traveller" follows. The lights dim and on a screen above and between Sinclair and Catling appears a projected

black-and-white image of an old woman, her eyes closed, her head moving back and forth as she grimaces and contorts her features, as if in mental anguish. We hear what sounds like someone hissing or breathing awkwardly, but the sound isn't synchronized to the picture. After a bit, the image and sound freeze, and Sinclair begins to recite this very strange poem from the Pickering Manuscript—until he reads the first word of the sixth verse, "Till." At which point, the image and sound start up again for a while, then freeze again, and the recitation or commentary picks up again until the next "till." This becomes a bit tedious and predictable, and some of the shifts back and forth don't go smoothly, but hearing the poem is worth the glitches. At the end of "Mental Traveller," Catling reads one of his own poems—meaning, I suppose, to illustrate how Blake had influenced him, but I couldn't discern any parallelism.

After hearing Jah Wobble's 1996 album, *The Inspiration of William Blake*, months before the concert, I looked forward to this set the most. The album is an eclectic mix of Blake lyrics ("Songs of Innocence," "Tyger," "Holy Thursday," etc.), atmospheric soundscapes, backing tracks, Eastern esoterica, and Western beats—in the manner of what is often now referred to as "world music."

The music and name suggest Caribbean origins, but Jah Wobble is actually an East End cockney named John Wardle, who emerged from the British punk rock scene of the late 70s and early 80s. In a drunken stupor, Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols twisted his name into Jah Wobble, which he adopted because he thought it made him sound like a Jamaican bass player. When the Pistols dissolved, Johnny Rotten invited Wobble to play bass in his new band, Public Image Ltd., and when that too crashed, he dropped out of the music scene to become a train driver on London's underground until the late 80s. When he came back, he dropped the virulent nihilism of punk rock—in part because he discovered Blake—for experimental, eclectic collaborations with Björk, Brian Eno, Sinéad O'Connor, and many others.

Despite this inner change, Wobble is an imposing physical presence—a big hulk of a fellow with a shaved head. Joining him on the Purcell Room stage is Deep Space, a three-piece band he often plays and records with. The name is apt: with Wobble laying down the steady bass line, the others join in a hypnotic thirty-minute improvised instrumental piece that builds, Bolero-like, to a loud crescendo. Clive Bell and Jean-Pierre Rasle supply most of the sound—an improbable, exotic mix of French bagpipes, crumhorn, recorders, Turkish sipsi, shinobue flute, and stereo goathorns. On the screen above them, a slide show alternates between drawings and paintings by Blake and John Freeman (who did the concert program cover above). Certainly Blakean in the spacey sense.

After the intermission, visionary comic book novelist Alan Moore smolders onto the stage. He's tall, with long dark hair and beard, dressed in black, and accompanied by composer Tim Perkins. Given Blake's comic book style (the mix

of pictures and words) and his vivid colors, it's understandable that Moore sees Blake as an influential precursor. Moore's 1986 *Watchman* redefined the comic book medium, and his graphic novel, *From Hell*, was made into a film, again starring Depp.

After Moore settles into a seat at center stage, a recorded sound track commences, to which Perkins adds percussive touches. On the screen above Moore's head, a psychedelic video plays. And then Moore begins to read "Angel Passage," his own densely evocative, epic description of Blake's life in blank verse (a recording is available on the RE: label, PCD04, at www.stevenseverin.com). After a bit, performer Andrea Svajcsic, dressed in a white robe and carrying lighted torches, appears on stage behind Moore, swigs drafts of flammable liquid, and breathes fire into the air. At the end, she returns in a cloud of white smoke, cloaked in huge angel wings. Although it is overly busy, this performance seems the centerpiece of the evening and the closest to a genuine tribute. "It's not enough to study or revere him—only be him," insists Moore, who actually believes himself to be the reincarnation of Blake.

Last, and I'm afraid least, comes film composer Simon Boswell (*Photographing Fairies, A Midsummer Night's Dream*), along with a small chamber orchestra and classical pianist Chris Ross, Blur's Dave Rowntree on drums, former Sex Pistol Glen Matlock on bass, and surprise guest, actor Ewan McGregor. The musicians perform the first public airing of a new work called *Time to Die*, which combines the classical score of *Photographing Fairies* with a contemporary rap railing against the false glamour of early death, read by McGregor. What this has to do with Blake, I can't guess.

For the grand finale, performers and audience join in a standing singalong of Blake's "Jerusalem." All in all, some of the evening's performances worked, some didn't—much like Blake's art. The tygers of wrath were as wise as the horses of instruction.

An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832. Iain McCalman, general ed.; Jon Mee, Gillian Russell, Clara Tuite, assoc. eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. 780 pp., 109 illus. £85/\$150 cloth; £20/\$29.95 paper.

Reviewed by NELSON HILTON

Unlike the *Encyclopedia of Romanticism: Culture in Britain, 1780s-1830s*, reported on in these pages nine years ago, this larger and more comprehensive volume offers itself as a "companion": *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776-1832*. Discussing this denomination in the "Introduction," the general editor Iain