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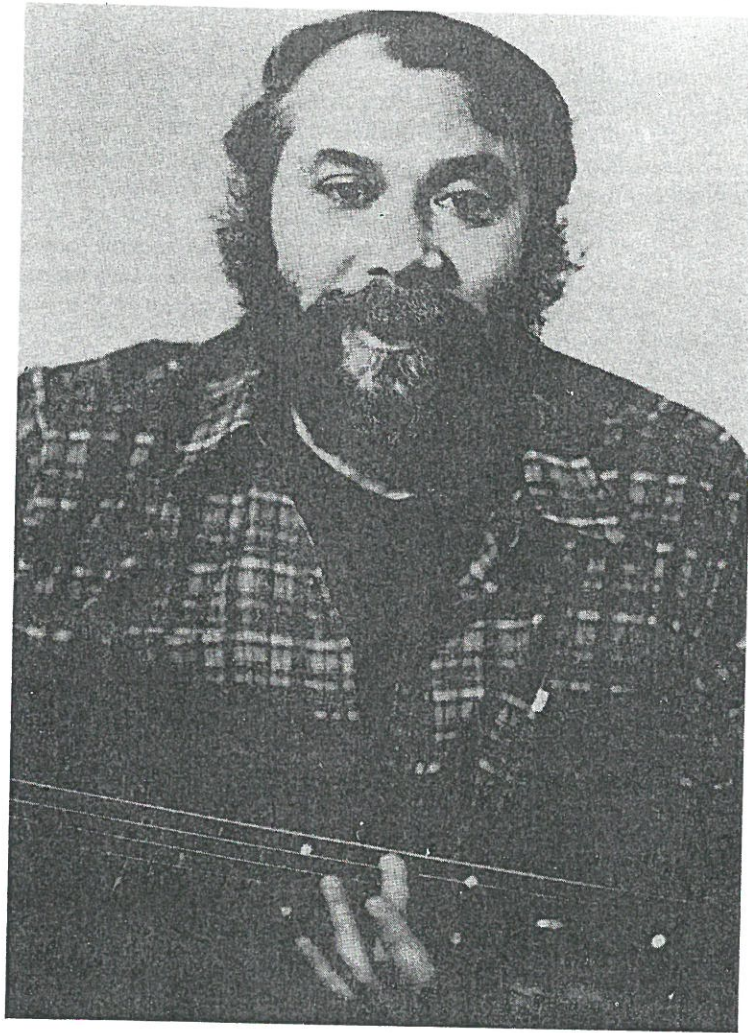
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JOHN FAHEY

In conversation with
Michael Grenfell

An American magazine once referred to John Fahey as the 'Segovia of the steel string guitar'. Praise indeed for a man who remains very much a 'cult' figure. Certainly, for the band of devotees he has built up, his guitar playing amounts to some of the most beautiful available on record. Elsewhere he is seen as representing very much the 'guitarists guitarist', fashioning for himself a highly individual and often copied technique. Yet such recognition has only been achieved after years of persistence to develop and present a totally new approach to the guitar 'as a whole', often in the face of indifference and incomprehension.

Born in Takoma Park, Maryland, John grew up in a family steeped in religious and classical music. He started playing guitar in his teens, eventually launching his own Takoma record label to act as a vehicle for his recordings. Most of these were adaptations of the blues and country songs he was now collecting on old 78's, as well as his own compositions. Being the late 50's though, the time was hardly ripe for the rebirth of the acoustic guitar! In fact it was not until the late 60's, and with the boom in modern pop music that his name became more widely known. It is interesting that some of those same people enjoying the extremes of psychedelic rock now turned to the acoustic 'stillness' of John's playing, probably as the very antithesis of the electric experimentation they were used to. By now though John was experimenting himself, combining sequences from all his musical influences, classical, blues, country, spiritual, indian, etc. to produce longer more complex pieces he would describe as 'ragaesque' from the

Indian Raga. These often bore rather mysterious sounding titles such as the Voice of the Turtle. His records too came accompanied with long semi-philosophical essays to explain the music, or booklets presented as the biographies of John Fahey and Blind Joe Death (a name used by John in the early days in passing himself off on records at least as an old blues artist). Much of the humour of these was probably lost at the time, although it is true that John's guitar playing has always seemed bound up with other activities and involvements he has pursued in expressing himself as an artist. Any appreciation of his music would therefore probably be incomplete without taking some account of his interests in philosophy and the 'psychology' of playing the guitar.

John's enigmatic reputation has increased in this country with his apparent reluctance to play here, appearing only a handful of times in the past ten years. He claims that this is not his fault but that of 'businessmen and managers'. Anyway I found him to be in an open and friendly mood at last summer's Cambridge Folk Festival. Since he has elsewhere claimed to be a composer for the guitar rather than a guitarist, I started by asking him 'why the guitar?'

