

Are you with the band?

**Interviewing stars and
playing bars - tales from the
street-level end of showbiz,
and the music press**

IAN BOUGHTON

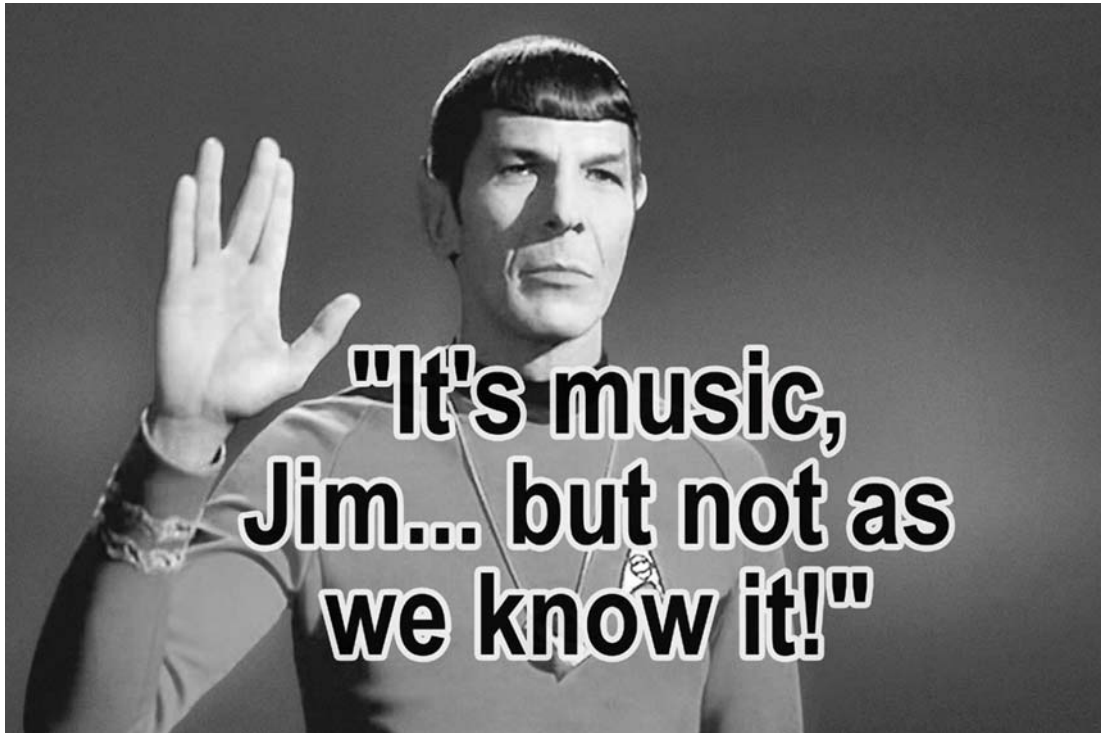
Are you with the band?



Copyright – Ian Boughton, 2018

It has been said of the author of this book that he has a memory like a garbage can... everything goes into it, and you're simply not sure what's going to come out, or when. Everything in this book actually happened – anyone claiming to the contrary, or claiming to be a character in this book, or questioning anything recalled in this book, risks the curse of the author!

Some pics are by the author, including, by the miracle of timer controls, the front cover and pages 2 and 14. The little cartoon of the author is by Derek West. The one on p4 is by Newhall Publications. I regret that the photographers for pp 24 and 33 have long been forgotten. Pics on p13 and p23 are by Trudi. I think p18 and p56 are by Simon Wilson. Page 55 is through the kind assistance of Jennifer Adcock, but how a pic on her tablet was taken in the gents' must remain a secret. The Mystery Worshipper is by Ship of Fools. The back cover is only remembered as 'some Oxford gig'.



This image was inspired by the Ukes of Hazzard, a delightful ukelele band I play with in Norfolk, and they were very nice about it... but truthfully, it applies to many bands I've been with!

This book is not one of those memoirs about how musically clever the author is. Well, he isn't - I've never had a hit record, never written a hit song. I've gigged and recorded with over seventy bands... but that can either mean that I'm in great demand, or that I get quickly fired from all of them! As you will find out, even my single 'million-seller' is not all it might seem.

The author apologises for the number of personal pronouns in this book - as George Harrison put it, there's a lot of 'I, me, mine!'. But in a memoir such as this, it can be rather difficult to avoid writing 'I' so many times. It isn't meant to be so ego-driven.

This is dedicated to my better half, Trudi, to my son Christian (though he rarely reads my books or listens to my records) and to the hundreds of musicians I have worked with over the years. I can't imagine why they were willing to stick with me - it can't have been my talent, and it certainly wasn't my easy-going personality. Whatever the hell it was... thanks. I've had so much fun from being a musical never-quite-made-it, I just can't conceive of how success could have been much better!

If this book makes any money, there will be a donation to a favourite cause. If you received it as a gift and think it worth a donation, please consider buying a bale of hay for the Hillside Animal Sanctuary, Norfolk (www.hillside.org.uk). Thanks.

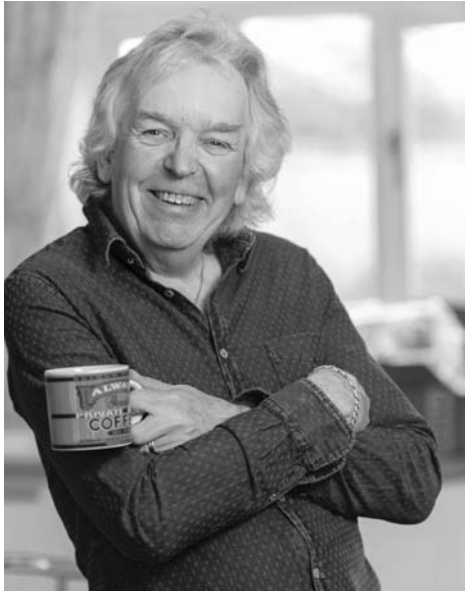


- Ian B, Norfolk, 2018

The set list...

Chapter 1 - Clubbing it

For a gigging musician, there never was a working life like the world of social clubs. Page 5



Thanks to Newhall Publications for the pic

Chapter 2 - On The Road

The joys of touring. Page 18

Chapter 3 - Writing it Down

Life as a journalist for the pop music press. Page 24

Chapter 4 - Plug In And Pray...

The extremely odd world of church bands. Page 33

Chapter 5 - Writing for Jesus

Finding unusual musical stories for the Christian press.

Page 41

Chapter 6 - A Different Country

The wild, weird world of 'country and western' music.

Page 46

Chapter 7 - In The Studio

The fun of multi-track recording. Page 52

Chapter 8 - Nowt So Queer as Folk

The sometimes bizarre world of traditional music.

Page 59

1. Clubbing it

The social club and cabaret scene used to drive us all mad... but it did keep us alive!

I rolled into the club car park about 45 minutes before the gig. We were a well road-tested band, and we knew just how quickly we could have the gear in, set up and connected, guitars tuned, stage suits on, and still have time for a swift one or two at the bar.

My bass cabinet held two twelve-inch speakers, and while it would fit in the boot of my car, was an awkward thing to lift and carry. But I slung my guitar bag over my shoulder like a rucksack, swung my suit bag over my shoulder, picked up the cabinet with both hands and staggered the fifty yards or so to the club door.

The jobsworth at the door eyed me all the way. Good, I thought, someone to open the door for me.

I should have known better. As I got within six feet of the door, he stepped in front of me to block the way, his hand lifted in a 'halt' sign.

As I groaned under the weight of the gear, he demanded suspiciously: "are you with the band?"

I tell you, it's all glamour in the music business!

*

In the 1970s and into the 80s, one of the most important scenes for any semi-pro musician was the social club circuit. The description 'club' covered a vast range of venues, from miners' welfare clubs to bowling clubs; stories of these clubs, and the people who ran them, have become legends of showbusiness.

This typical tale has been claimed by many bands, but I heard it first by John McNally of the Searchers. They were at a miners' welfare club where he was sitting in the wings, tuning his guitar, when the club chairman came by.

"What's tha doin' there, lad? Tha's due on't stage." Oh, said John, I'm just tuning my guitar. The chairman exploded.

"What's tha doin' that now for? Tha's known about this booking for six months!"

Now, I hate to disappoint anyone, but audiences do not come to clubs and pubs to listen to the music. There is a naïve belief among those who have not done it that pub and club audiences will applaud you... well, it does happen, but the truth is that you are not their main reason for being there. You are a side issue. Maybe they'll acknowledge your presence, maybe not. You can't

Clubbing it

expect attention, and in many cases, you shouldn't try and command it - because they might get hacked off at you interrupting their conversation.

It is quite true that at one club, I think it was in the east midlands mining area, that a solo girl singer was having a torrid time trying to get attention. She was giving it everything, and being ignored. At last the club chairman took pity on her, and banged the gavel which was used to draw the audience's attention to an announcement. As the members' faces turned to him, he said: "now, now, everybody, best of attention for the singer... you know she's not that good, and so do I, but the poor cow's doing her best, so give her best of attention!" The poor girl had to continue after that!

It is a standard belief among club musicians that their act comes second to the bingo. This is absolutely true - in the classic social club scenario, the most important person in the club is usually the bingo caller. You can always spot them, because they're very neatly dressed in blazer and shirt and tie, because this is their big moment - they may be nobody at all in the real world, but when they call the bingo, they are 'someone'.

We played once at a short-lived Scottish club opened and run by a Scottish boxing champion - it was Ken Buchanan or Jim Watt, or someone like that. Now, boxers tend to surround themselves with other boxers, and at the opening night of this club, the champ himself was accompanied by a table-full of big bruisers, broken noses all the way. We were summoned to their table for the interval: sit down and play bingo with us. As the numbers were called, and as the crowd of middle-aged men and women bent studiously over their cards, so did this table-full of practised killers. It was a sight to see, with them chewing the ends of their pencils and carefully marking off the numbers. Our guitarist nudged me and whispered in my ear. "If you get a line or a house up... don't call. Keep your mouth shut!"

There was a bingo hall in Glasgow where the job was to play in the interval between houses; they would have half an hour of bingo, then twenty minutes for them to go to the loo and have a cuppa, then the same again later. In the first twenty minutes, you played to an empty theatre for a quarter of an hour, and then they would all straggle back. It depended on whether they liked you in the last five minutes as to whether they stayed for your second set or not.

Another naïve belief, and I'm astonished to hear people still say this, regards tailoring your music to the audience, particularly in a pub. Inexperienced musicians still say: "if it's good, they'll like it". You hear this time and time again from people trying to form bands, and sorry, it's just not true. The truth is that most audiences prefer a song they know, even played imperfectly but recognisably, to one they don't know played superbly. Sorry to shatter any illusions, but there's no point in spending six months getting Bohemian Rhapsody and Stairway to Heaven off note-perfect, if you're going to find

that the average pub audience wants Agadoo and Y Viva Espana.

And truly, don't get precious about singing of tying yellow ribbons round the old oak tree... because if they like it, you'll have far more fun, believe me. Why do the over 60s in social clubs love old rock and roll? Because it was the music that was on when they were teenagers. Just because someone is over 70, doesn't mean they can only do waltzes and quicksteps.

And don't worry about getting things note-perfect - to a degree, audiences hear what they want to hear, so you can busk a lot of stuff and they won't know the difference.

But then again, you can't rely on that - certainly, unless you are absolutely certain of the standard of your act, never play the Swingin' Blue Jeans hit You're No Good. I can tell you, it is extremely embarrassing to have a pub crowd singing the chorus back at you. In Scotland, this may be followed by the traditional farewell to a band: 'yez were shite!'

You can never assume that your audience will be on your side. I like to say that I have been in prison three times - each time, playing with a band! I've done Perth prison in Scotland twice, and one in Germany. Now, this is a tricky one - you could, in the old days, get an unpaid gig in a prison easily, by simply offering your services to the governor. Some acts did it because they weren't good enough to be booked anywhere else, and this is a two-edged sword - some people assume that prisoners are going to be so glad of entertainment, they'll be a good audience. Well, it's true that most prisoners will be more happy to see a rock band on their stage than the local Sally Army choir. But, if you aren't good enough... wow, believe me, they'll let you hear about it. The Christian songwriter Ishmael (the Reverend Ian Smale) once achieved the possibly-unique feat of being booed offstage in a prison... I think there is something admirably heroic in that.

It horrifies my serious music friends when I say this, but the best band I was ever in was a social club band. This was the Jadehunters, a cabaret and social club trio from Edinburgh. (The bizarre name was the combination of Brian Jade and John Hunter). This was early in my 'career', and even though the bow-tie and frilly-shirt circuit was derided by my rock friends at the time, I learned more from this band than any other, before or since - how to speak to an audience, how to tell jokes and how to busk through a number.

We never ever rehearsed, not once; I was simply given a list of dates and told to be there. First date, a miners' welfare social club, it was on with the suit and bow-tie and onstage, with no idea what they were going to play - Hunter shouted 'Bye Bye Blackbird in F!' and we were off. You either caught up, or... well, there was no alternative. You had to do it.

Now, these two were not great musicians, but they had an understanding of audiences like no other band I've ever been in - they could read the mood of an audience, they knew when to do the rock'n'rollers, when to do the



The Jadehunters get ready to leave the bar and go onstage, maybe late 1970s. Would you just look at those eyes?! From left, me, Brian Jade and John Hunter.

waltzes and foxtrots, when to tell the jokes, and when to bring in unusual things like a St Bernard's Waltz. And they were clever enough to know how to condense songs into three, four or five chords: many people deride 'three-chord musicians' without really knowing what they're criticising - when you have to respond to a request by singing a song you've never played before, then the ability to improvise a simple backing is a skill indeed. For a relatively new bass player, this was a great lesson in listening for key changes and chord changes and learning to anticipate starts and stops. But they did confound me at my first gig by going into a Shadows number, complete with the dance steps and the famous Shadows Walk (left foot forward and slightly to the right, right foot forward and across the left foot, left foot back and right foot back to the starting position). The first time I was baffled - the second night I watched, the third time I was there with them. And that is how club bands develop their acts - somebody says an ad lib one night, it goes well, so they repeat it the next time, and the third time the rest of the band are ready for it, and it's part of the act.

To this day, I'm afraid I get very impatient with musicians who just don't understand the basics of stage technique that could be learned from bands like that.

To be fair, several of our jokes were pinched, and mainly from the act of Alex 'Happy' Howden, one of the truly great stand-up comics... and that's in the days of the real stand-up comedians. Not the modern ones, with their weak and crude 'observational humour', but the real old-time club comics. So many acts pinched Alex's jokes that he ended up doing a live album of his best ones, just to show who owned them. Brian of the Jadehunters once told me that you never had to worry too much about telling a joke twice in the same venue - he said he could see people in the audience nudging each other and saying: 'wait for this, this is a good one!'

Happy Howden was a more thoughtful comedian than many people realised. He had a reputation as a 'blue' comic, but he told me once that he only told blue jokes when he was specifically booked to do so, or when it was

appropriate. Watching him work, I realised what he did - his first four or five jokes were rehearsed; there would be a clean one you could tell your granny, maybe an ever-so-slightly smutty one, a slightly racist one (this was in the days before political correctness), and maybe a football-relevant one, or a slightly religious one - Scotland in those days had a quite fierce religious divide. While he was telling these, he would be watching the audience keenly, and their reaction to each of these jokes guided him to the direction of his act... if the cheeky ones drew silence, he kept the entire act clean, but if they got a big laugh, he would develop the blueness gently, seeing how far he could go. It really was an art.

It was Happy who was believed to have created one of the standard insults for comics - if a man in the audience slipped out to the loo during his act, he would wait until the poor guy came back, and ask solicitously - "could you still hear me in there?" Whatever the answer was, the follow-up would be "well, we could hear you!" It is always useful to have a few put-downs ready to silence hecklers - but even the great stars sometimes meet their match. A truly brilliant improvisational comic, because of his incomparable memory for jokes, was Bob Monkhouse. He was once billed at the notorious Glasgow Empire, where they hated comedians, and they certainly hated all English acts. Bob decided to wear a suit made famous by the great music-hall comic Max Miller - this was a white suit, with a big rose embroidered on it. The stem twined its way up the leg and ended as a big flower on the chest. Now, the big hit song of the day was the Alphabet song, "A - you're adorable, B - you're so beautiful", and so on. Monkhouse decided on some gentle self-deprecating English humour... a bad idea. He walked on to the stage to gasps, his pianist struck a chord, and Bob sang: "A, I'm adorable, and B, I'm so beautiful..." With lightning speed, a Glaswegian voice from the stalls responded: "C, you're a..."

