

## A Musical Journey: Stephen Cook



Stephen has been hosting acoustic nights for many years were ‘*anything goes*’ but writes that ‘*we’re definitely not a folk club*’ – read on

*I don’t read many biographies. The ones I do read are almost always music related. I’m fascinated by the musical journey, how the seed was planted and how circumstances came to nurture it; how the first opportunities came along and how the career took off. There always seems to be an element of good fortune, and yet, so many of the great talents we recognise today came close to giving up before they were famous. But what about the musical journeys of ordinary people? I’ve had a few musical highlights in my life, but for the most part I’ve been a strum and finger pick guitar and uke player, who sings a few songs at the pub. I’ve enjoyed the journey tremendously. Here’s my story – perhaps a few others may care to share theirs?*

No one could ever say I’d been born into a musical family. Apparently, my mother had piano lessons as a child, but I certainly never saw her touch an instrument of any kind. My brother, who had grown up and left home before I was born, had played the guitar in the 1950s. I know he didn’t carry on playing. One sister knew how to play the recorder at Junior School level, but certainly didn’t progress far beyond ‘Three Blind Mice’. My eldest sister was grown up, married and with a family of her own when I was growing up. In recent years she has sung in choirs, before then I couldn’t say.

Even so, I grew up surrounded by music. Being five years older than me, my recorder playing sister discovered the teenage ‘pop’ scene when The Beatles were starting to be noticed. The house was full of pop music, all day it seemed, but music was something other people ‘did’. There were people who knew how to play music and it seemed I was not one of them. I just listened and developed an ear for the stuff I liked. At about the age of seven or eight I had a guitar as a Christmas present. It was precisely the sort of guitar that would guarantee failure. It was no more than a toy. Entirely made of metal, even the neck. It had nylon strings which, as I recall, were all identical. It was blue. No one in my house knew how to tune it, and I doubt very much that it could have been tuned successfully. There was a song book with it, even some chord pictures, though I had no idea what they represented. I did try, but clearly any sounds I got from it were fairly terrible. It soon ended up unloved in a cupboard with broken strings and eventually was given away. Growing up in a single parent family there was no opportunity to have lessons and as no one in the house played, there was no chance to learn in any other way in that pre-internet generation. And that was that.

Music remained very much on the sidelines for me until my mid teens. My peers were starting to take a greater interest in music by then, and not wishing to be left behind, I followed suit. In my sixth-form years I started to make the change from someone who liked to hear music (I played air guitar as well as anyone!) to someone who actually might try to play some for himself. When I was 17 years old, just starting the second year of the sixth-form leading up to ‘A’ Levels, a new kid arrived at our school. His appearance was striking. Tall, long ginger hair; he wouldn’t have looked out of place at Woodstock.

And it turned out that he played guitar like a dream. His ability to play just about anything anyone asked for on a very beat up acoustic soon made him very popular and I was one of about half a dozen sixth formers who were inspired to have a go.

The first thing was to find a guitar. There was an advert in the evening paper, and I set off to make my purchase. Of course, I had no idea if it was a good instrument or not. In hindsight, it was a disaster. It was probably little better than the toy I'd had as a child. The strings hurt my fingers, the action was very high, and it proved virtually impossible to learn anything on it. But there was Ed, playing in the sixth form room at lunchtimes to adoring followers. I recall one lunchtime very fondly. Ed was challenged to play the theme tunes to various TV adverts. His rendition of the Cadbury's Flake advert had us all singing along (Only the crumbliest, flakiest chocolate, tastes like chocolate never tasted before....). God, I wanted some of that! The music, that is, not the chocolate! But that disaster of a guitar I'd bought was close to putting me off. Ed showed me how to make sense of chord charts and how people wrote down songs with chords written over the words. I understood, but I just couldn't make it work with the instrument I had. I could, with effort, form the chords and strum, but when a change was needed, the effort required to press down the new shape took me some time. I had to stop strumming and concentrate on getting the next shape right. It was so frustrating, I found myself picking up the guitar less and less frequently. Perhaps this really was something 'other people did'. Believe me, Bert Wheedon's 'Play in a Day' (and yes, someone had given me a copy) didn't help me at all. The fact that I couldn't play in a day just made me feel bad!

Then completely out of the blue one afternoon, I picked up the guitar and found that I could change from 'G' to 'C' without a gap. I wasn't thinking about it, or concentrating, it just happened. It still sounded rough, mainly as the guitar was so awful, but I could hear the difference. Perhaps if I had a better guitar? I waited patiently until my eighteenth birthday when, using birthday money, I went and bought my first proper guitar from a music shop in Nottingham. Although I didn't know it at the time, it was a copy of a Gibson Hummingbird. Perhaps it wasn't a guitar of the greatest quality, but it had a big sound and decent tone and was certainly going to be good enough for me to learn.