Well there were all these guys in the park picking up girls and singing (laughs) but when I got my first guitar I saw it had a few possibilities. I didn't know how to do anything with it. There were no teachers around at that time to teach you so I had to figure a great deal of it out for myself. In those days I practised incessantly C7, F, G, over and over, because I was a very slow learner.

What were those qualities you saw in the guitar?

Well I've heard it said that it's the most personal instrument. I don't know what that means or I can't explain what that means, but I think I would agree with the statement. I guess it's like there's something very personal about playing the thing because the guitar is not personal — it's an instrument not a human being. It's certainly good to express emotions on. It's also very versatile. I mean you can make it sound like almost anything. If you have a P.A. system, you can make it sound like a full orchestra.

How did your musical influences develop at this time?

I started off trying to play country 'n' western and I couldn't learn to play with a flat-pick. And then I heard Sam Magee on some of his old records, and Frank Hutchinson — they were playing with their fingers and I decided that I wanted to play like that. I hate to admit it but I actually bought the Pete Seeger instruction record to learn to finger-pick off that, because everyone else was playing bluegrass. I didn't learn to read notes or anything like that — I wanted to play like Sam Magee, and there was one song 'Railroad Bill' on the Pete Seeger record that sounded like the same kind of thing; and he played it fairly slowly. Then once I had it I could branch out. Then I discovered Bill Munroe which blew my mind. I was collecting records at the time with Dick Spottswood — and I'd swap the blues 78's I had for his country records. Then one day I heard Blind Willie Johnson singing 'Praise God I'm Satisfied', and I thought what the hell is that!! I broke down convulsed in tears — I can't explain it now. Up until that time I just couldn't appreciate that type of music. But the area I lived in was very racist — like even asking people if they had any blues records was suggesting something outrageous. And the background to all that was years and years of listening to classical music.

John later introduced Al Wilson, Henry Vestine, and Bob Hite to each other. They eventually formed the group 'Canned Heat', although John, not interested in playing electric, did not join them. Instead he went on to further involve himself in those early blues artists, finally writing a study of Charlie Patton (published by Studio Vista). I asked him how this came about.

"When I did my masters thesis I had Al Wilson teach me a little bit of music theory so I could write that. He taught me how to do an analysis. You see I was really curious to know why I liked this guy so much. It was a devil to do and yet that is the only book on what these guys were actually doing. And it can be checked publically in the UCLA Folkways Dept. — which is a part of empiricism — public verification. In case I made a mistake some one else can look at it but no-body does. It's too technical. Any classical musician could go through that; it's just one line with chords. But no one has an empirical interest in this kind of music — it's all very romantic or something. Like my interest probably started because I heard these guys sounded 'mad' and I was 'mad', and I didn't know how to express myself, to express this mood in an artistic manner. So they fascinated me."

Did your knowledge of music theory help you in your playing?

I don't think in terms of notes it did, although I do think so in terms of structure and form. Trying to build the piece up into emotions and then slowing down — but not technical notation. I got the kind of structural ideas that I used from classical music; not from reading it, but from listening to it.

What does this mean in terms of your approach to playing the guitar then?

Well it's a symphonic effect I'm trying to get. I usually string four or five songs together in the same tuning to make

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short suites. I usually do two sets; a short 45 minute one which is really a warming up for the second, which is the harder and usually takes 2 hours or more. That's when I go into Latin American music and further out experiments. Actually I've been listening to some Irish music at the festival and these guys (Sea Mists) do the same thing. I saw them play a fast song then a slow song without a break, then build up and build up to an emotional peak — or you might want to build down — depending. We're using different instruments and come out of a different tradition, but we are playing very similarly. Whereas the idea of playing one song for 3 or 4 minutes — stop — applause — start again, is a lot harder to do. You see, you lose your momentum, and you don't build up as much excitement. That's the way I started, playing one song at a time, and it sounded nerveracking. So I usually play for about 10 minutes, stop briefly, then start playing in the middle of the applause, and only stop when I have to retune or when I want to say something, which isn't very often,

How do you compose?

It's sort of automatic. When I practise or I'm trying to compose, I don't actually sit down with the intention writing a new song. You sort of sit down, maybe in front of the T.V., hold the guitar, and it 'is' automatic. Suddenly you've got something new there — you run over it a few times so you don't forget it. You may just have a segment, and may not know what to do with it, but if you remember it you'll eventually be able to put some other segments together and make a nice song. I actually got this idea from Hegel. The brain, the mind is such that it'll create things just to get out of boredom. That's what I do, sit and doodle around but then that gets boring, and without really thinking about what I'm doing I try something else.

How conscious are you then of changing key, etc.?

Even that is automatic. You get tired of key of C so you go to G with not really much thought about it. Unless you get a nice melodic line that won't fit in that key, so you stop, maybe that'll work better in open G, let's try that, etc. . .

Do musical keys have 'moods' or associations for you?