Anyway, I soon realised that the comic's skill of reading an audience is the same for playing in a band. Yes, you may work out your 'set list' before you start, and you know what your first few numbers will be, and you probably know what your closing numbers or medley will be, too. But you don't have to stick too rigidly to what's in the middle - if they're up dancing to the old rock stuff, be flexible enough to give them a few more of that; if there are a few oldies sitting in their chairs, try a St Bernard's waltz (the one that has a gentle two foot stomp by the dancers). In a few club bands, we delegated responsibility for the running order to one of the guitarists, whose job would be to watch the crowd and, as we came to the end of one number, be ready to call out his choice for the next so we could go into it without the embarrassing 'what shall we do next?' break. It's a skill, and you get used to it.

This kind of background sets you up for playing with all kinds of acts. I realised quickly with my first real rock band, Band for Life, that if you learn and rehearse Stairway to Heaven note for note, what have you learned?

You've learned Stairway to Heaven. If you learn several rock'n'roll and 'standards' sequences, then you've learned an entire repertoire. Just as with the Jadehunters, this came in useful working with the country act Nichols and Dimes - Pete Nichol was a hard-working country singer who did not bother with rehearsals. Nor did he bother with planning intros and outros. Often he would not bother telling you what song was coming next, or in what key - he would hammer out the rhythm of a song on guitar, and you were expected to be in there with him within a couple of bars.

Peter had a quite brilliant feature which always went down well in clubs - he picked up a collection of the tunes and jingles from TV advertisements and worked them into a medley. If things were going slowly, he would call "we'll do the adverts!" and it always woke an audience up.

The club world also introduces you to subtleties of style and tempo which you don't come up against in rock, or jazz or folk. Such as: is a slow foxtrot really faster than a foxtrot, and if so, why? Foxtrot is danced in 4/4 time to perhaps 112-120 beats per minute. But so is a slow foxtrot, and here comes another musical puzzle - some ballroom dancers refer to tempo in BPM, which to them is 'bars-per-minute' or 'measures per minute', but to musicians, BPM is 'beats per minute', which is an entirely different thing. And to make things even more complicated, the actual tempo of a specific tune or dance may also vary depending on the rhythm being used; Roger, the drummer with the North Norfolk Jazz Workshop, told me that he once had an argument with a singer he was backing, who said that the Jim Reeves song He'll Have to Go ("put your sweet lips a little closer to the phone...") was in three-four, whereas Roger argued that it's in six-eight. You play it each way, and you'll hear two very different results. And one may appear faster than the other...!

(That Jazz Workshop is a fascinating project - Roger calls it 'the twenty-minute band' because when there are fourteen or fifteen musicians together in a big circle, and everybody gets a solo, numbers can be endless. These are mainly senior jazzers, most of whom read music fluently, plus a couple of people who have no right to be there, like me. The music is handed out, you get a minute to run your eye over it, hoping desperately for something you can recognise, then off you go. The first verse is ensemble, then going round anti-clockwise, everyone takes a verse solo, which can range from the brilliant to the embarrassing, and it ends up with another all-in verse. It is absolutely terrifying, but exciting. The word 'challenging' doesn't begin to describe it.)

And that question of speed is a fascinating one - I have always held that the speed of a piece of music depends on the circumstances, and that timing is not an exact science, certainly not in rock'n'roll. There are other examples - in the orchestral world, the most important part of a musician's kit is a copy of the Good Beer Guide, and if the orchestra begins the final movement of a

symphony with only twenty minutes before the pubs close, then you can expect it to be taken at a more sprightly pace than the composer may have intended! By contrast, there is a maxim in the classical guitar world that if you want more applause, you slow down for the final 8-12 bars - this shows the audience the intense concentration you're putting in!

Anyway, the old breed of social clubs, of which there were thousands, were a source of income that kept many acts going during the seventies and eighties, until the whole scene fell down. Everything was going so well that the breweries muscled in and sold the club committees a story: we'll lend you vast amounts of money to upgrade your clubs, in return for an agreement to get all your stocks from this brewery. All very tempting, but when the good times began to fall off and the audiences began to thin out, the clubs began to fall behind on the loan repayments, and hundreds of clubs went bust... and took musicians' livelihoods with them.

In the same way, I'm not surprised that the pub music scene is on its last legs in many places. In 1979, we would put a whole five-piece band out for £25, which the Treasury online calculator says is £88 today. But today, no decent five-piece would want to leave home for less than £50 a man. And yet Glenn, who is both boss of the Muddy Broad Blues Band and runs the Pleasure Boat pub in Hickling Broad, Norfolk, points out that to hire a band for £150, he probably has to take in £500-750 in bar sales - because, of course, the band can only be paid out of the profit margin, not the face value sales. And what local band is going to pull a crowd that puts £500 over the bar?

Mind you, it really is amazing how little some places have always paid. In the 70s, the great but now-closed Waverley Bar in Edinburgh, the place where Bert Jansch and Davey Graham started, would pay £3 a night, whether you were solo or a four-piece band. The place was jammed most nights a week... and we all accepted the low money, just to play there.

When the club scene was king, there was plenty of work, but you had to be careful with entertainment agents booking bands into clubs. They would tell you anything. With a five-piece rock band, we were booked in at a cement works social club - appropriately enough, we thought, for a rock band! Are you sure we're the kind of band they want, we asked? Yes, said the agent, you're absolutely right for this club. Never trust an agent who says that!

So we played our rock set, and at half-time we received a deputation from The Committee, who trooped into the dressing room and ranged themselves before us. "You're a good band, lads, but now we need less of the rock stuff. This is where you play your quicksteps and foxtrots."

The drummer looked up. "The best way I know to make a fox trot is to tie its back legs together and kick it in the balls."

We were paid off immediately.

Masonic clubs held their own hazards. At one, I was told off for walking through the Master's Door, whatever that is. And I knew many musicians who learned the handshake for business reasons... not always wisely. After one show in a Glasgow masonic hall, in a city where religious tensions are always high, I heard a deputation of members quiz the bandleader threateningly: "so, how do you manage to be both a Mason and a Catholic, then?" I didn't wait for the answer, but legged it... and I went through whichever door was nearest.

A good club gig was always in Reading at the fire station, where the band would play for the crews and their families. They shifted the fire engines out, and used the garage as a dance hall. A couple of times we noticed that we had a full dance floor, of women only - the bells had gone down, and all the men were off on call. Nobody made any fuss about it.

I played with a country band called Stetson, who played a neat gag on social club managers. They would set up in an empty club and do the sound check; as soon as they saw the promoter was in and listening, they would quietly swap instruments and pretend to do the sound check again, with the drummer playing guitar, the bass man on lead vocals, and so on. The promoter would be horrified at the racket they made, and would be convinced that his evening would be a disaster... until show time came and the band played in the right positions, and of course everything was OK!

In the great days of these clubs, bands were expected to dress up onstage; by the mid- 70s, it all went the other way with the 'punk look'. The promoter of a regular club gig in Scotland met us one night laughing his head off as he let us into the dressing room - he said the previous band came in looking perfectly smart and respectable, and came out onstage wearing ripped jeans and shirts with holes in them.

Glasgow clubs and pubs are, thank heaven, a law unto themselves, unlike anything else in the world. I once rolled up in a pub car park and was instantly surrounded by a gang of kids, maybe eight to ten years old. "We'll mind your car for you, mister!" Now, what that really means is, if you don't give us some money, you'll come back to find the wheels missing. I negotiated - I said I was only going to be in there five minutes to pick something up, so if they would take care of my car for five minutes, I'd pay them on the way out. I came out to find them waiting hopefully: I got in, gunned the motor, threw a handful of change up in the air, and as they scrambled for it, roared out of the car park. I was glad to find that all four wheels were still on.

At one club gig in the far north, the women of the band had to be locked away. It was an oil workers' 'social club', at the height of the north sea gas and oil boom, and really the place was nothing but a drinking joint for rig workers who were either waiting to fly out for a shift or who had just come back, and was essentially a hall with a bar and a stage, of which the bar was the

more popular. These were guys who hadn't had a good drink or seen a woman for months. It was so rough that when the manager realised we had two girls travelling with the band, he insisted they be smuggled into the dressing room out of sight of the rig workers, and locked in there for the duration of our show, for everyone's safety.

(I have never insisted that any lady friend come and watch me play. A vast number of bands seem to expect that their lady friends come and sit dutifully at the front at every gig, presumably to admire their menfolk. The most dangerous example I had of this was with a trio in which both of the other two members were married, but both had a bit on the side, who came to every gig. The problem was, the guitarist's bit on the side was the mother of the singer's bit on the side. Imagine the permutations – it was always one against three in the dressing room rows, with the poor innocent bass player ducking the crossfire.)



With Every Hippie's Dream, featuring Paul Spink on right-handed lead, who was a left-handed bassist in a Beatles tribute band - this pic looks posed, but it really was taken during a live session. (Pic by Trudi)

This oil-crews gig was my only (I hope) experience of an electric shock onstage. Our guitarist had decided that on a big stage, he would use two amplifiers - one his side, and a second one at my side. During the sound check he tossed over one end of a lead to me, and asked me to plug it in to the second amp; I was already plugged in with my own guitar and amp, and somehow I completed a circuit. The result was that I did a double somersault over my own amp to the back of the stage, the singer and guitarist paused briefly to give me marks for height, style and artistic impression, and then kicked the lead out of my hand, and I was carted off to the base medical room. We made it onstage in time, but during the set the burn in my hand started bleeding all over my guitar, which must have looked dramatic... but none of them batted an eyelid. I suppose blood was a regular sight at that kind of club.

Today, of course, all the clubs are filled with 'tribute' acts - and I enjoyed seeing recently, in a Norfolk seaside town, a poster which said: Cromer Social Club, Saturday, the Sex Pistols Experience! Yes, the club scene surely has changed since my day. But I have often wondered what goes through the heads of people in these 'tribute' bands – if you spend all your working life pretending to be Elton John, or Bowie, or Marc Bolan, do you get screwed up and forget who you really are?

I helped form a heavy rock trio called Every Hippie's Dream, which played

the usual mix of Hendrix and Cream numbers and so on; the super lead player, Paul Spink, had previously been in a Beatles tribute band in which, though right-handed, he had taught himself to play bass left-handed to play the part of McCartney. In his case, you have to admire the attention to detail.

(Someone else who taught himself to play an instrument was Gavin, the drummer in Band For Life. He was a multi-instrumentalist but couldn't find anyone to play drums the way he wanted - so he bought a kit and learned it, quickly. When I congratulated him, he replied: "once you realise that drumming is basically an exercise in physical co-ordination for the mentally not-quite-with-it, it's pretty easy!")

Tribute acts or real ones, I do enjoy a good entrance. I was playing in the big Reading Social Club with a club band called April City (yes, an odd name). The star of the evening was Mike Reid, the gravel-voiced comic whose career had been reborn when he got a role in Eastenders. We didn't see him before our spot, and as we came into our last number, the band shared some worried looks - where is he? We finished up, left the stage, the lights went down... and then from the far end of the hall, we heard that familiar voice. He had slipped in, unseen, collected a radio mike, and made his entrance from where it was least expected. Every head turned to him... perfect.

Paul Jones of Manfred Mann had a similar trick. He would wait until the stage lights went down, then sing the opening notes of his first song from behind the tabs. "Let me tell you 'bout the Manfreds..."

Trudi and I saw a wonderful entrance by one of these general tribute bands, who play rock hits of the 60-70s. The intro was a video on big screen of the band busking outside a theatre; they picked up their instruments and filed through the stage door. With perfect timing, as they disappeared from the big screen, they appeared in the same order and same clothes, onstage from the wings. Brilliant.

Elkie Brooks, appearing at the theatre on Cromer Pier in Norfolk, really impressed me with her entrance. Her six-piece band came on and got an instrumental riff going; the star herself walked on, acknowledged the applause, and casually strolled from one member of the band to the next, with a quick word here, a joke there, a pat on the back here... it was a remarkably effective bit of team-building.

Elkie Brooks was the person who scattered the ashes of Humphrey



Although I've been playing electric bass for forty years, I can't really play the doghouse... but for some reason, people do like it!

Lyttleton, the great jazz trumpeter. I had the privilege of sitting next to him at a trade dinner once; I was staggered to find that this great man, one of Britain's greatest jazzers, couldn't read music. He had it all in his head. In this respect, somebody said recently, and I think it may have been Ros of the Occasional Ceilidh Band, that there is an interesting trade-off in reading music - some of those who read the dots as fluently as I read a newspaper may not be that good at improvising or making music up, because they can only play what is written. It's an interesting point - which skill do you want?

I read and write music about as quickly as I read Serbo-Croat, and typically always have the tails of the notes sticking up or down in the wrong direction. I have often been in the position of being the most experienced person in a band in live-gigging terms, but the least technically accomplished in music. It doesn't really bother me, except that I do smile when obscure terms crop up in rehearsal conversation... I mean, how many times have you used the term 'anacrusis' in a band rehearsal? Precisely!

(It's a pick-up note, or a lead-in note - you might find it outside the first bar at the very beginning of a sheet of music!)

*

You could learn a hell of a lot from the people you played with on the club scene - some practical lessons, some useful tricks.

The best advice I ever received from a working musician was 'wash your hands'. After driving to the gig, setting up the gear and so on, your hands will have picked up all kinds of muck, and so your fingers just won't move as fast as they would otherwise do. Just wash them before you play; it is amazing how many guitarists do not!

And I'm very often surprised at how many of today's guitarists change their strings so rarely... just about everybody I know seems to be playing on dead strings all the time. To a degree, you can get away with this when playing bass, and the great James Jamerson, who played all the wonderful Motown bass lines, deliberately played with old strings to get his unique sound. When you're playing stand-up bass, you may find yourself playing with old strings because new ones are expensive - they can be £40 each string! So I was intrigued to learn about Weedwhacker strings, from America. The name comes from the kind of nylon fishing twine that is used in garden strimmers. Somebody in the USA had the idea of using a nylon coating on the top of Kevlar inners, and a set of these double-bass strings, including mail from the States, is about £25 the lot. And they're wonderful - they feel soft to play, and though some of the real double-bass players say they slip out of tune, my playing is usually more of a thud-and-thump sound, so nobody notices.

Among the great pieces of advice to come from the club scene was to understand that you, the one on stage, are in charge. This means that while you

know what you are supposed to be doing next, the audience doesn't. Many new musicians are nervous about being watched and looked at, but once you appreciate that you know what's going on more than the audience does, and that you are therefore in command of the proceedings, the nerves go. (Personally, I never get nervous if I'm confident of those I'm working with... but if I'm not, then I don't like it at all!)

I was once given some intriguing advice about placing in a multi-act bill. I'm surprised how many bands I meet still gripe about their position in the running order of shows – generally, they all seem to want to go on last, which they see as the star spot. I first heard it debated in club dressing rooms that on a two-act bill, you must always go on first; if you blow the headliner off the stage, the audience will remember you. If you're awful, they'll forget, because it wasn't you they came to see anyway!

Certainly, at a church or community event, the best spot is last before the interval. This is because many locals will come to support a local cause, but having done their duty by turning up, will slip away and go home at the break - so the audience can be vastly depleted in the second half.

It's a similar argument at festivals : go on first, so long as there is a decent audience. You get the most time to set up, and the odds are that at a day-long event, timings will slip and keep on slipping, so the later acts may well be an hour late in getting on, or may have their time severely clipped. Go on first, and you're in control.

Much of all this advice is, or was, shared very generously between artistes, because the true pros are all on the same side, and believe that passing on tips and helpful advice benefits us all. It's a good thing to do – and true musicians are like that. They do the nice thing. In one of his books, the gay author Christopher Isherwood had one of his musical characters complain of another: "Il n'a pas la nature riche de l'artiste!" (he does not have the generous or extravagant nature of the artist). Well, it is true that musicians do have an impulsive generosity of spirit... most of them.

My late father was a friend of Lena Martell, the Glasgow girl who had a hit with *One Day at a Time*, but who never managed a follow-up success, and so was condemned to be one of history's one-hit wonders (most of us would have been very happy to have had even one hit!) He was living in Cornwall, and she was in Glasgow; I really don't know what it was he did for her, but at one stage she put on one single concert in his home town of Falmouth, hired a band to travel west from London, I think, and flew down herself just to play that one show. Just as a friendly gesture of thanks. That's the kind of thing that the 'nature of the artiste' makes you do!