My journey into playing would have been very similar to hundreds of other teenagers. I was lucky that a group of us were starting off together. We spurred each other on. As one of us mastered the mysteries of a new chord, the others learned it, too. Whenever you met a new player, you'd glean some new little trick, lick or riff. When writing this, I was reminded of an interview given by Paul McCartney. He told a story about a time when he, George and John used several buses to travel across Liverpool to knock on the door of a complete stranger who, they'd been told, knew how to play 'B7'. I never went to quite such extremes myself, but then I was never going to be a Beatle. In truth, I didn't learn many complete songs at all at this stage. It seemed in every one there was a tricky bit I couldn't quite get and anything I looked at which contained an 'F', a 'Bb' or a 'B' was ignored as I just couldn't get my fingers around them. Little ways of cheating by missing out odd notes or not fingering the chord quite fully became the norm and hence a lifetime of bad habits had begun.

However, the shared enthusiasms of my fellow learners saw us through to the point where most of us could play something recognisable. It was clear that some of us took to playing very much more easily than others. I was certainly no natural, but I had enthusiasm on my side, and I do have quite a determined nature. A couple of the guys progressed in time to playing in local bands. The highlights of my playing career at the time were a few performances, usually with a friend, at Bingham Folk Club. I was not good. When you're playing with a friend it isn't too bad, but on one occasion, playing alone, I remember getting lost halfway through a song and having to stop and apologise. I didn't finish and I never played there again. I often wonder if that one experience left me with the deeply ingrained fear of

making myself look foolish on stage, which has resurfaced more recently when trying to play solo? I think seventeen is quite a tricky age to start playing. 'A' Levels were looming and demanded my time. Then three years of teacher training kept me busy, and I couldn't really justify the time to play as much as I'd have liked. So, by the age of twenty-two, when I began my teaching career, I could actually play and sound quite competent (by only playing small snippets of things) but really didn't know many whole songs to play.

My first teaching post was in Bury St. Edmunds. There, two of my colleagues, Roger and Peter, were regular players, having secured a 'residency' at a local pub, playing every Thursday evening. Having seen me play snippets of songs they invited me to join them and play during the beer breaks on the Thursday evenings. I had to turn it down and admit that I couldn't play many songs at all. They sent me along to join a teachers' guitar course run in the evenings by John Amos. John, who has been a close friend and musical colleague ever since, ran evenings for teachers where they could learn new songs. A different theme each evening. Over about three years I learned hundreds of songs and even some basic fingerpicking techniques. At last, some usable skills, broad repertoire and confidence. I never looked back. During this time, I had run various guitar clubs in school, trying to teach some basic guitar to children. Having met John, the emphasis changed. He invited me to an evening musical event at his school. John didn't teach guitar to children, but he did run a Folk Club. Folk was a very loose term. Yes, they sang folk songs, but also, current pop songs. The kids obviously had a great time doing this and I was completely won over. I'd start one of these at my school! It wasn't the greatest success, in my mind. Although this early attempt at a Folk Club was actually mentioned by some ex-pupils on Facebook last year, and it clearly had made more of an impact than I remembered, some even showed photos of the actual song sheets I'd given them back in the very early 1980s; they still have them!

A couple of years later, following promotion to another school, I was invited to join a newly formed Male Voice Choir in the town. One of the best decisions I ever made! It did wonders for my singing voice and my confidence. So, in my thirties my general finger picking and strumming on a guitar had reached a competent level and my singing voice was undoubtedly the best it ever was. Recently, a good friend sent me some footage filmed in 1995 of us singing at an outdoor Folk Festival in Diss. As far as my voice goes, this is without doubt the best recording of me anywhere! It isn't perfect, but it is confirmation that once upon a time I actually could sing quite well. For the next twenty-five years or so, I regret to say, I remained on something of a plateau. I'd reached a level of playing and singing that was acceptable, but was far too busy with career and family to really press on. Over the years I've often had conversations with non players who say things like 'If I could just strum a few chords while I sing, that would be enough.' I suppose that's exactly where I started. But it's never quite enough, there's always the next stage. It's just that sometimes other things get in the way and slow you down. It wasn't until my very early sixties that I took the next step. The accidental discovery of fingerstyle guitar playing (Tommy Emmanuel, Joe Robinson, Richard Smith etc) caused me to re evaluate my playing and strive for something better. It's been a real eye opener trying to play in a totally different style, almost like starting a new instrument from scratch. I have a long way to go, but the rewards in terms of personal satisfaction have been enormous.

Any regrets? Hmmmm..... Well I wish I'd had the opportunity and the personal resolve to do something about my musical interest when I was still a child. I'm sure I'd have learned more quickly then. Also, I wish I'd considered fingerstyle guitar playing at a much younger age. Had I started down that route in my thirties rather than my sixties, perhaps I could have become a skilled player. I enjoy what I do, but it's never quite enough, is it?

There is one thing that I'm sure I did get right. My musical journey was littered with shared experiences. Share your progress with friends, play often in as many different settings as you can. Join clubs and music societies. My longest friendships in life have all been music related, going all the way back to those first faltering steps in the sixth-form common room. Music should be a shared passion Go on, share it!

**Stephen Cook**

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Freely adapted from Chapter Three of his book 'Episodes from Life: a tale of a music loving bookseller', available on Amazon and ABE.