No. My favourite tunings are open G (DGDGBD) and open C (CGCGCE). I've heard so many blues played in the key of E that I think of it as a blues key. And A min, E min as sad keys. Robbie Basho wrote this strange thing with all the keys set out, the colour, mood, and associations they each represent to him. I don't have it because you can play very up songs in the key of E too. And Charlie Patton played blues in the key of C that sound like blues. That seems like a straight jacket to me, if you start thinking like that and pitching all things to it.

So tunings and keys are almost random?

It's like free-association in psychoanalysis — if you sit down with your guitar in your hand and let your mind go, and play just whatever comes into your mind; in fact it doesn't even feel like that, rather it comes into your fingers. That's my method of composition. It's interesting that Freud got that idea from two or three German writers quoted by someone like Goethe in his early work. He says that anyone can learn to be a writer, here's how you do it: you sit down and you write whatever comes into your mind, and you do it for various periods of time everyday — no breaks, no censorship — write anything, each thought or current, just write it down. That's pretty much the way I compose, just let myself go, but then later I'll try to make it better or clean it up — whatever.

One of John's most popular records has been his interpretation of Christmas carols (The New Possibility) released in 1968. Since then he has recorded a second volume of these as well as an album of his favourite guitar hymns. I asked him how his approach to these arrangements differed.



"Those I had to sit down and pretty much learn, although I knew most of them already from going to church so much! In fact most of the hymns are in standard key of C — almost like a record of studies in the key of C.C is the easiest key to start in

three positions; certainly the first five. So if I've got a tune in mind to arrange I always start in the key of C. If it doesn't work I'll try G or I'll open-tune. The hymns have very different tunes and great melodic structure, which is probably the hardest thing to find — a good tune. You see you've got to have some raw material, once you've got that you can start putting chords to it or arranging."

What guitars do you play?

At the moment I've got a Laguna guitar to play upright; designed in California and made in Japan. Originally I had a Bacon and Day that looked very nice, it had this very gaudy coloured glass on the neck (it can be seen on the cover of the Requia album). It didn't have any base though so I traded it in for a Ray Whitley Recording King. That unfortunately got smashed up in a fight so I bought a Martin D35, but United Airlines lost it. I'm just not going to have any more expensive guitars, that's all, although the Laguna actually sounds better on stage. It's not as mysterious, but it has a more balanced

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tone, and for some reason it's easier for me to play.

In recent years John has interested himself more and more in the music of Latin America and in particular the playing of the Brazilian guitarist Bola Sete. In fact he has acted as producer on Sete's 'Ocean' record (Sonet SNTF 695), and from this has himself recorded 'Guitar Lamento' on 'John Fahey Goes To Washington D.C.' I wondered if after years of playing his own compositions it was difficult to get back into learning someone else's.

"It's nice to find someone I want to learn to play, that's all. In fact I may have to learn to read chords, as those guys play an awful lot of chords. I have a couple of friends who know where they are and I'm gradually taking lessons. You see we're trying to find out how Bola Sete plays those songs, particularly on the 'Ocean' record which is really my favourite. That's been going on now for about ten years and it's branched out — oh I see Baden Powell wrote this song, let's see if we can find that version, etc. etc. It's a very slow process. It appears those guys don't actually learn the music, it seems to be in the atmosphere down there. Powell for example is an extremely clean guitarist, fast, and never seems to make a mistake, and yet he still plays emotionally."

'Emotion' is probably the watchword in understanding the attraction of John Fahey's music. From those early highly derivative blues pieces, through to the 'symphonias', and finally his adaptations of religious and Latin American music, his approach to guitar playing and recording techniques has always laid heavy emphasis on recreating a wide range of human acoustic guitar! An orchestral player indeed. Those who find his earlier works more satisfying will be pleased to learn that John last year recorded an album of shorter blues numbers entitled 'Railroad', soon to be released on Rounder Records. He has also just completed a Latin American record, 'Let Go', which includes pieces by Bola Sete and Baden Powell, and intends releasing another volume of Christmas songs (his fourth) later this year. Clearly a period of renewed

activity then to be welcomed by new-comers and old aficionados alike.

Discography

British licensing label quoted where applicable.

Blind Joe Death: Sonet SNTF 607

Death Chants, Breakdowns, and Military Waltzes: SNTF 608

Dance of Death and Other Plantation Favourites: Takoma 1004

San Bernardino Birthday Party and other Excursions: TAK 1008

The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death: SNTF 744

Days Have Gone By: TAK 1014

The New Possibility: TAK 1020

America: SNTF 628

Fare Forward Voyagers: SNTF 656

Best of John Fahey: SNTF 733

Old Fashioned Love: SNTF 688

The Yellow Princess: Vanguard VSD 79293

Requia: VSD 79259

After the Ball: Reprise (deleted)

Rivers and Religion: Reprise (deleted)

Christmas With John Fahey Vol 2: Tak 1045

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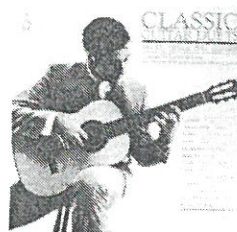
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