A more cynical piece of advice from the club music world was to never, ever, go in for talent contests, which are very big on the social club scene, and whatever you do, never ever take up an invitation to judge them. Real musi-

cians just don't go near talent shows - although I did know one high-quality boy-girl duo who did take part in one, just to get their names known because a collection of agents were expected to be in the audience. They won, of course, and were presented with one of those shocking cheap trophies that you get from sports shops. At first, they competed in trying to get rid of it - each would hide it in the other's suitcase at a gig. Then they discovered that these plastic trophies are made up of parts which screw together, and you can combine them in different orders to design different trophies. Hours of fun.

Judging talent contests is a job to be avoided at all costs. When writing for music magazines, I was often invited to be a judge, and I quickly realised the dangers - even at relatively small or local contests, I have known the judges have to barricade themselves in the toilets until it was safe to come out. And anyway, all contests are bent.

I was in a very decent band that was put in, against our wishes, for the Edinburgh Evening News 'search for a star' contest. We were entered by our agent, who was also a well-known singer and radio personality, and who reckoned that the exposure would help us get bookings. And who, by remarkable coincidence, was also a judge at the heat we were entered into. So we knew we would walk it, and took it pretty casually; yes, we togged ourselves out in our best cabaret rig of dinner jackets and frilly shirts with bow ties, but we skipped the sound check, and spent most of the evening at the bar until it was time to go on. As a result, we were absolutely appalling.

As the judges retired to discuss their verdict, we went back to the bar. We were back in the dressing room when our agent/judge/personality burst in and gave us an earful. "You were bloody awful! Do you realise what it's cost me to get you through to the next round?" They're all bent.

If you absolutely cannot get out of being a judge, the safe technique is to decide on a kind of median mark and make sure that you group all the entries very close to that, and make sure that for each act, you identify something about their performance that you can praise highly. This way, even the act who come bottom will feel appreciated, and the chances are that you may make a safe escape to your car.

Another thing the true musician never does is auditions - certainly, never do unpaid 'audition' gigs with vague promises of gigs to come if you go down well. These are only for the really desperate.

Occasionally, of course, you do have to try-out with a new band. A mate of mine went for a try-out and the next day I asked, how did your audition go? He replied: "I passed... but they failed!" Yes, we all know the feeling...

2. On the road

The sheer five-star luxury of life on tour



Getting into a fingerstyle solo at an outdoor gig - look at the concentration, and the flatpick between the teeth!

Until you've actually done it, being in a touring band sounds like a glamorous occupation - no, it isn't. Maybe it is at Abba level, but not at the bottom end. When the Shadows were in their early days as a chart band, they had a saying: 'we're staying at the Bedford'. It meant they were sleeping in the van!

A friend of mine who worked with an international 'name' folk band said that after ten years of being fully pro, he was still sick of having to crash on somebody's floor or sofa after a show, and being expected to be grateful for the hospitality.

On one tour, we were in the same position, with no accommodation booked. It was a quick dash round the north of Scotland in a freezing January, and the organisers of the first show said not to worry, they would put the band up. This gig was in a small fishing village, and we were taken after the show to a tiny cottage with one barely-alive coal fire in the downstairs grate. Right, said the organiser, you're sleeping upstairs, and he led us to a tiny room with one double bed and a threadbare covering... for four male musicians. Wonderful.

In the morning, four cold and snappy musicians couldn't wait to get out - it felt warmer outside the cottage than in. We had seen a pub on the seafront, and although it was an hour or two before opening time, we reckoned we could huddle in a bus shelter or something. (They didn't have coffee houses everywhere in those days!)

As we stamped our feet outside the pub, a local passed by, nodded, and curiously said 'aye?' In the north, you can convey anything from comment on the political situation to the weather by the inflection you put on that one syllable. Half an hour later, about 9.30, he walked back, and this time he stopped. "What are still you doing out here, lads?" We told him and said we were waiting for the pub to open.

He smiled sympathetically, and explained that in remote areas like this, while the front door of the pub might well be locked to comply with licensing laws, we would find that the back door would be open, there would be a roaring fire, and several locals would have been in there for a pint since early morning. We were in there in a flash.

They do things very differently up there. On tours of the western isles, it is not unknown for a band to be ferried from one island to another by rowing boat.

Maddy Taylor, a very fine Scots folk singer (and my ex., as it happens) was booked for a tour of the isles. The typical bill for such a tour was made up of a folk singer, an accordionist, a comic and a kilted tenor. On such tours, everyone pitches in to share the work - you may be onstage at 8.30, but immediately before that you're on the door taking the money, and afterwards you're sweeping up.

She was on the door when a man walked straight past and into the hall. Oy, she said, come back and pay. No, he replied, he didn't pay. Then you get chucked out, she said.

One of the locals hurried up and explained the situation. This was the minister, and in a small island community, the minister rules. So, an organiser might call and ask if they could book the church hall for a show on a Saturday night - the minister might say no, because then the audience would not be in any state to come to church in the morning. But a helpful minister would then say you could have the hall on Sunday night, because that would not affect the attendance at his morning service - and if you were obliging enough to play ball with him, then he would end his morning service with the words: "and don't forget, we shall have entertainment in the church hall tonight... and I shall be expecting to see you all there."

And, duly told, they all would be!

A part-time band I was in had a gig supporting a 'name' touring band who had had all their hits back in the 60s. We were in the dressing room, chatting about what had happened at work that day, and we realised the name band were listening to us. One said: "we envy you." Why? "Because you've got other things going on in your life - this is all we do."

Remember that when you have your rosy dreams of being a full-time touring pro!

All of us are haunted by venues with hellish acoustics - there is a relatively newly-rebuilt village hall near here in which I have played jazz, blues and ceilidh music, and every time it drives me to despair, because the sound goes upward and everywhere except where you want it. It was said that the great classical guitarist Julian Bream would walk into a concert hall for a sound check, clap his hands once, and know instantly how he had to play that

evening's show... a light touch with his right hand, or a firm one.

My problem has been that I very rarely get a decent sound at outdoor gigs. You know what a lot of bands do wrong? They get on the back of a flatbed truck, see all that room, and spread themselves out. But even light breezes can do strange things with sound, and you may not be able to hear the guy six feet away - so if you stay close together, then you counteract the things that wind can do to amplified sound.

My biggest gig was an open-air one. I honestly and truly don't know how I ended up onstage in Saarbrücken, a small town on the French-German border, topping the bill at their town festival with the Zimmermen, a band that played only Bob Dylan songs... in English. Yes, I thought it was a bizarre choice of bill-topper, too.

Now, looking out in the late evening darkness at a crowd of perhaps 8,000 is one hell of a feeling. But the most nerve-wracking part of the show was this - the band had decided that halfway through the set, they would put down their electric guitars, pick up acoustic guitars, move three chairs to the front of the stage, and play an acoustic segment. Jolly good - but this would take three or four minutes, and what would stop the crowd getting restive? Well, we'd have to say something, and who spoke German? Everybody looked at me, because I spoke just a little more than anyone else - enough for directions, and to buy things, but nowhere near enough to hold a detailed conversation. It was decided by a majority vote - Ian would speak to an audience of many thousands of Germans for as long as it took to re-arrange the band.

I had just a few minutes during our opening numbers to think of something; then the time came, I took a deep breath, and thanked all these people for their hospitality and said what I hoped were nice things about their town. I remembered that if you don't know a precise word in German, it is acceptable to make up words to signify your meaning, so I made up a new title and announced: 'meine damen und herren, die akoustike Zimmermen!' Well, it wasn't as bad as President Kennedy's infamous 'ich bin ein Berliner', and the band liked it so much, they adopted the name when we were back in England.

(If you don't know the JFK story, back in 1963 he tried to speak a bit of German to show some kind of solidarity with his hosts in Berlin. He didn't know that a 'berliner' is a local term for a kind of cake - so what the president of the USA actually said to a big audience and live television across the world was: 'I am a doughnut'.)

It was with this band of Dylan freaks that I played a big society wedding. In the year that Blackburn Rovers won the premier league, they were owned by the lovely Jack Walker, an industrialist from the north who had sold his steel business to what became British Steel for something like £600 million.

We had been booked to play at a showy wedding in Chelsea, and as it was a flash do, we asked for £250, which was double our normal fee. It turned out that the bride's father was this very Jack Walker - we could have asked for ten times our fee and he would have paid it out of his pocket! Looking round the lounge before the gig, I was struck by the sheer opulence of the clientele, many of them Middle Eastern. "Just think how much money is in this room," I remarked to the singer. He replied: "I expect only half of them are filthy rich - the other half are their armed bodyguards."

*

In the days long before sat-nav, the major asset for touring was the AA book, with its maps of Britain. This was always printed in a smallish six-by-eight page size, and to get everything fitted in, some artistic liberty was taken with regard to scale. Typically, the islands off Britain were shown in little boxes, as near as possible to the nearest coastal town. There was a country band which rolled up in Aberdeen at about 6pm one evening. They waved at a passer-by and asked: "where's the bridge to Shetland? We're playing there this evening." The local was astonished. Shetland's twelve hours away by boat! No, said the band, waving the page of the AA book at him. "Look at the map - here it is, right next to Aberdeen. There must be a bridge!"

I was touring with a country duo when we decided that, to try and save money, we would drive overnight from one gig to the next, and check in to our hotel in the morning; we could sleep through the day before the show. So I drove through the night, and as we entered one destination town, the girl singer woke up and said: "you've been driving all night, I'll take over". Within minutes, she spotted and overshot the hotel, rammed on the brakes and jammed the car into reverse... forgetting that we had a trailer with all the gear. She took a wheel off the trailer. Which was borrowed...

They do things very differently in the north of Scotland, which, in its way, it is as much a different country as Cornwall is from England. (Do you know the old Cornish saying? "Cornish always; British sometimes; English... never!")

It took me some time to really understand the Scots-English divide, and I did make some embarrassing cock-ups; as a country music writer, I was interviewed on local radio by the great Ann Carmody, a very influential agent and promoter in the Inverness area. She asked what I had been doing that day, and I mentioned that I had driven through Culloden, the site of the last great battle between the English and the Scots Jacobites. Now, I have a very clear London accent, which must have been quite obvious to every listener, and I added, with a touch of typically English humour, "we won that one, I think..." There was a stunned silence in the studio, and Ann quickly moved on - in those parts, you still do not joke about 'the 1745'.

Digressing slightly, the matter of being interviewed on radio, which I was a lot in the country music days, leads us to TV. While the Occasional Ceilidh

Band was waiting to go on for the second set at a Norfolk village hall dance just a few days ago, Ros the melodeon player enquired, for no good reason, whether I have ever been on TV. I answered 'no' - and then remembered that I was once interviewed by Claudia Winkleman, before she got famous, on the subject of toilets. We were at a convention of the British Toilet Association - really! - and someone had pointed me out to her as a writer who had recently done several features on the subject of conveniences around the world. Whether the interview was ever screened I cannot say, and I doubt if Ms Winkleman remembers, but if you ever need information about the world's toilet habits, I'm your man. Oh, you'd like a toilet story? Right. Back in the 1980s, the authorities at Schiphol airport in Holland had a big problem - the floors of the gents' needed continual mopping due to the careless aim of thousands of male patrons. Someone had the bright idea of painting the outline of a fly, the insect that is, on each urinal stall, about two feet from the floor. Spillage stopped instantly!

You want another toilet story? OK. A big German city, possibly Cologne, was plagued by late-night drinkers urinating on the walls of the cathedral; over the years, the acidity had worn away at the stonework. Now, the Germans are pragmatic - where we would have put up a council sign saying 'do not piss on the cathedral', the Germans devised the 'spetterplatt', a protective panel which clothed the cathedral wall to a height of about four feet and bore the brunt of the waterworks. But the Germans thought it right through - the panel was cleverly linked to an automatic control, and when the acid water hit the platt, a battery of spotlights opened up. For the unwary user, the effect was rather like walking into the spotlight at Wembley Arena. In today's world, I suppose, they would have had CCTV linked to a Twitter feed!

But back to the subject. Rather typical of the north of Scotland was the village hall gig in, I think, Inch - there were Saturday dances in the middle of nowhere: a village hall, a phone box, and that was it. Quiet as the grave until about 8pm on the night of a dance, and then absolute mayhem as the locals drove in from every farm and village in a radius of about forty miles. The dance floor would be full until closing time, when they all roared off again - I always reckoned that this deserted spot must have been the most dangerous road in Britain for half an hour every month.

Well, this village hall had a curiosity. At the back of the stage was a guitar case, and in that case was a Fender bass, worth a couple of hundred quid, a lot at the time. Everyone knew it was there... and nobody pinched it. When I asked why, I was given the extremely logical answer: as everyone in the Scottish music scene knew it was there, then if it ever disappeared, then it must have been the last band on that took it!

It is no surprise that my favourite touring stories happen in the remote

areas of the north. A country band I knew was booked into a village hall, and their beds for the night were in a B&B in the next village. They packed up after the gig, took directions from a local (always a dodgy thing to do!) and set off into the dark country lanes. Half an hour later they didn't know where the hell they were, so they stopped the truck and had an argument about whether to go on or go back. At which point, bang! There was a hell of a noise from the back of the truck.

They got out, looked at the back of the van, and there was a body lying prone in the road, his bike in the ditch. There was no response from the body - what on earth should they do? Put him in the van and drive on - we're bound to come to somewhere soon, and they'll tell us where the nearest hospital is.

Well, no sooner were they round the next bend, than they saw the cottage gates of their B&B. So they pulled in, rang the bell, and when the lady of the house answered, explained breathlessly that they had a badly-injured man in the van. "Let's have a look," she said. "Oh, no, he's not injured - that's my husband. He's just dead drunk. Where did you find him?" The band explained. Did you have your lights on when you stopped, she asked. Of course, it's nearly midnight.

"Ah well, that's it, do you see. Every Saturday night my Archie rides his bike down to the pub in the village, and at closing time they send him off in the right direction, but after a night in the pub he doesn't know where he is. So we fixed two red reflector lights to the gateposts outside the cottage, and so he just pedals along until he sees two red lights, and then he puts his head down and aims between them..."

*



This Gibson guitar has the word Lucille on the headstock, which tells you it is one of BB King's old guitars. How did I get to play it? Trudi's secret - but in the pub afterwards, I was quite emotional at having had the chance.

3. Writing it down

I've probably spent as much time writing about music as I have playing it...



The earnest young reporter, with extremely dodgy beard, quizzes the great Peter Green (left) and the late Steve Marriott.

I have been a journalist, whatever you take that term to mean, for around fifty-three years... and I have always enjoyed the caustic remark that 'journalism is the chance to write about life without having to actually live it'.

I was on the Daily Mail when it was still a serious paper, in the 1960s, but over the years wrote for, and edited, a pile of music-related magazines. I was offered a job on a 1960s magazine called *Beat Instrumental*, a 'serious' paper asking bands about recording techniques, but I screwed up the interview because I was way too young and stupid to see the opportunity, and ended up writing for local music magazines in Scotland, with such inspired titles as 'Shout!' and 'Transplant' (the stupid marketing pitch was 'you need a...')

This is really going to ruin my reputation as a serious musician, but... I was the first publicist for the Bay City Rollers. This gang was the band who became the teenage sensations of the early 70s; they wore a curious outfit of white jeans with braces, the jeans reaching down to calf height, decorated with tartan stripes.

It is absolutely true that the Rollers were massive in Scotland before they became internationally famous - they actually did provoke screams from the

girls at Edinburgh clubs. I've seen it. I also, to my amazement, saw them being paid in one club in a clear plastic bag full of old half-crowns. Oh, this was the big money scene!

They got their big break at the second attempt; they went down to London to record a single called *Keep On Dancing*, which wasn't great - their manager played it to me over the phone after the session. Then they had some personnel changes, and came back as the *Shang-a-Lang* band which conquered the world. By that time, I had gone, and so had their good musicians.

Were they any good? Well, I once saw the first set of *Rollers* going onstage at a club - they lined up at the dressing-room door and filed past their singer, Nobby, who listened to each guitar and tuned it for them as they went past.

