

Sleepy bull toad plays autoharp

Looking back, I think it was the autoharp that hooked me - the shimmer at the beginning of *Younger Girl* sounded familiar. A junior school teacher, circa 1960, had had one - a real curiosity: black, rectangular, about 12 inches by 15 with a corner cut off, soundbox about one inch thick, a string for each note over a range of maybe two octaves, stopped by felt pads under sprung wooden bars, each one labelled with a chord name. But where Miss Clifton had played it mechanically, unidirectionally, metal plectrum, flat on the desk, strictly on the beat, Sebastian strummed it flexible-wristed, standing up - an evocative, magical sound.

And there was something else too. The transformation mirrored how I first taught myself guitar. Before my hands were big enough to reach round the neck, I started out with the soundbox across my knee, making chord shapes with my left hand fingers straight down onto the fretboard, right hand at too awkward an angle to stroke the strings properly. Then my hands grew and I could turn it over and strum back and forth - real progress as I became a teenager!

With a little musical knowledge from earlier piano lessons, aided by Bert Weedon's *Play in a Day* and a book of simple old stuff called *Folk Sing*, I could understand the chord structures and work out the finger shapes. But I wanted to play pop music - yes, POP, that's what we called it, the generic term that meant it wasn't classical.

Scarce pocket money got diverted over from records to sheet music for favourite songs, and I started to match what my ears were hearing with the chords I was learning. I still remember which songs taught me which chord sequences, translating everything to C - which was all my brain and fingers could cope with at the time. Loads of songs used C-Am-F-G7: *All I have to do is dream*, *Teenager in love*. The many rock'n'roll 12-bars: C-F-C-G7-F-C. *Hang on Sloop* was C-F-G7-F. Though it was a whole creative era, it was the Beatles, and then the Spoonful, that yielded a second level of subtlety. *All My Loving* gave me Bb. *Walk right in* was C-A7-D7-G7, which gave the main clue for *Little Child* and then *Daydream* (which requires a diminished chord too). *You didn't have to be so nice* brought in C-Em-F-G7, and I realised that crude Fs sounded better with an open 4th string (as F6 or Dm7). *Coconut Grove* was Em-A7. *Younger Girl* introduced Dm-Em-F-G7, later to reappear in one of Paul McCartney's finest, *Here there and everywhere*. *Didn't want to have to do it* tells you about major-7ths. *Summer in the City* just cries at you to walk the bass downwards; if you're in Am, it's from the open A and down the E-string.

I pause here to pay tribute to what must have been one of the best sheet music shops outside London: Nequests in South Sherwood Street, Nottingham, where I then lived. Sure, any worthwhile music shop would have supplied the primary vehicles for my learning: the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd *Fabulous Beatles Souvenir Song Albums*, and the *Hard Day's Night* album, giving words and music to the Fab Four's first four LPs. But it took somewhere really special to stock what I found on Nequests' counter, circa 1965: *The Good Time Music of the Lovin' Spoonful*. Just for me, the only Spoonful fan in the City! I darned near fell on my face on somebody's new mowed lawn! The shop is long closed and the elderly owners probably dead, so I never did tell them, till now, just how grateful and amazed I was to find this small collection from the first two Spoonful albums. And yes folks, that's how I found out, not just the chords, but the other thing you get from sheet music: the words. Could you ever decipher, from the record, the verse that ends: "*Tomorrow I'll pay the dues for dropping my load, a pie in the face for being a sleepy bull toad*"?

The next and only comparable gem was found in London in 1970: the *John Sebastian Anthology*, a much larger volume covering much of John's work up to and including the *John B Sebastian* album. Next time, I'll tell you more about what I discovered therein, and how it helped me play in at least two more keys!

Nigel Siederer

The doctor said *Where's the jug?*

Last time, I related how the Spoonful had helped my musical education, from echoes of autoharp, through self-taught guitar, using sheet music to find those elusive chords and lyrics. Round about 1968, I got the courage to stand up and play in front of other people, and the first ever song I played was *Younger Generation*. It was the school folk club, and someone said I was the star, but I knew it was the song - telling all those naïve young people (me included) about parenthood. As John himself said much later: "*It's so much easier to write that kinda song when you're not a parent!*".

Into the 70s and I got more into the folk club scene. My opening number for many years was *Jug Band Music*. It's great to get the audience picking up the last line: "*And the doctor said...*". Along the way, I encountered the occasional real jug band, with an old wine jug that they persuaded to give out a real burp (as played in the J-Band by Fritz Richmond). I tried hard not to ask why no such sound appeared on the record, and why my hero had apparently written a song in praise of jug band music that wasn't a jug band song at all! I was later to ask a similar question about a country song called *Nashville Cats*, a eulogy about Sun Records - a rock'n'roll label based in 200 miles to the West, in Memphis! Let's just say that admiration sometimes overrides accuracy - which, aided a little by John's *Anthology* album of sheet music from 1970, I'll try not to let happen with this article!

Another favourite was *It's not time now*, with its unique use of a little Eb-D-G7-C run. It also had something Sebastian was quite fond of: a key-change. Key changes aren't common in popular music. Usually, they're just short phrases which go to the fifth and back, or jack up a song's last verse by a tone. But Sebastian does neither of these. In *It's not time now* and one of the guitar picks to *Rain on the roof*, he goes up to the fourth and back. *She's a lady* goes up a tone and back (from D to E). There are more complex minor-major switches in *Summer in the City*, and a rare use of Ab7 in *She's still a mystery*. (I can think of a few songs that use Ab, but Ab7!) *Magical Connection* is too strange to describe. With the wonderful use of major-7ths and more, it's one of only two songs I know that doesn't use the key chord at all. The other one is *Didn't want to have to do it*.

Another pause, this time for a side glance at John's skill on harmonica, discovered not so much from his own records but from chancing on exquisite work as a session musician. Try out the breaks on Gordon Lightfoot's *Pony man*, or Judy Collins's version of Eric Andersen's *Thirsty boots* (on her *Fifth Album*). Nobody, just *nobody*, plays that small instrument as well.

Time for a glance at the original keys, as translation of everything to C has its limits. In fact many of John's songs are indeed written in C, with much use of the capo, and others are in G - *Make up your mind*, *Fishin' Blues*, *You're a big boy now*, *Six o'clock*, *Darling be home soon*. These two keys are also the most common for the more traditional songs that loom large in his current repertoire. Going back to the original keys pays dividends. *You didn't have to be so nice* belongs so naturally in E (and, good as it is, you can hear the debt it owes to the Ronettes' *You baby*). *Summer in the City* is in Cm, which makes the walking bass more difficult, but pays off as you come to the switches to C, F, Dm, G7 and back to Cm. Put the capo up to the first fret and play *Lovin' You* in D, *Coconut Grove* in Em, *Daydream* in C, *She's still a mystery* in E. And one I couldn't get right, until I saw John himself do it live (around 1981): *Do you believe in magic* is pitched in C, but sounds wrong. Try it in G with capo on the 5th fret, and it comes right.

Looking at how the songwriter himself plays a song seems like a peculiarly voyeuristic way of learning, and I felt a bit odd about it. And was positively embarrassed when, on his 1997 tour, John looked out into the audience and caught me at it! Fixed me in his gaze for just a moment, and then, in his genial way, related how he in his turn had picked up the licks to some of the older songs by watching the original artists' hands at work. Thanks man!

And thanks for writing all these inventive songs, that are hard enough to stretch and teach a learner, but not so hard that one guy and guitar can't have a good try at them. That's what makes them not just good for the ears, but fun for the voice and the fingers too!

Nigel Siederer