Between this early version and the big hit band, there really was, honestly, a very good intermediate *Bay City Rollers* - the guitarist was Davie Paton and the keyboard player was Billy Lyall, both of whom quit to form *Pilot*, which had hits with *Magic* and *January* (they popped in to my mother-in-law's flat in Edinburgh for me to take their first band photographs).

The manager of the *Rollers* was the notorious Tam Paton (no relation to Davie). He used to drive round Edinburgh in the family lorry delivering potatoes. He ended up in prison for certain antisocial offences... as indeed did the producer of the *Rollers'* first record, Jonathan King. The *Rollers* still owe me a Chinese meal.

Anyway, as the sixties became the seventies, there were a vast number of good groups for a writer to talk to, and you got some big bands appearing in weird places in those days - there was a corn exchange hall in Kelso, in the middle of nowhere in the Scottish borders, which put on remarkable bands - I interviewed the *Troggs* there, and whatever you may think, they were great. It's not that they were wonderful as musicians, but on straightforward rock and pop, they had 'it'. They had a reputation for being only simple country boys from rural Hampshire, but they could stomp with the best of them, and proved that simple teamwork gives the best result. Four average musicians going in the same direction will always give you a much better band than five virtuosi fighting each other.

Talking of virtuosi, among my favourites were *Deep Purple*, who came to Edinburgh several times and were always amenable to a chat; on one occasion my girl Jan was with me, and was wearing a particularly ornate silver ring which connected to a kind of chain-mail thing and wrist bracelet. *Deep Purple's* guitarist Ritchie Blackmore came over and said: "did you get that in America?" and she just about melted on the spot.

I was working for *Beat Instrumental* (doesn't that now sound a delightfully dated title) when I met them, and it was for the same magazine that I found myself backstage and then in a hotel bar with the three guys of *Cream*. I was very young, and very starstruck, and as a result I asked no coherent questions

Writing it down

at all... I even did what a true professional reporter should never do, and asked Eric Clapton for his autograph. I have it on my desk, to this day.

The Bee Gees turned up at, of all places, a miners' welfare club just south of Edinburgh, at the time that Massachusetts was getting big in the charts for them. I was chatting to their drummer Colin Petersen (who had been a child star in an Aussie kids TV series) about homesickness... but I didn't know at the time that he was under threat of deportation because his visa had been screwed up. Later, Petersen said something quite typical of the 1960s hitmakers: "we lived very well in those years, but we ended up with very little money in the bank." After he was fired by the BeeGees there was a court case resulting in the bizarre judgment that he should never again try to find work as a drummer. He did, of course!

Also in a Scottish social club, we came across the Move, who at the time had just released *Fire Brigade*, and for some reason I found myself helping cart their gear up a snow-covered fire escape on to the stage. Their guitarist Roy Wood had just discovered the wah-wah pedal - he used it on every single number, which had the result of turning me off the effect for ever.

Working for some magazine or other, I found myself backstage at the Usher Hall in Edinburgh, talking to Steve Marriott of Humble Pie. As an introduction to the world of big business, it was an eye-opener - I asked what money the band went out for, and he replied: "I honestly don't know". It's only at our level we worry about such things. Once you've made it, you don't have to worry about spending three-quarters of an hour after the gig trying to find out who's responsible for paying the band... then discovering that he's gone home, taking the cash box with him.

An interesting lesson that same night was seeing Peter Frampton, who was in the band with Marriott, staggering past absolutely full of the cold and flu and whatever; he didn't seem likely to stay on his feet. A few minutes later, he was onstage with Marriott, and gave no indication of not being well - he was sparkling. Professionals do that. An important lesson.



Real pro reporters don't ask star interviewees for autographs - but I couldn't resist this one.

Backstage at that same show, I met a shy, diffident young chap with curly hair, who was getting ready to go out and face a crowd of 2,000, armed with only a 12-string acoustic guitar, and singing a song about a spaceman. He was a favourite with the stage crew, who were in the wings stomping and clapping. They clearly had an eye for talent - he was the young David Bowie.

These days, the godfather of the British blues is an affable and cheerful 80-year-old - but in the 70s, John Mayall was notoriously hard to get on with. I was backstage with three members of Fleetwood Mac, Peter Green, John McVie and Mick Fleetwood, when it suddenly occurred to me: "you were all with Mayall, weren't you?" McVie rolled his eyes heavenward and nodded. "We've all been through the mill..."

I was to go through the same mill myself not long after. When I reported on Mayall's acoustic band, the one that did the *Turning Point* album, his manager drove us down to his hotel for an interview. Things started badly when Mayall sat down with a curt "right, let's get this over with", and frankly, it got worse from then on. We did not part on good terms!

I did have 'my own' music magazine for a couple of years around 1980 - this was the *Scottish Country Music Express*, a remarkably home-made piece of work that circulated round the country and western clubs. I did all the writing and the typesetting on an old IBM typewriter, pasted up the artwork, and sold what few adverts there were, and we flogged a thousand a month at 20p a go, which more or less covered the print costs and the petrol in travelling all over Scotland. It proved something which I have confirmed over and over again - that if you can throw your energy into creating a well-written news medium for enthusiasts of any limited-interest group, whether that is in hundreds or tens of thousands, you will make a name for yourself overnight... although you won't necessarily make any money. (Trudi and I repeated the same trick for fifteen years just before we retired, when we published the only credible news magazine for the coffee-house trade; we did manage to retire on it, but I always said that if our revenue had been as big as our reputation, we'd be in the Bahamas by now).

Little magazines like these can do a remarkable job in bringing together people with like interests, and forming true 'communities' of like-minded people; groups who would never otherwise have appeared in the press found themselves interviewed in the *Country Music Express*, and began receiving enquiries from the other end of the country.

Delightfully, that led to working for a 'real' news-stand music magazine, the *International Country Music News*, for whom I went off to have a look round Nashville, the capital of country music. I had to pay for the trip myself, but in the early 1980s, arriving in Tennessee and saying you were from a British magazine had a remarkable effect even on those most hospitable of people. Being a Brit writer got me a trip round Gracelands, the

Writing it down

mansion in which Elvis lived and died - they have a 'guide' for every room, who repeats parrot-fashion the script they have been given; don't ask them a question, or you'll throw them completely. Say anything critical, such as questioning Elvis' taste in furnishing, and they'll call security.

(On the bus back to my motel, I got chatting to the driver, and asked him why, in Elvis' living room, everything clashed so badly - the colour of the curtains argued with the colour of the carpet, and so on. He replied, politely: "sir, you have to remember that Elvis grew up in a shack with a dirt floor. When you've been that poor, and then you come into money, you look at something and think I want that, I'll buy it - and you just don't care whether it matches with whatever else you've got.")

I had an uncomfortable time in the Martin Luther King museum in Atlanta. There is a very big display of the kind of thing that led up to the civil rights movement - not only lynchings, but the way black students were treated when they first entered white colleges and universities in the southern states, including the infamous picture of a black student sitting stoically at a dinner table as several white racist students pour food and drink over her head. I involuntarily said 'unbelievable' out loud, and it was heard by a black girl standing next to me; she gave me a funny look and moved several paces away. I went into the lecture theatre for a film about the civil rights movement, which was followed by a discussion session - I was the only white in the room, and when the lecturer asked what I thought, I said I felt ashamed. A little old black lady, a thin stick of a woman who seemed about 90, turned and said kindly: "don't yo' worry, son... it wasn't yo' fault."

I had an equally uncomfortable time with 'native Americans' in Arizona. I visited a sort of craft fair they were holding, and caused offence by taking a picture. You always know the real Indians - they're the ones who ask for money when you take a photograph.

(I travelled with a black serviceman on a Greyhound bus journey in the southern states, and when we stopped for drinks at a not-entirely friendly one-horse town somewhere in Alabama, I plucked up the courage to ask him about being a black in those parts. He replied, very politely, that bad as it still was, he felt safer in the south than as a black in New York.)

I had clicked to the fact that distances in America are so vast, you could programme a series of overnight Greyhound bus trips on journeys that were so long, you could get a night's sleep and save money on motels. At 4am, I woke on one Greyhound bus and found myself staring down into the kitchen of the café at the bus station in Macon, Georgia. As I looked down at the sink, my first thought was: that's where Little Richard used to wash dishes!

The people of the southern states are famous for their hospitality, and in the early 80s I experienced it time after time. I realised that the Greyhound bus taking me from Memphis to Nashville would take me right past the ranch of

Loretta Lynn, the first great female country singer to write her own songs... she was women's lib thirty years before America caught up with it. I called the ranch and said who I was, and her site manager said "come and see us, we'll put you up at the Loretta Lynn motel" - and they did. They provided a free night's stay, and a tour of her ranch in a jeep - though she wasn't at home.

At her ranch, I got chatting to the chap who ran the souvenir stall. As he was closing for the night, he said: "you ever been to a Tennessee beer joint?" Well, no - so it was into his truck, across the freeway, and deep into a pine forest for a mile or so. And suddenly there was a shack in a clearing, with a few pick-up trucks outside. We walked in, and I saw the total furnishings in one glance - two pool tables, a 'bar' consisting of a plank across a couple of barrels, and two more barrels filled with ice. The barman plunged his hand into these to bring out cans of cold beer. That was it - if you've seen Crocodile Dundee, the bar in the outback was much the same kind of thing, but this one had an unmistakeable underlying air of menace.

We walked in, and the place fell silent - in redneck Tennessee, long-haired strangers were not a familiar sight. My friend said immediately to the barman: "hey, Leroy, shake hands with my friend Ian from England," and I realised that this was a very astute opening gambit to show that I was acceptable. The whole place relaxed... well, I didn't. I felt certain that if I had walked into the place on my own, I would not have walked out again.

Anyway, the next day I continued on to Music City, Nashville, and experienced southern hospitality again. I called the Grand Ole Opry, the home of country music, and introduced myself as being from a British magazine - come on down, said the manager. We had been chatting in his office for a few minutes when an elderly chap shuffled in, nodded, and walked on through; the manager idly called "Hi Roy", and I realised who the old man was - it was Roy Acuff, the first of the great country stars, from the 30s through to the 60s or so. Hank Williams, the biggest country star of all, once said of him: "you booked him and you didn't worry about crowds - for drawing power in the South, it was Roy Acuff, then God."

Acuff, in view of his importance in the country music, had been built a retirement cottage in the new Opryland complex, so even his old age could be spent in the centre of country music. I told a local agent about this the next day, and the cynical response was: "they're just waiting for him to die, so they can turn the cottage into a museum." And they did - in the capital of country music, money trumps everything.

The hospitality of the Opry management led to a free backstage pass at the next show. Now, these shows, in a format which has been running for fifty years or more, are like no other. It was an accolade to be made a 'member' of the Opry, and one responsibility of being a member was that you had to make yourself available for a dozen appearances a year, and even country superstars were paid only basic union rates for doing so. This meant that on

Writing it down

any weekend night, you might find a dozen or more big country stars who had turned up to make their appearance - when I was backstage, I was starstruck to see Roy Acuff chatting to Bill Monroe, the father of bluegrass music. Both were in their 80s, but were on the show that night, and I also even managed to get a word with Jimmy C Newman, the most famous Cajun musician, that wonderfully wild music which is a blend of country, Tex-Mex, barndance, and anything else they can blend in, with lyrics in the curious kind of pidgin-French they speak in Louisiana, all played at full speed.

The unsung heroes of the Opry were the A-Team. These were the house band, and these guys backed every solo or duo artist, which needed an encyclopaedic knowledge of country music and the ability to improvise and adapt. They didn't read music as we know it - they used the Nashville Numbers System, which was a kind of tonic sol-fa which didn't use names for chords or notes. So long as you knew which key a song was in, you just played the relative numbers - 'one' was the tonic chord, 'four' was the fourth, and so on; a minus sign meant a minor chord. I got the chance to meet one of the A-Team - I had been chatting to a showbiz agent called Jay Diamond (wonderful name for an agent, and the only chance I got to ride in a Cadillac!) and he said he would introduce me to an A-Team player; this turned out to be Henry Strzelecki, a bass player who had sessioned for just about every star in country music. Henry took some time over a beer to explain just how hard it was to crack the music scene in Nashville. I had hoped that as a bass player, there might be some openings for me - no chance!

*

While writing for a quality Sunday newspaper (I really have appeared in the quality press!) I got a chance to interview one of the world's greatest violin makers... not that anyone had heard of him, or that he ever got any credit.

My other half of the time, the folk singer Maddy Taylor, was working with the playwright Hector MacMillan, who in turn had become the apprentice to old John Brown of Sanquhar in the Scottish borders. In a tiny cottage tucked away in the hill country, old John worked with home-made tools to create instruments of a quite unbelievable quality.

John was a first-war veteran. Back in the trenches, he had made his first fiddle (it is an orchestral conceit to refer to violins as 'fiddles'), from a cigar box. Somewhere along the line he had stumbled upon the secret of whatever it was that allowed Stradivarius to make truly great violins. By the 1980s, using home-made tools, he was turning out one or two fiddles a year, and they were world-class. He couldn't play the thing at all, and indeed his playing was excruciating. But he could make a violin which would, from day one, sound the way a Strad is supposed to do after a few hundred years. It was true - he lent one to the first violin of the Scottish National Orchestra, who for a long time refused to give it back.

Old John did not let me into the secret. Only Hector was allowed to learn it.

But, John told me, it isn't any of what are held to be the big secrets - you don't have to cut the wood from the north side of the tree by the light of the full moon, or use a varnish boiled up with magical incantations. Indeed, all John's fiddles sounded great before the varnish was put on.

The old man is long gone... but I am glad to see that Hector the playwright has made an entire new career as a luthier. And what's the secret? The best I can do is say it has something to do with the Hemholz Resonance, or the way sound acts inside a cavity... and beyond that, I'm lost!

*

With regard to great instruments, a golden rule is - never sell your instrument. It may be the way for you to make money one day. I made the mistake of selling my best-ever instrument when times got hard; I had a genuine American-made Fender Precision bass which I bought for a couple of hundred quid in the seventies, and the day George Harrison died, I flogged it for money for groceries. It's probably worth two thousand now.

Talking of Fenders, the bassist with Fairport Convention, Dave Pegg, told me in an interview that he had the chance to go round the guitar factory and met Leo Fender himself. Pegg had his own Fender bass with him, and asked the great man to sign it... Leo took a metal stylus, heated it in a flame, and burned his signature into the guitar body.

Do you know that you can buy fake Fender and Gibson logos and decals? I have an acoustic guitar with a Gibson logo on, but I know it isn't a real one - because I put it there! Today, when you can buy replica guitars with no brand names on, the opportunities for fraud are obvious - Modern Music in Truro used to have on display an absolutely beautiful Les Paul, with a discreet sign asking customers not to ask the price, because it was a fake. Truly, you'd never have known - it was a cheap copy, but the Gibson decals had been skilfully applied and perfectly varnished over, and it looked perfect... it certainly had done to the poor chap who had bought it and took it to the shop to be valued. I was told that there was a 'factory' in Cornwall turning out craftsman-level work that would turn a £50 copy into something which would sell at perhaps £800 - a price just low enough to suggest authenticity yet a bargain.

*

One of my very favourite interviewees for the music press was the great Clinton Ford. Now, if you're under forty, that name won't mean anything - but in the 60s, Clinton was the big singing star of radio, particularly on the Light programme (which became Radio 2). He could sing in any style, from pops to jazz to music hall, and many years later, to everybody's surprise including his own, he was hired to be the top of the bill at a Peterborough Country Music Festival; the reason for this was that in the 1950s he had been a hit country singer, as much as he had ever been anything else.

Before going on in front of a marquee full of about eight thousand people,

he sat down with me in the backstage café for an interview... he was so nervous that he smoked every one of my pack of cigarettes. But what a chap, and what stories - he immediately became my hero, not least because he had been co-writer of *The Old Bazaar in Cairo*, which I can still recite, and also because of his 1962 hit *Fanlight Fanny* (the *Frowsy Nightclub Queen*).

Clinton was gentleman enough to share his career stories, even those of bad luck and bad decisions. In 1958, his manager brought him with a song and told him to record it; Clinton said no, it was a rotten song. "It's a weepie about a kid and his dog and it's no good. It won't sell." His manager persisted, and Clinton reluctantly gave in, protesting: "It won't sell - if it sells anything, I'll give the royalties to the Battersea Dogs Home."

The song was *Old Shep*, and his recording was a smash hit. Clinton never saw a penny from it!

In the 60s, the *Light* programme was full of 'variety' music programmes, most of which were played live - *Workers' Playtime*, *Women's Hour*, *Sing Something Simple*, and so on. Clinton was on all of them, and particularly on the two big pop radio shows, *Saturday Club* and on *Sunday, Easybeat*. When they wanted chart songs sung, but weren't going to play the record or hire the chart stars (these programmes had a budget of about fifty quid!), Clinton was one of the resident studio singers who would do the job.

He was so popular that he often appeared on radio shows more than once a day; in one week, he was the guest star in six or seven shows. Then, as always happens with the BBC, some new smart-arse came in to run the *Light* programme, saw Clinton's name in the listings and said: "who's this singer and why are we putting him on so many times?" The producers of all the radio shows, keen to keep in with their new boss, dutifully cancelled his contracts, and Clinton went overnight from being the UK's most favourite radio singer to being heard nowhere on the air.

He was a super guy - by the time I got to know him, he had snow-white hair and a little beard, and looked like Colonel Sanders of *Kentucky Fried Chicken*. His gags never stopped: he went to the hotel reception desk and said, "I have a reservation." She said "what's your name?" and he replied "Geronimo." I thought he was a wonderful old trouper, and we were on Christmas card terms for a few years.

And what happened at Peterborough? Having finished all my fags, he straightened his bow tie, strolled on in front of an audience of thousands and said: "let's get this straight from the start - I am not going to sing *Fanlight Fanny*!" The crowd erupted, and he had them eating out of his hand all the way to *Old Shep*.

But he didn't always sing his big song - occasionally, if someone in a club audience called out '*Old Shep*!', Clinton would retort: "can you not let a poor mutt rest in peace?"

4. Plug in and pray

Playing religious or 'inspirational' music isn't all sweetness and light



New thinking continues to scare the church, and indeed the general public. We were allowed to use this picture for the cover of our Easter CD, Love Is Come Again... the crucifixion was staged in Cardiff, and the actor was a soldier, whose make-up took five hours.

Just look at the expression of near-contempt on the face of the passer-by.

I think I can now achieve the neat trick of upsetting two opposing factions on the same subject. Because this chapter is about church music, or more accurately 'worship music', and I can now offend both those who are into church music and those who aren't.

Candidly, modern church bands are, virtually without exception, a pain in the arse. I've played in many of them over twenty years, and I always say 'never again'. Don't get me wrong - there is a lot of really good music in the Christian world, but you just don't find it in the church.

Did you ever realise that church leaders and their musicians don't always get on? There have been 'tensions' between them over the centuries, and this is still the case. The musicians often feel undervalued and misunderstood, and when there is conflict between them, it is the musicians who always come off worst.

Mike Pilavachi, leader of the Soul Survivor ministry, said he was once speaking at a church musicians' conference when he suddenly felt compelled to ask: "have any of you felt mistreated by your church leaders? Have your God-given dreams to create music ever been suppressed by your home church?" One observer counted 120 who stood up immediately. Had I been there, I too would have been up like a shot.

"We now have a 'war' between pastors and musicians," Pilavachi said. "Pastors think of musicians as undisciplined and egocentric, and the musicians say their pastors never encourage them. So, over the years, church has become stuffed to bursting with musicians who are hurting."

It's very true! The problem exists because creative musicians are always looking to develop in new directions, and new ways do not always appeal to the church. So musicians are regarded with suspicion... worse, if they are thought

to enjoy applause, they are viewed as downright dangerous.

"This is something I'm often asked about," I was told by Noel Richards, the singer who filled Wembley Stadium with worshippers at his Champion of the World event. "I see it particularly in the States, where a lot of churches are run like corporations - the pastor is the chief executive, and everyone else are minions! So the musician ends up just 'doing a job'. But we musicians want to express ourselves... we do have egos, which is not a bad thing if it makes us work hard, but the church needs to understand that we have hopes and dreams and aspirations, and to make space for us."

Britain's top worship songwriter of the last twenty years, Graham Kendrick, guided me to wise words on this: "musicians are subject to the desire for acclaim because that is the way a musician is usually measured... although, to their pastor, this desire may seem hopelessly wrong. Pastors must understand that what most musicians desperately want is to please."

This paradox between selfless service and the desire to be applauded brings us to a major piece of bullshit you often hear from church leaders - the myth of 'performance'. In churches everywhere, musicians are still put in their place with the phrase: 'this is worship, not a performance'. I've been slapped down with this one myself. It is, of course, nonsense - 'performance' is just a device to convey a message, and it is understood by every kind of communicator from teachers to politicians. Any minister who wants the point of his sermon to get across will accept the value of 'performance'.

Those two top writers, Graham and Noel, have both fought to get past this with new ideas, and one of Kendrick's was the March for Jesus project, which gave us enjoyable street parades. These can be fun, though it can be dicey playing on the back of a flatbed lorry while it's moving down the high street. The problem is, you don't see the speed bumps ahead: one moment you're launching into verse two, and the next, you're on your backside.

Noel's big idea was sheer 'performance' - a big Wembley stadium worship show. He was 'convicted', as the curious Christian phrase puts it, that he should do it. This means he believes he was divinely instructed to do so, and certainly, a lot of Christians claim divine inspiration for all kinds of nonsense. But Noel very sensibly qualified that in our interview, observing that 'if God orders something, He pays for it... if God doesn't order it, then guess who has to pay for it!' Now, having decided that he must put on a giant event, Noel quite reasonably got the jitters - he had to put up security for the cost of Wembley, so his house was on the line, and he needed something like forty thousand paying customers to get through. So, every day for a month before the show, he was calling the ticket office to see how things were going... and in the end he drew 45,000, which saw him financially safe.

Anyway, back at the subject, one of the biggest problems with modern church bands is... most of them are awful. I think there is one major reason

for this, though you may think it an unchristian view: I reckon that many musicians who just aren't good enough to be in bands in the secular world have found that, by appearing to be very sincerely devotional, they can get a place in a church band... and once in, they defend their status fiercely!

This is not helped by the management of modern churches and the music played in them. Many modern churches are new-covenant churches... briefly, this is fire-and-brimstone theology replaced with the concept that everything is possible through faith and a personal relationship with Jesus. Alongside this new concept, there arose a new kind of worship music - if the 'old' church music is hymns played in a turgid and dreary way, then the 'new' form is what is called CCM, or 'contemporary Christian music', guitar-led and often referred to as 'happy-clappy'.

It took off in the 1980s; the super songwriter Dave Bilbrough once told me in an interview how in those early days, he and several other young and very nervous singer-songwriters would sit round and tentatively try out their new songs on each other. These songs were not 'hymns' in the old sense, although many of them did come to be sung by congregations, and Dave managed to score a worldwide success with his very first song, Abba Father. Then Graham Kendrick did the same with the boppy Shine, Jesus, Shine, and in the 1990s, young Matt Redman achieved the unthinkable, becoming the first credible Christian songwriter to appeal to teenage girls.

So the whole thing exploded and modern guitar-led Christian music took over. Instead of congregations with their heads down over hymnbooks, the people now had their heads up, their hands raised to the heavens, and expressions of rapture on their faces. The leaders, who were not always ordained ministers, did not wear robes, but jeans and tee-shirts. Now, as a musician - which group of people would you prefer to play to?

But there was a snag.

Many of these new community-type churches began in an 'unofficial' way - it's quite easy to 'plant' a church without affiliation to any established religious group, and many of their leaders have not been formally ordained or even been to Bible college. Sure, many of them have done truly great work for their communities, but when you have churches led by people who are not accountable to any chain of management, then there is the risk of abuse. Certainly, some fellowships were founded, or taken over, by dodgy characters who found a good way to attain personal 'status' was to run their own 'church'. I've met some who are downright charlatans. A Catholic musician friend of mine complained: 'they are preying on the gullible'.

(Perhaps you think I'm being too cynical... well, I was horrified when I saw a pastor introduce his new-born baby to a congregation with the assertion 'he already has the power of healing', and I remember the general intake of breath from a congregation when another pastor announced that the Lord

had instructed him to 'cure' (his word) a couple of gay ladies through the power of prayer. And don't get me started on those who profess to speak in tongues, or 'receive pictures from the Lord', which they amazingly seem to do at exactly the same time every Sunday morning. I recall one service of such mystical waffle which seemed to be going on forever, until after two hours, with most of us now yearning for lunch, one of these people stood up and said "the Lord has just given me a picture of a Mars bar..." The leaders were not pleased with the giggles which swept along the back row, where we had all been visualizing roast spuds and two veg...)

Anyway, with the 'new' kind of churches came a new kind of musician: true, some were really talented, but others were just not good enough to get a gig in the outside world, and who found that by expressing the right kind of 'devotion', they could quickly become 'worship leaders' in the new churches.

And some of them are unbelievably crap. It is almost a repeat of the punk explosion of 1976, in which the ability to actually play an instrument didn't matter. (There actually is a Christian-punk music movement!) So the standard of some guitar-led worship bands is scarcely credible. In an established church not a million miles from where I am writing, I have seen a worship band of three guitars in which one guy was playing in three-four time, one in 4/4 time, and one in no rhythm known to man. And nobody noticed! One guitarist I played with in that same church actually confessed to me that he "didn't know the difference between tempo and rhythm". Lord help us...

I promise you this is true - while with a community church band in Oxfordshire, I played beside an extremely pious and self-righteous bassist who never practised or rehearsed. He believed that as a devout Christian, the Holy Spirit would see him through. It didn't. I rather suspect that the holy entity's view on this would have been: "if you can't be bothered to put in some effort, mate, you're on your own!"

In the same area, I played with a Baptist pastor called Cathy the Tuneless. Not just because her singing voice was even more awful than mine, but because she didn't know that her guitar needed to be tuned before she played it. It just sat in the corner going farther and farther out of tune. Every Sunday, at one point in the service, she would give the congregation a cute smile and turn to her guitar, oblivious to the looks of horror on the faces of her flock... they knew what was coming. And every week it got worse!

And in spite of all their shortcomings, worship bands always try material far beyond their capabilities. The song that sounded wonderful on a new worship CD probably took a month to write, a couple of weeks to arrange, and was almost certainly road-tested on stage before it got near the studio, to be recorded with the best session musicians and recording techniques... yet every worship band thinks they can knock it off in one rehearsal and a pre-service run-through! (It is common for the worship band to retire to a side room for a prayer before the service - a hopeful prayer before the service will

often not save the band, or indeed save the congregation from the result.)

So we end up with a very common situation in which musicians without any working experience at all find themselves leading the music at certain churches, largely unsupervised. I think that in 25 years of Christian music, I have worked with perhaps two church leaders who understood how to run a band, so the majority of church bands are unguided.

This has brought us an unfortunate collision between the two types of church musician - the old-time church pianist, who can read music and bang out the melody of a hymn for the congregation to follow, and the new ones, who can't read music, and who play rhythmic chords instead of melodies. The two don't communicate - I have recently seen a perfectly good traditional church pianist reduced to tears through being unable to understand what the guitarists in her church's band expected her to do. I have seen another perfectly good traditional pianist reduce one of the greatest modern worship songs to unfollowable gibberish, because she couldn't understand the style.

The result is mistrust, and as they don't get on, the newer musicians fail to benefit from the experience of the older ones, which is a hell of a shame.

Why don't the two kinds work together? Why should gigging experience in the secular world help with playing in church? I'll tell you - traditional church musicians often don't understand the way band musicians work. Typically, piano players read music differently to guitarists; they start at the beginning and read through to the end, and it makes little difference to them if the end of one verse comes in the middle of a line of music in the paper. Guitarists, by contrast, work in patterns and visualise a song best when it is written out like a poem. This makes it easier for them to see when melody lines are repeated, or when lines 2 and 4 of a verse match. So, when church music leaders hand the guitarist conventional sheet music - they're lost.

And church musicians preach about 'playing in the key as written', when every gigging guitarist knows that you choose your key according to the lead singer's voice. The 'key as written' is only the key the writer sings in, or the key which was convenient for the lead instrument in the original version. So, bands who have no brass section will probably not need to play in Bb or Eb, whatever the sheet music says. And you'd be amazed how much church music is written in the key of Eb, probably the least-convenient chord of all to play on a guitar. (In the case of certain 1950s/60s hits, some sheet-music keys were deliberately changed to make it difficult for other artistes to copy the songs, and such red herrings still exist - you can find copies of the guitar classic 'Apache' written in D minor, which seems to make no sense at all... the Shadows recorded it in Am, which everyone has played since. But Jerry Lordan wrote it on piano, where the melody falls conveniently in Dm...!)

Whatever the standard of the musicians, it doesn't help that a fair amount of 'new' Christian worship songs are utter drivel. Some songwriters seem to

hope they can get a reputation for great piety by writing in pompous semi-churchy language that they would never ever use in everyday talk... if you sing this rubbish with an expression of pure rapture on your face, people will think you're being deeply meaningful, however bad your lyrics are. Others go for a kind of hippie airy-fairyness, and the very best parody of this kind of modern Christian music is from the Rev Gerald Ambulance, a character created by the satirical Christian website Ship Of Fools, in his song 'O God, You're Really Lord'. If I remember rightly, the words go:

"Oh God
You're really God
Yes, you are.
And I love you, God,
Because you're God
You're really God
Oh yes,
You really are,
Because you're God.
Oh God..."

Believe me, that is a pin-sharp satire on some modern church music!

By contrast, spirituals and the best inspirational folk songs get straight to the point. I discussed this with Dave Bilbrough, the chap who hit the jackpot with his first song, and whose catchy worship songs are now well known. He told me his style came from questioning why religious music should all be written in old-fashioned language: "I listened to hymns which were well-meaning, but didn't do anything for me... yet Paul Simon was writing that 'the words of the prophets were written on the subway walls', and that hooked me."

The most brilliant plain-language Christian lyricist of our time is Don Francisco, of Colorado; I was lucky to interview him a couple of times. He ditched whole the formula of verse-and-chorus songs with 'God is great' lyrics in favour of songs are based on Bible stories, which he rewrites as exciting, powerful and dramatic tales, often seen from an unlikely viewpoint, and supported by a punchy and percussive acoustic guitar style.

Don told me that one American publishing company brought out a Graphic Bible, saying specifically that it was for "kids who wouldn't normally be seen dead reading a Bible". In the same way, said Don, people who don't like other Christian music like his songs, because of their action and drama. His most famous story-song is He's Alive, which tells the story of the risen Jesus in an unexpected way. It is a nine-verse epic sung from the viewpoint of the apostle Peter, who denied knowing Jesus on the night of the crucifixion... and then, on seeing the empty tomb, suddenly realised he'd got it all wrong. Stars such as Dolly Parton recorded it (so did I, but with less success!).

I don't do much solo singing - well, you wouldn't, with a voice like mine - but I was doing a lead spot at the Witney Community Church one Easter and chose that song of Don's, with his approval. I was playing this in a fairly fast finger-picking style, with a conga player and a harmonica behind me, and we steamed into our live spot at quite a lick. Now, in front of an audience, your brain will often split itself into separate parts - one bit registers "this is going well!", while another part reaches forward into your memory to check what the next verse is; meanwhile, you're singing the current verse on autopilot. Just as I was thinking that this song was going down well, I spotted a young Down's Syndrome lad in the third row - he was punching his fist into the air in time with the music and shouting 'yeah!!!' The rest of the song was directed at this young man - and twenty-odd years later, I haven't forgotten him.

Thinking about those kids who wouldn't be seen dead reading a Bible helped my friend Tom Scott of California create the greatest rock-worship CD of recent times. Tom has played on award-winning music for big labels, and his Victory Christian Fellowship band in Fresno really cooked. California, of course, has a history of spirit-filled charismatic churches, with a typically American flair for imaginative outreach - Tom told me that his church installed pool tables in the lobby, so that kids could have something to do while their parents worshipped, and also built a skateboard ramp in the car park. Sure enough, the music drew them irresistibly into the worship area!

So Tom wrote a dozen songs, all with a clear Christian content but which were pure rock and funk (there was even a slow blues in there) and the band invited the congregation in for a rehearsal to sing through them. Then the band and the fellowship together went for it, with the recording machine on... the result was *Experience the Fire*, an hour of joyous Christian pop-rock, superbly played and with the fellowship shouting their hearts out.

How I wish church leaders in Britain could think this way. It's true, Tom's album, the funkiest and fieriest live worship album of the 1990s was, unfairly, not a hit. Most Christians in Britain didn't even get to hear it; many wouldn't have understood that such a thing could exist, because it is not what they think of as Christian worship music. Ros from the Occasional Ceilidh Band told me that she took members of an Anglican church to hear a modern worship show, and they were enthralled - they hadn't known modern Christian music exists!

That isn't a loose phrase. I was talking to a chap who ran his own Christian music business; a worship leader was browsing his stock and my friend said for a laugh: 'come on, get your congregation into the 21st century!' The visitor replied glumly: 'I'm still trying to get them into the twentieth!'

To this day, many of us are still trying to get our new songs heard by church leaders and congregations, but it's one hell of a battle. My own best worship song has been a failure; this is *Pray With Me*, taken from a folk melody I got from Penny Nichols, a singing teacher in the Catskills north of New York. I

adapted it, added some simple words, and waited for churches to take it up with enthusiasm, and make me rich... well, it got used in a couple of services, but that was it. Truly, churches hate new ideas. (If I can find a way of getting that song to Aled Jones, there may yet be a hope...!)

So, those who try to break the mould often come to grief. We had a folk-gospel band playing in a market square at Easter, and our O Sinner Man was said to have feet tapping in queues at the supermarket check-out a hundred yards away. We were doing what the church needs to do - we were reaching the general public! And the church leaders later gave us a bollocking 'for turning Easter from a funeral into a celebration'. Jesus wept.

For an Easter CD, we used a cover picture of a real-life 'crucifixion' - this was an event in which Jesus, played by a soldier, was hung on a cross in the centre of Cardiff to highlight the meaning of Easter. His make-up took five hours to apply. Not only did the public not get it (and our picture shows a passer-by staring with a kind of dismissive contempt), but some church leaders hated the idea of the soldier's imaginative project. Well, it's safer to stay inside the church and moan about the world outside, than actually go out there...

But all is not lost - it really is possible to take good Christian music outside the church. One super real-world outlet is the 'pub church', an idea that has been going for over twenty years, yet is still unknown to many ministers. The idea is simple - church members visit their local pub once a month or so to put on some lively music and debate Christian issues, informally and without any religiosity, over a few pints. The church goes out into the community, and the world sees that 'church' is not some secret ritual that goes on behind church walls. My old partner in Caleb's Mission, Derek, has been running a pub church successfully in an Oxfordshire pub for years. Nearer where we live, the Royal Oak, in Poringland, near Norwich, even hosts Can't Sing, Won't Sing sessions for people who would love to sing gospel, but reckon they aren't good enough. Even Costa holds coffee-shop church.

Times have changed, yet many ministers still don't get it. I tried to explain the pub church concept to a local reverend, who replied doubtfully: "well, we sometimes go to sing carols in the pub at Christmas..." Heaven help us.

But perhaps I am being impatient. Perhaps we have to be more understanding in presenting our new music and ideas, because we Christian musicians are only human...and indeed, my favourite illustration of this is the great country star Hank Williams, a modernist Christian of his times who wrote brilliantly inspirational songs, yet died in 1952 in the back seat of a car on the way to a gig, from an excess of booze, drugs, and loose women.

I find this a delightfully real-life contradiction, illustrating the human failings of a believer in the faith... but once made the mistake of saying so to a Methodist audience.

The teetotallers received the remark in stony silence!

5. Writing for Jesus

Satire and gay writers in the Christian music world



The mystery reviewer created by Ship of Fools

Being a writer, a musician, and involved in gospel music, it followed that I spent a fair amount of time writing for the Christian press. And I can tell you, there are as many interesting personalities in this kind of music as anywhere else.

For a gospel music magazine, I managed to contrive an interview with the great Joy Webb in the café beneath St Pauls. If her name is unfamiliar, think back to the 60s and the Joystrings, the Salvation Army band who, to everyone's astonishment, got into the charts with *It's An Open Secret*. That was Joy.

When we met, Joy had just become retired-major Webb and published her autobiography *Bridge of Songs*, and she was the most charming interviewee. I didn't like to tell her, but back in the 60s, if she had needed a bass player, I'd have donned the uniform and signed the pledge to be beside her... even in the silly hat, she was quite a looker!

Joy unwittingly kicked off the entire guitar-led Christian music movement through an unguarded remark by the head of the Sally Army.

"In 1963, our leader was asked about Christianity reaching the youth of the day - he replied that if we had to play electric guitars to reach them, then we would. Well, the press jumped on that, and wanted to see it happen!

"The Army knew I had a guitar, so I was sent for and told to get a group together to go on television - that night. We did, the BBC telephones were jammed, we were asked back the next week, and by then I had got together some guys who knew a few chords. Then the first song I wrote, 'It's an Open Secret', was our first hit... by which time the Army realised that perhaps they ought to let us rehearse!"

Playing in churches is, for most musicians, a pretty easy gig, because you're in front of people who are already on your side. It's far more difficult playing Christian music out in the real world, and Joy's band had the courage to do that. Well, the Salvation Army has always had that kind of guts... remember the little old ladies who would walk into the toughest bars in town to sell the

War Cry magazine. In the same way, the Joystings played for the tough gangsters in east end drinking clubs.

"In the early hours of the morning in a nightclub, people begin to want to talk, and that's what we were really there for," Joy told me. "I wouldn't have played the Playboy club by choice, but we were sent there by the Army - and we lost all our fear by playing those kind of clubs. So now I say to Christian bands, you get out there, and find the venues outside the church. But do it well, or you'll be laughed off - God doesn't need to be shot down just because you aren't good enough."

I dared to ask Joy if the Joystings were good enough. She giggled.

"Good enough for the 60s, yes - some of our early records were as gross as everyone else's of the time, but our advantage was that we really could sing."

This question of quality in Christian music, and Christian entertainment, was also discussed by another interviewee, Simon Smith, creator of the quite unique revue show Holy Unsuitable. Simon was a pioneer in something which is still not widely known - that satire is alive in the established church... well, in the Christian church, anyway. In some faiths, of course, it will get you shot.

Nothing in Christian humour has ever beaten Holy Unsuitable. It was so funny that even the Bishop of Oxford put something in to support it, and live shows were always sold out. Their quite brilliant policy was that 'you can laugh at the religion, but not at the faith'.

Typically, the live events featured a giant-screen caption competition. The audience were shown a picture and invited to drop their suggested captions in a box at the interval. I have never forgotten the show in which the picture showed a service in a nudist colony, taken from the back of the undressed congregation - only the minister, at the far end, was clothed. The winning caption was: 'though shalt not covet thy neighbour's ass!'

(Only one Holy Unsuitable item was ever cut out at the request of the church. This was a proposed video report on the clergy mud-wrestling championships - and even that item was only cut because the church couldn't offer anywhere to film it.)

Anyway, Simon made the point to me in an interview that the average Christian audience these days will not put up with below-par entertainment. His logic was this - the average person in the street these days is now used to entertainment on demand that cost millions to make, and so the average churchgoer is not as forgiving about the average acts as they once were.

"We've all been to church events which are embarrassingly bad, and it's accepted that 'they do their best, but ...' Well, when we go out in the community we have to be excellent, because to draw people away from other things on a Saturday night, it has to be good. Christian presenters are now

competing with television shows that cost millions of dollars!"

The other great Christian satirical project is the website Ship of Fools, 'the magazine of Christian unrest', which has now been running for over twenty years. My favourite feature is The Mystery Worshipper, in which followers are invited to review a service in any kind of church - you can print out a visiting card which shows a masked Lone Ranger type, which you slip into the collection plate, and which surprises the church's leaders by telling them that they have been visited.

The reviewers have a list of standard questions: on a scale of 1-10, how good was the preacher; did you get a welcome; what happened when you hung around after the service looking lost; which part of the service was like being in heaven... and which part was like being in the other place, and how would you describe the after-service coffee?

Yes, I confess to having been a reviewer. Just don't ask which churches I reviewed.

*

I once met, and interviewed, a lovely Christian musician with a musical education we would all die for. He was the retired-reverend Kenneth Johnson, and in the 1940-50s, he was a member of the Johnson Family Singers, one of those uniquely American troupes who toured the States in anything but luxury... not exactly in a Model T Ford, but cars of that general kind. Father played guitar, and mother, daughter and three sons all sang harmonies. They sang on local radio, which has always been more important in America than here, and everywhere from churches to school halls. Typically, they would always be short of money, so if they spotted a roadside diner on their travels, they would go in and ask if the manager would let them sing for the lunch customers. They would always make a decent amount in tips, and the diner boss would often feed them as well. When young Kenneth was eight, he was already managing the band's finances - which meant he was handing out wages to his own dad!

What an incredible musical education.

From very much the same roots in rural Americana, George Hamilton IV told me a wonderful story about the evangelist Billy Graham. They had both been booked at one of those great gospel get-togethers in the hillbilly countryside, where hundreds, sometimes thousands, of people would assemble on a hilltop and listen to preachers and some of those wonderful bluegrass bands who would all group around one microphone. It had been raining all day, George told me, and when Billy Graham turned up, they apologised for the weather. "Dr Graham just smiled," said George. "When it came time for him to go on, he stepped up... and the rain stopped. He spoke for an hour, stepped down and put his coat back on... and the rain started again!"

While writing for a music magazine, I chanced one summer to come across a snippet in a local Scottish newspaper, which said that the great Johnny Cash, no less, would be visiting a tiny church in a Fife fishing village, to record an item for his Christmas Special in the USA. It would be on a Saturday.

I whizzed up, as did a few dozen other people who had spotted it and who thus made up a useful congregation. The dour Scots minister told me that both Johnny Cash and Andy Williams had said they wanted to record their spots for the show in his church; Cash had booked the Saturday, but Williams had said he wouldn't be free until the Sunday. "I told him," said the reverend dryly, "that we do tend to be rather busy on a Sunday..."

So Johnny Cash stood in front of a choir made up of the kids from the village school, preparing to sing his Christmas song to a pre-recorded backing. The camera crews were ready, and the congregation of fans hushed.

Cash took fifteen takes to get that song done; the kids from the village school got their part bang-on, every single time!

*

One of the very best interviews I did while writing for the religious press got me into a vast amount of trouble. I had come across Lavender Light, which is 'the black and people of all colours, lesbian and gay gospel choir', from New York. I happened to be in Dallas when I made contact with their leader Maria-Elena Grant in a midnight phone interview from New York. She's British, and I was chilled by her description of the loneliness of a young gay teenager, thinking she's the only one of her kind in the world... and then the life-changing result of finding fellowship in a gay Christian choir.

The members of the choir needed their mutual support, she told me, because simply daring to come out, for want of a better expression, as both gay and Christian put her and her choir colleagues right in the firing line from every angle.

"I get the occasional e-mail saying that if I read the Bible, I'd find that I have no right to sing this music. Well, I always reply, and I say that we are all God's children, that I'm a child of God, and that He created me this way.... and if He'd thought it was such a bad thing, He'd have made me differently. I believe my relationship with God is a good one, because I try to walk in the light. A lot of other people are very pious, put their money in the collection plate on Sunday, then leave the church and go back to doing the same bullshit as they did before... so what kind of values are those? When people tell me I'll be going to hell, then what kind of poison are their words putting into the world?"

Now, you can imagine the kind of reaction that this feature had. The editor of the magazine got scared, ran to his church leader asking for advice, and

printed my story with a cowardly additional note saying that the magazine didn't approve of the 'perversions' of my interviewee. The choir in America were absolutely incensed... but, to their credit, not with me. They said my interview was fair, and I wasn't responsible for what some editor had added to it; that, I thought, was a very Christian attitude.

I never wrote for that paper again.

As it happens, some great inspirational songs come from gay people. I was once trying to get information on a song by Janis Ian, the gutsy New York songwriter (she wrote *At Seventeen*, the great hymn to teenage angst: 'to those whose names were never called, when picking sides for basketball...') and so I put a question about it on her fan forum... and to my amazement, she answered! What's more, she told me a story about it.

This song, *What About the Love*, is quite clearly Christian in its values and content, but as a lesbian, she is not the church's ideal person. So, she said, she wrote this song in her apartment with her girlfriend/spouse, and when it was finished, she said sourly: "well, girls like us have got no chance of getting that recorded by X" (she was referring to a famous, squeaky-clean, butter-wouldn't-melt, holier-than-thou Christian singer, whose image was pretty much the opposite of Janis herself). A few months later, said Janis, there was a knock on her apartment door - and there was the squeaky-clean singer, saying 'can I record your song?'

I wonder if Janis laughed as much as I did a little later, when it turned out that the very holy lady was now in disgrace for having ditched her husband and run off with her road manager!

*

While writing for *New Christian Herald*, I once hit on the idea of applying to interview David Elleray, who was at the time a top Premier League referee, and was known to be an active Christian. He saw me in his master's rooms at Harrow school, and mentioned to me that he knew several top-class footballers who were Christians, and dedicated their success to God. Did it have any effect on their play, I asked.

"It could be dangerous to expect higher standards of Christian players," he replied thoughtfully. "It would be very wrong if they were to be pilloried for doing, in the heat of battle, something a non-Christian would be expected to do. For example, if the Christian midfielder were under a manager's instructions to chop someone down when they were clear on goal, I couldn't really expect him not to.... although I would be very interested to hear how he squares it in his conversation with the Lord that night!"

6. A different country

The British 'country and western' scene truly is
a world unto itself



Yee-hah! In appropriate country mode with a band whose name I forget - but the girl in the middle is the noted Scots singer Maddy Taylor.

I have had a lot to do with country music; the big years for it in the UK were probably mid-70s to mid-80s, and in the middle of that period, not only was I playing with country bands, but I also edited a magazine which was sold round the country music clubs in Scotland (there were around a hundred of them at the time!) and wrote for several of the British country music magazines.

Now, most of the people who frequented country music clubs are really nice folks, although the general public might think them a little odd: they tend to favour western shirts with the classic yoke design on the shoulders, string ties, and Stetson hats. All this gear can cost a fortune - I did a brief bit of work for a guy who imported this stuff and sold it round the clubs, and I can tell he was coining it, with mark-ups of 400 per cent at the very least.

The other main bit of 'country-and-western' gear (I'll tell you later why 'C&W' is an inaccurate term) that has to be worn at a country club is... the gun. No, I'm serious. Just as the most important part of an evening in a social club is the bingo, so, for many people, the most important part of an evening in a C&W club is the shoot-out. This is the point at which the 'gunfighters', who wear belts and holsters and fake revolvers that fire blanks, take over the dance floor and compete in a quick-draw contest.

To be fair, there is a certain amount of skill involved in this: the equipment is quite clever, in that two gunfighters face each other, a balloon may be

released as a signal to draw and fire, and timing equipment measures to a fraction of a second which man drew first. But honestly, once you've seen it done once, the novelty disappears very quickly. And for the band, the big problem is that you take to the stage for the second set coughing like mad because of the cordite.

What became a very serious problem around the country clubs was when certain gunfighters started getting above themselves. If some club organisers turned them down, saying: "we don't want gunfights - we're a music club", then the gunfighting associations replied "we made you, and we can break you - it's us people come to see". That was bull, of course. If anything, people laughed at the gunfighters.

Some of them took it all far too seriously. I was in a country club once when two cowboys, in full rig, got into a really fierce argument at the bar. After several minutes of mutual abuse, one actually stood back and pulled his gun. The rest of the audience watched in laughing disbelief - the chap actually thought he was a cowboy!

More light-heartedly, my musician ex, Maddy Taylor, was starring in the regional TV show *All Kinds of Country*, when she suggested to the producer that as the studio audience would all be country fans coming in full rig, they might post a notice at the door saying 'check your guns at the cloakroom'. It went down well with the country audience, who realised that the station was taking them seriously as fans of the music - and any trick which gets the crowds on your side before you go on is time well spent.

(We had a real gun problem when I was playing with a country band in a pub in Leith, the dockside area of Edinburgh which is, apparently, now 'gentrified', but in those days was downright dangerous. For some time, right in front of the band, we had a solo dancer - he was a 'workie', wearing that curiously Scottish combination of old suit jacket with jeans. He was putting away a few beers and having a great time, until, in the middle of one number, we saw the pub door open and a dozen cops burst in. The dancer sidled off in the direction of the gents', but not quickly enough - he was overpowered and hustled out. We later discovered that all the time he had been dancing in front of us, he had a loaded pistol in his pocket. Going up to the bar, he had decided to play the big man, and had put the gun on the bar; the barmaid, with impressive speed of thought, simply brushed it into the sink under the bar and called the cops. I'm glad he liked the band.)

I interviewed some of the country gunfighters once for a magazine and was struck by their argument that 'country and western music is cowboy music'. What a load of rubbish. And there is, I can tell you, no such thing as 'country and western music', because 'country' and 'western' are two separate genres, which just happened to come together in the repertoires of the great 'country' singers in the USA, in the 1940-50s.

Country music is the music of farmers, generally speaking poor white farmers, from east of the Mississippi. Stars like Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn tell of their impoverished childhoods, and this is all true - they came from farming families who didn't have a dime. The great Boxcar Willie told me once of his childhood in a dirt-floor shack which stood next to the railroad line - "we were near enough the tracks for me to spit on 'em!" - and how he met the railroad bums, the hobos who illegally hitched lifts on the freight trains.

Boxie's story really is an inspiration. His angle was that he dressed as an old-style American engine driver, and he sang and played great train songs; he could do a remarkable train whistle by mouth alone. But nobody in his home country wanted to know. One day, the Scots promoter Drew Taylor, who I did know well, was in America and heard Boxie playing to an uninterested audience in a small club. He realised that the image would work in the UK, brought him over, and the guy was a sensation... and then went back and conquered America as well. What was the inspiring thing about this? Well, Boxie was in his late 50s when he got discovered, and he had maybe five or six years at the top before leukaemia got him. It is never too late to give it a go...

Anyway, these are the kind of people who created 'country' music, and also its near relative, bluegrass. This is played almost entirely on stringed instruments - guitar, mandolin, fiddle, and in the case of the really obscure old stuff, dulcimer.

George Hamilton IV, the 'first gentleman of country music', came from this hillbilly background and was a lovely chap. We met after I had written a feature about the atmosphere backstage at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, and he had been kind enough to say that I had captured the scene accurately. Well, one year at the massive country music festival in Peterborough, I had a press ticket, but no backstage pass. I was loitering around the backstage entrance, wondering how the hell I was going to get through, when a big limousine slowed down and stopped. The back window rolled down and George IV's voice said: "Hey, Ian, are you going in? Get in!" And with no backstage pass, I rolled luxuriously past the security guards!

(A few years later, he did a British tour of churches promoting his album of songs by Fanny Crosby, the great hymn writer of the 1800s - she was blind, but wrote over eight thousand hymns and inspirational songs. George appeared with the tour at our local church, who asked me to introduce him to a packed house. I gave him such a fulsome introduction that the audience cheered him to the rafters, and as the applause died down, George looked over and said: "gee, Ian, that was some welcome - will you do the rest of the tour with me?")

At the big Wembley country music festivals of the 1980s, promoted by the remarkably-named Mervyn Conn, one of the least-favourite jobs was com-

pere - well, it sounds attractive, introducing twenty acts a night to ten thousand people, but it's a long slog. George IV drew the short straw the night George Jones came on - he was the irascible country superstar known variously for his drinking, for never getting over Tammy Wynette, and for unreliability, which earned him the name of 'no-show Jones'. Jones walked on to a great reception, and told the crowd "you've made us so welcome, we'll sing for you all night if you want" - but that only lasted two songs, before he started abusing the sound crew for the quality of the onstage monitors, threw down his guitar, and stalked offstage. His band stayed in place wearing expressions that said 'oh, not again', and ten thousand country fans sat in place, wondering what was going to happen. I happened to be in a position where I could see backstage - compere George IV was calming the star down, and handed him a half-pint mug of something clear, which the star downed. It worked - he went back to continue his set. What was in the glass, I asked later. "Moonshine!" came the compere's answer with a grin.

But that's all 'country' music - 'western' music is something entirely different. This is the music of west of the Mississippi, where the cowboys really did live - this was the land of open prairie and cattle drives. This, in turn, is why you got music such as *Home on the Range*, which means sod-all in Nashville and Memphis, because they didn't have a range there - they had wooded hills and farms.

The westerners had the range, and they also had their own kind of music - western swing, which is a curious blend of jazz and folk; it uses both stringed instruments and brass, and it is the most irresistible dance music you can ever hear.

So 'country and western' is actually a blend of two musics, and the westerners and the easterners don't always get on - my old friend Lore, of Lore and the Legends in Bandera, Texas (cowboy capital of the world, having had more rodeo champions than anywhere else) told me "I always feel a little uncomfortable east of the Mississippi..."

Let me tell you about cowboys. The average British country and western fan would love to be a cowboy, but Lore and the Legends really were cowboys. They lived and worked on a dude ranch and wore riding boots all day, by nature, because they would saddle a horse as readily as I turn the ignition in my car. These guys were tough, but unfailingly polite, as is the way in the southern states. The lady boss of the ranch told me, demurely, "when a cowboy wants to 'air his lungs', as we call it, then he always goes outside to say it."

Lore and his band were my first introduction to Texans, who are a breed apart - as Lore put it, "Texas is not a state - it's a state of mind," which means that Texans are a particularly independent and self-sufficient people.

I was in a remote Texas car park, having been dropped off by a Greyhound

A different country.

bus, when I was collected by Bandera Bob, one of Lore's guitar players. I was standing there in the evening dusk, under an endless Texan sky, realising that I was a thousand miles from anywhere I knew, when a pick-up truck roared into the parking lot, swung in a wide circle to me, and an arm reached out to offer me a bottle. "Hey, y'all drink beer, dontcha?" came my introduction to Texas cowboys!

Lore's songs were a mini-history of the west - he was a student of western history and he knew the country; the people we used to see in western films, from Jesse James to Big John Chisum, were as real to him as if they were still walking around. "Billy the Kid was a bum," he told me. "He was a no-good backshooter and a horse thief, which is the worst thing you could be in the west."

I was indirectly responsible for getting Lore and the band a spot on a Peterborough country music festival, and he did a brief tour here - but a few years later, Lore died in hospital waiting for a liver transplant, before the wider country world could catch up with his songs of the real West.

At one time, the country-and-western club circuit was a very important earner for bands. In the late 70s and into the 80s, there were hundreds of these clubs in Britain, and you could make a full-time living out of playing them.

But this time of plenty for the working country musician clubs did have its hazards.

The singer Gerry Ford, who at one time held down a decent weekly BBC radio show devoted to country music, once suggested to me that a big problem of the country scene was that full-time musicians, doing this music for a living, were putting their livelihoods into the hands of amateurs, the club organisers who were doing it as a hobby. And those organisers did some weird things - at one time it was considered very sharp to claim that you had booked your club's entire diary up a year ahead, taking in any touring musicians who happened to be in your area. This sounded very good, and made them sound impressively serious operators... in fact it was a disaster, because the local bands who had helped build up the clubs by playing for reasonable fees were now frozen out. And when the good times began to falter, club organisers panicked, and cancelled all the touring acts' bookings, which left those acts out on a limb. Musicians putting their livelihoods into the hands of amateurs, indeed.

For the musician, country was not difficult to play. For a bass player, it very often involved just a steady 2/4, in three chords; western swing, played well, involved a fairly fast walking bass pattern, very similar to 1950s rock'n'roll.

Just as well, as not all country singers were that bright. I played with a pub-standard country band which was, quite inexplicably, booked for a society wedding. As we tuned up, someone remembered to say: "at a wedding, you

always start with a waltz". The band leader looked puzzled and replied: "what's a waltz?"

*

One of the most bizarre aspects of the British country music scene has always been the veneration of *The American Trilogy*, written or compiled by Mickey Newbury and recorded by Elvis. For some reason, this became adopted as an anthem by the British country music scene, and in many clubs is required, or even demanded, as the last song of the night. Everyone in western rig moves on to the dancefloor to sing the *Trilogy*, and there are some bizarre rituals - I have seen one in which the lady club organiser went round and touched everyone's Stetson with the tip of her Stetson. Why? Search me.

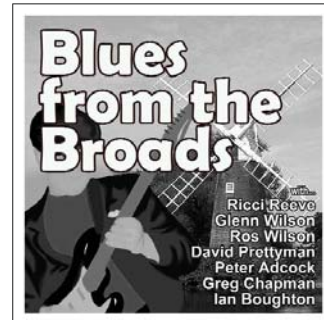
Entertainingly, some country music bands have flatly refused to go along with this, on the grounds that the *Trilogy* has nothing to do with country music! They have a point - of the three songs which make it up, *Dixie* is a blackface minstrel song, which, quite bizarrely, became an anthem of the pro-slavery Confederacy; the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* was the marching song of the Union forces, who came from nowhere near the world of country music; and *All My Trials* was a lullaby from the Bahamas! Newbury is supposed to have put it all together to represent the multi-facets of the USA as he saw it... but still, how country fans can proclaim that 'the South is gonna rise again!' and then sing a Union marching song is quite beyond me.

But the country music scene in Britain is, in many ways, a puzzle. They do things very differently from the rest of us...



7. In the studio

Or, for many of us, recording in kitchens, pubs and all kinds of unlikely situations



From the first album to the most recent - the first Caleb, the well-received Christmas album, and the blues album from Norfolk

I once recorded a million-seller. Yes, really. It was with Derek West of Oxfordshire - he and I were a gospel duo under the name Caleb's Mission, which was a light-hearted Christian reference to our ages, then 50-odd; in the old Testament, Caleb and his mates, including Moses, were in their eighties when they went marauding over the hills to knock seven bells out of a neighbouring tribe who had pissed them off. The inference was that you are never too old to go out and do it.

Anyway, we recorded an album called *Compassion Road*, largely in my living room. It was my first serious bit of home recording, and some parts of it were actually very good... and some, honestly, were complete rubbish. But we recorded it in aid of one of Britain's great little charities, Health Help International. This was founded by the saintly Ron Prosser in south Wales, an old friend of mine, and pays for healthcare for destitute sick in southern India and Zambia. (I've also written a couple of books for the cause).

We recorded a dozen tracks in my living room, had the whole thing professionally mixed (which didn't rescue it entirely), and pressed several hundred for sale through the charity and by our own promotion. And we raised one million Zambian kwache.

In the interests of accuracy, I feel compelled to add that at the time, the kwache exchanged at 1,760 to the pound. You can do the arithmetic yourself.

*

That was my first multi-track home recording and to be honest, it was awful - this was all my fault, because it was my first attempt, and I tried to do too much, and included some tracks which just weren't good enough. What

could have been an interesting 6-track album turned out as an awful 12-track one. The big lessons, well learned, were - don't get too clever, and if in doubt, chuck it out!

But when you are learning by trial and error, you learn techniques which are 'your own'. I was fascinated to learn that one trick I came up with to add depth to voices was, twenty years earlier, the same one used by Abba, though a little more profitably. The same went for guitar solos... do you know how Clapton and Hendrix got that depth of sound in the late 60s? Listen to their tracks on headphones, and concentrate - you can quite clearly hear them playing many of the solos twice, one on top of the other. Sometimes the notes don't quite mesh.

Our first recordings were on a Roland 840 four-track, which used computer disks holding a maximum of 125Mb of data. That is only about four minutes of four-track recording, so you very quickly learn the tricks of how to dub and overdub to save space and get as much music down as possible. And the Roland was notorious for what was called 'the click of death' - if you heard that click in the headphones, you'd lost everything you had been working on. By contrast, my current recording gear is the size of a laptop computer, records to an SD card, and will probably do me twenty-four hours of 16-track if necessary.

Home recording is a wonderful hobby, and is truly addictive. My friend Goff got into it before me, when he was working full-time; he used to come home from work, and think: "I'll just turn on the machine and listen to what I did yesterday"... and the next thing he knew, it was seven in the morning, there was a pile of coffee cups and an overflowing ashtray next to him, and it was time to go to work again. It's true - it just grabs you.

Before I got into home multi-track work, one of the first 'real' recording sessions I played on was with a fine Scots folk trio, the McCalmans. I had heard them onstage and on TV, and when the chance came to be a session bassist on one of their albums, I was excited... you are familiar with the sounds and harmonies of a 'name' band, and when you sit in rehearsal and these sounds and harmonies are suddenly going on round you, the hairs on your arms begin to prickle.

So, we got into the studio, working with an engineer who had once been with the famous Irish band The Boys of the Lough. This was in the days of big reels of tape, and at one point the engineer decided his equipment needed an adjustment, and laid into it with a screwdriver... after which the band sat in the pub for several hours waiting for a repair man to come. However, this did give the engineer the chance to tell us stories of his time with a star folk band.

My favourite tale was of when his band was on tour with the Dubliners, a band who quite famously did not always get on with each other. They were flying between two gigs in Canada when an argument broke out between two

Dubliners - it began to get more heated when "sure, and yez was way out of tune last night" was followed by "sure, yez were singing like a focken cat, so yez were!" Eventually, the two were squaring up to each other in the central aisle of the plane, which at this point was eight miles up over Canada, when one Dubliner uttered the immortal challenge: "roight - you and me are goin' outside, roight now!"

(I must admit that this McCalmans album was probably their worst seller; I do hope it wasn't because of my bass playing).

Anyway, I picked up my first second-hand four-track recording machine, and set to work in my own living room.

Caleb's Mission made two or three albums, most of which had only one or two good tracks - Derek once had the brilliant idea of putting *A Green Hill Far Away* to the tune of *House of the Rising Sun*, and it worked beautifully (with my most simplest but most effective acoustic guitar solo). On *Shake Off The Dust* (a St Paul reference) we recorded a collection of blues which swapped guitar solos and harmonica solos... but nobody knew we had never been in the same studio at the same time. That album also included my favourite of our tracks, *Believe to my Soul*, which was 'influenced by', or 'partly stole' a riff which was very near to *Ten Years After's Hear Me Calling*.

For the charity *Health Help International*, we came up with spoken-word story albums, some religious and some secular. Researching and re-writing or editing the stories was great fun, as was learning to incorporate sound effects. But one of them almost got me sued - we were doing an album of Easter songs and stories, and had come across one of the stories of David Kossoff, the Jewish storyteller who was on TV a lot in the 50s and 60s (his son was the guitarist in *Free*). I decided to use the story, wrote to him to ask for permission, which he gave, and he also sent a cheque for £25 for the charity.

Now, this story was all about the events immediately after the crucifixion, and was, very cleverly, told from the viewpoint of the official who led the soldiers in to arrest Jesus. My friend Derek West, with quite brilliant inspiration, cast this official as an obsequious little jobsworth, and told the story in a superb voicing of a self-important minor civil servant. It was a work of absolute genius.

But Kossoff didn't think so. His view was that his stories had to be told in the kind of gentle and wise Jewish grandfatherly style which had been his own character on radio and TV. But there wasn't much gentle Jewish kindness in the letter he sent me - he went completely apeshit and wrote in terms of venom that that left me shaken. To be fair, I suppose those who create stories and songs do have a view as to how they should be presented; I apologised and sent him his cheque back, and promised that the recording would not be issued.

But he's been dead for years, and Derek's interpretation is still a work of

genius. So now I cheerfully let as many people as possible hear it!

Researching songs and stories to use on recordings brings you in touch with a lot of interesting people, many of whom I still know - it has become easier these days with the internet, but I have always maintained that if you really want to contact someone, you can do it. Typically, I found myself in touch with such fascinating people as Mike di Sanza, who wrote the book *A Cop for Christ*; in New York, he was known as 'a lucky cop', and because he was a Christian, other cops tended to seek him out as a father figure. We were doing an album about angels in our everyday lives, and with his permission, we recorded a story from his book about an incident in which he was in danger of being pushed under an oncoming subway train by a New York gang, and was rescued by a couple of big guys who chased the gang off. When he tried to thank them, they had disappeared... and none of the crowd on the subway platform said they had seen any big guys at all. Mike said to us: "were they angels? Sure, they were!"

(As I write that, I find out to my horror that Mike has died. One of his friends has written: "just last Tuesday at our men's prayer group, Mike commented, 'one minute you are here and the next minute, poof, you're in heaven in the presence of God'." And apparently that's what happened.)

But you really can contact all kinds of people if you need them. It's easier now because of the internet, but it has always been true, if you only try - we did a church show in aid of Health Help International, and I sent a note to Cliff Richard asking for a message of support. And it came.

More recently I have been responsible - and you can take that whichever way you like - for getting 'on record' a whole pile of local musicians who would otherwise never have had the opportunity. Some of the results have been rubbish, but honest, some of it has been pretty good, even from people recording for the first time.

A big hazard you get in recording these people is 'red light fever'. This is where a musician who may be very experienced in playing live suddenly gets a fit of the jitters when faced with the machine. I know one guitarist whose skill is widely respected among all my music friends here, but when invited to enhance some home recordings, he made a total hash of the thing and ruined the whole project, just through nerves. I destroyed a couple of hundred CDs as a result.

On the other hand, several people I know have been very nervous to start with, but have then settled into the pattern of it and now enjoy being asked



Oh, the height of promotion - our Blues from the Broads poster on the wall of the gents' at the Pleasure Boat Inn in Norfolk. Pic courtesy of Jennifer Adcock. How did she get it? She isn't saying!



With the Muddy Broad Blues Band, who largely made up the Blues From The Broads album band - from left. the author, Peter Adcock, Glenn Wilson, David Prettyman and Ros Wilson

to put the headphones on and work on a track. Dave Prettyman and Peter Adcock of the Muddy Broad Blues Band were very wary to begin with... but after a couple of sessions they were talking like studio pros and saying "I think I'll do another take, I can do that better," and "can I punch in a correction after the second chorus?" And Glenn Wilson of the Muddies came up with an idea I had never thought of - he asked if he could have a tape of backing tracks with no vocals, to play to himself while on holiday. He came back from holiday well prepared, and though briefly nervous at never having recorded before, delivered his first recorded album in fine style.

(That album, as with everything I've done, was recorded in a combination of my home office, and a couple of living rooms - the final vocals were put down in a pub at ten in the morning on a freezing cold day with singer Ricci Reeve wrapped up in scarves and gloves and wooly hat. I know how to treat musicians well!)

Now, recording for the fun of it is one thing, and it is certainly enjoyable. But the other very important reason is this - when doing gigs, you must always have something to sell. This is a basic principle, and I'm staggered at the number of acts who go in front of an audience with nothing to sell at the end of the show. And believe me, if you've given them a good night, then at the end, people will buy anything!

On the other hand, of course, we know musicians who don't quite approve of recording at all - it is apparently aesthetically impure compared to the real live thing.

Professionalism is an admirable thing, whether in recording or in a live situation.

We were recording a Christmas album of stories and songs for a charity, and this is a seasonal job you do in August. Just two of us, an actress and myself, were sitting in my living room with a script we had adapted from *The Gifts of the Magi*, a brilliant short story by O Henry (his talent was for the sting in the tail, the unexpected twist at the end). The adaptation was about eight or nine minutes long, and the actress read it perfectly, first time. But when we listened back, we realised that we had forgotten that as it was a searing hot summer day, we had an electric fan by the window, and the hum had come clearly through. The actress was a real pro and didn't turn a hair - she just read the story again, and the second take was as perfect as the first.

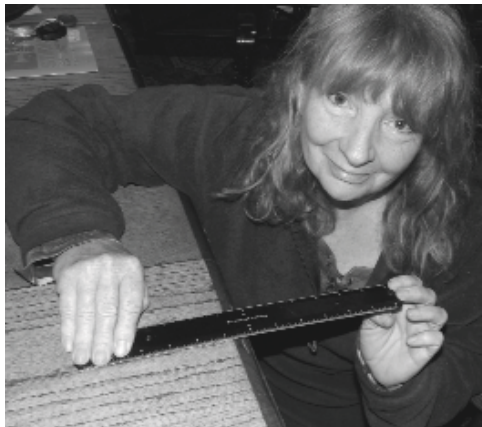
The same calmness under pressure was shown by Soul Devotion, my first experience of playing in a ten-piece Commitments-type band. Believe me, soul music works... it always works. It works with young and old, and if you have a ten-piece band with several women in it, you're on to a winner every time. We were set to do a wedding at the flashiest hotel in Oxford, when a message came through from the singer - he had been in a car bump, and was going to hospital with whiplash. I have never seen a band react so quickly - it was "I know the words to this one, I'll take the vocal... you take the vocal on that, we'll share the verses on this one." We finished to a standing ovation.

Quite recently, a similarly admirable bit of professionalism came, perhaps a little unexpectedly, from a group of complete amateurs. These were the Stalham Players, an am-dram group from a one-street town near where we live in Norfolk. I was with the Occasional Ceilidh Band, and we had been hired to do the incidental and interval music for their panto, *Robin Hood and the Babes in the Wood* (which sounds to me like an odd combination of two pantomimes, but there it is). The run was three evenings and two matinees, and between the afternoon and evening shows on the Saturday, the lady playing *Friar Tuck* fell ill. The director, Emma, immediately rewrote the second act in her head - "cut this scene, cut that, you improvise through this one, you bring in some audience-participation there, and at the end we'll have *Tuck* take her curtain-call sitting on a tree stump, so she doesn't have to stand up." Now, these actors were not seasoned pros, they were housewives and schoolkids, and they did it - they fought their way through the second act so cleverly that the audience didn't notice anything amiss. *Taryn*, the principal boy, later told me she found it a terrifying experience - but they did it.

That panto was notable for several other incidents - that same afternoon, they had discovered that one of the kids playing a *Sherwood Forest* rabbit was sensitive to her stage make-up. *Frosty*, our whistle-player, immediately remarked: "I've always been against the testing of cosmetics on rabbits..."

And in one scene, the principal boy, the young lady playing *Robin Hood*, was shown shackled and helpless, chained to a stone wall in the *Sherriff's* dungeon. From the band pit, unheard by the audience, came the remark: "oh good, it's forty shades of *Lincoln green!*"

And we had decided that, just before the actors came onstage for the first time, we would play the theme to the old 1950s TV series of Robin Hood, the 'riding through the glen' one. On the original programme, the theme tune featured an intro sound effect of an arrow thudding into a tree. The puzzle of how to reproduce this fell to Eilish, the bodhran player. Her solution was in remembering how, at school, you could ping a ruler off the top of the desk and make a buzzing sound... at the right moment, she did this on the side-stage steps. It brought the house down every time.



Boinggg.... Eilish of the Occasional Ceilidh Band prepares to send an arrow thudding into a tree!

8. Nowt so queer as folk

The people and styles of the folk music circuit



The Occasional Ceilidh Band : from left, Diana, Eunice, Ros, Eilish, and Frosty. The reason box players are always looking in the wrong direction is, they say, so that one ear is focussed on their instrument. Honest.

I have spent a long time playing folk music, without really knowing anything about it (which goes for a large part of my career!) The big folk revival began in the sixties, but it was still going strong in the early 70s, when I first got involved in it, and I'm fascinated to see that forty years later, folkies don't seem to have changed a bit.

I have played with many folk musicians, nearly all of whom can be considered 'eccentric', and many of them just plain mad. I briefly joined an Irish folk trio in Oxford, and I would cheerfully name them except that I have just found that they are still going, and I do believe that one of them was involved in the legal profession. Anyway, the extremely Irish leader of this band played a 12-string guitar with all the subtlety of a navvie with a pneumatic drill, and very regularly broke strings - I was told that at one gig, he broke so many, someone from the audience actually went home to get a guitar to allow the singer to continue. The other member of the trio was an English folk fiddler of fairly fast and fluid style, although not always in tune, and the band tended to storm through instrumentals at one heck of a lick. Now, that's fine by me... but this eccentric Irish band leader was prone to violent mood swings.

One night, we were steaming through Star of the County Down, which is usually a fairly gentle song, but which in this band took on punk-folk characteristics. The leader was hammering his 12-string guitar until a string broke; he carried on in spite of the fact that the tuning began to clearly suffer, as did his timing - it wasn't 4/4, it wasn't six-eight as many jigs are, it wasn't nine-eight as many slip jigs are, and indeed I don't think it was any time signature

known to man. The fiddler gave me a look over his bow and fingerboard which clearly said 'don't blame me!', and we both carried on trying to follow this unfollowable storm.

Eventually, a second string on the guitar broke, and the song collapsed in chaos with a sound like a freight train hitting the buffers. This was followed by one of those moments of absolute silence which suddenly occur at a time of crisis, during which the leader turned to me and shouted "bejaysus, Ian, sure you're putting the whole focken band off!" I quit on the spot.

*

One of the nicest folkies was the tiny Paddie Bell, who had been an original member of the Corries trio, the most successful-ever Scots folk band (they wrote the Scottish anthem Flower of Scotland). Back in the sixties she was effectively ditched to let the two guys get on with the Arran-sweatered macho image which made them world-famous, and I don't think she ever got over it. She did, however, have a solo career which involved a long series of spots on the BBC's first evening magazine programme, *Tonight*, and some decent live work in big concert halls. I once asked her what it was like to walk out on a stage, alone, in front of two or three thousand people. She grinned and said: "sure, when you're small and blonde, you can get away with anything!"

At the very height of her solo fame, she was on the *Tonight* programme a couple of nights a week, and was nationally very well-known. She used to travel down from Edinburgh to the BBC studio by train, and on one journey, she found herself sitting next to one of Scotland's most famous kilted tenors (think White Heather Club and Donald, Where's Your Troosers?) He looked up from his book and nodded and went back to reading. As the journey proceeded, Paddie realised that the old lady sitting opposite the famous tenor was getting more and more excited and agitated. Eventually the lady could contain herself no longer and said: "excuse me, but may I have your autograph?" The famous man threw down his book, said bad-temperedly: "oh, I suppose so," signed a piece of paper and stormed off to the restaurant car.

"I'll never watch him again," said the old lady, adding to Paddie's discomfort: "... you see what happens to people when they get on television!"

Most of the folk playing I have done has been in barn-dance or 'ceilidh' bands. In England, ceilidhs tend to be relatively stately affairs, whereas in Scotland the jigs and reels can be wild dances which involve a real danger of bouncing off walls.

In the more sedate English barndance scene, I played with an Oxfordshire ceilidh band which was, essentially, two farmers' wives, one the caller and the other a very decent accordion player. My friend Gavin joined me for some dances and, accurately if unkindly, said they reminded him of the first scene of *Macbeth*!

We played a very swish ceilidh wedding reception at a country house in Oxfordshire. The bride was the daughter of the family behind the Dorling-Kindersley educational books. The marquee was furnished with portaloos, but not of your everyday kind - these ones had carpets on the floor, hunting prints on the walls and recorded classical music playing. We were maliciously pleased to find that the tapes had gone wonky and the music was all playing at the wrong speed.

My favourite band name, of all the ones I've played with, came from a ceilidh band. This band was a Scottish Tex-Mex ceilidh band called the Wild Cigarillos. We were playing a university event, and one of the other bands, made up of some local medical students, was called the Peristalsis Four... to save you looking it up, it's the action of the bowel which expels waste!

Depping is an interesting way of making a few bob, and it is often folk bands that need a last-minute stand-in player, but it can jar the nerves a bit. David from the Occasional Ceilidh Band says that when he was at music college in London, there would often be calls from the west end theatres saying 'can you send a dep second trumpet round quick for the matinee, to cover sickness?' He would be sent round, would sit in the pit and see the show music for the first time, and be expected to hack it. It was incredible experience for a young musician - although, he told me, he was often playing for shows which he had never seen, and so was completely unfamiliar with the music or the plots. He depped once for the band in *Fiddler on the Roof*, and at a break commented to the guy in the next chair: "this music is interesting - it sounds very Jewish and Russian." The next guy gave him an odd look and said: "yes, I think that's the point of the story..."

However, some dep gigs are not always what they seem. There are certain so-called 'bandleaders' who don't actually have bands - they tout their name about for gigs, and then cobble together a set of players. I was once booked for a four-nights tour as a dep; it was a singer and four-piece backing band. Each of us in the band assumed that we were standing in for one member who was unavailable, and that the other three had rehearsed for the tour... then as we were chatting in the van it clicked that all four of us were stand-ins. None of us knew the leader or had any idea what he played or sang. It was a very apprehensive band that walked onstage for the first show!

Composition is, bizarre as it sounds, a major part of folk music; it isn't all traditional stuff a hundred years old. Now, I have always maintained that if you can play an instrument to any degree at all, you can write music or songs... and it can be great fun, and it can encourage people who have never written a tune to get down and do so. With the Occasional Ceilidh Band, Frosty the whistle player and Ros the melodeon player were the first to bring along a couple of their own tunes, and then I slung in a few jigs and things of my own... and suddenly Diana the clarinet player contributed a waltz, Eunice the fiddler came up with a tune, and Eilish the bodhran player wrote a song.

Several of them had never actually written music before, and suddenly we found we had enough for an album of original material!

But not everyone can do it. I was recently playing with a church band, and was trying to encourage them to create their own songs, giving the example of worship songwriter Matt Redman, who told me in an interview: "there is a great value in original songs which come out of the experience of your own congregation." I thought it would be great encouragement for this band to be able to present 'their own song' to their church fellowship. So I wrote a song, Name of the Lord, which actually wasn't half bad, but I deliberately left a few of the last lines out, and invited the band to 'help me finish it'. It was a very simple painting-by-numbers exercise... and to my astonishment, none of them could do it. I showed it to Ros from the ceilidh band, and she filled in all the gaps in about thirty seconds.

I formed a little jazzy quartet in Norfolk, and at a rehearsal I told the others, very enthusiastically, I had an idea for a song, so would they help me write it? I got the slightly contemptuous response "we can't write songs", as if it were some secret ritual. I despaired.

When you succeed, it's quite wonderful. With the Occasional Ceilidh Band, we were working our way through my tune Roasted Joan (which refers to Joan Boughton, somewhere deep in our family history, who was burned at the stake in 1494 for being on the wrong side of the church) when Frosty looked over thoughtfully and said: "y'know, working on our own tunes... this really is 'making music'."

And that's what makes it such fun, isn't it?

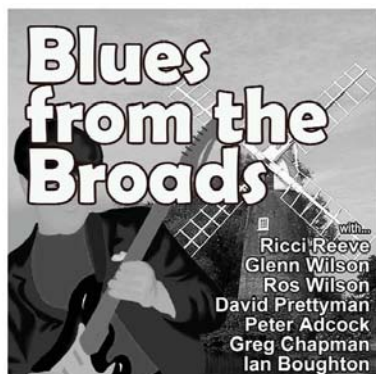


All writers know that we must end our stories with a bang. This has always been one of my favourites, and is appropriate here...

An elderly lady bustled up to the supermarket check-out in a state of high excitement, a bottle of champagne in her basket. "It's for my husband," she wittered to the check-out girl, "he's finished his book!"

The till-girl took in the situation with one professionally-disinterested glance. "Ah," she replied. "Slow reader, is he?"

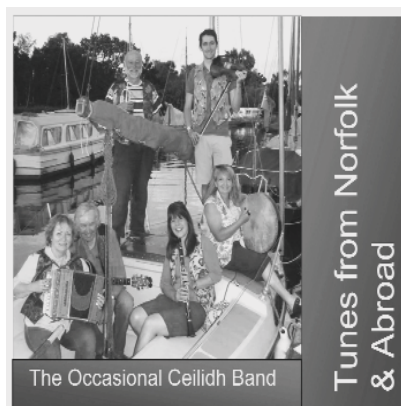
If you have enjoyed this book and would like to hear some of the music...



Some copies of this 2016 album are still available. Profits went to the Hillside Animal Sanctuary. See the Muddies website at www.muddybroadblues.com

The quite super first album from the Occasional Ceilidh Band of Norfolk.

As with the Muddies album, you can buy this at the Pleasure Boat Inn, Hickling Broad, Norfolk. A fiver each.



By the same author, though many now out of print:

Books:

Small Cars Over There, Please!

(for Children in Need)

Journey of Faith

Neesha and the Tentmakers

The Foot-and-Mouth disaster - a farmer's diary

(All for Health Help International)

Coffee House Capers

(for Health Help International and Shelter From the Storm)

CDs:

Compassion Road

In Real Life

Shake Off The Dust

Caleb's Cool Yule

Love Is Come Again

Angels

(all by Caleb's Mission, and all for Health Help International)

Blues from the Broads

(in support of the Hillside Animal Sanctuary)

Tunes from Norfolk and Abroad - the Occasional Ceilidh Band

Are you with the band?



Ian Boughton has been playing in bands for longer than he really should admit to... club bands, rock bands, soul bands, folk bands, jazz bands, barn-dance bands, Christian bands, and heaven knows what else. He never made it big – even his one million-seller is not quite what you might think. This is a collection of stories of the joys of life at the bottom of the showbiz pile. As the author says – if he has had this much fun without ever making it big, could life really have been any more fun if he had been a success?



What the first reviews have said:

“Made me laugh out loud...”

“A very enjoyable and consuming read.”

“Great pace, and lyrical. A book needs rhythm, and this has it.”