

The other story:
Stan Hirsch (2015)

What is the other story? I guess it's the one without any particular slant or angle. This is just a simple story - Boy meets Guitar... It seems there was always an angle because I needed to make a living. When your job is being a guitar player/entertainer/artist/teacher, etc... You then kinda' need to sell yourself one way or the other. I suppose that's true for most professions - but I don't really know. So, Stan Hirsch with no particular image in mind. Just looking back on my guitar learning experiences. Not a list of my artistic career accomplishments, full of great anecdotes about a colorful life.

Now, since most of that was me involved in guitar playing - then that is the focus for the story. That said - not being a famous entertainer, but just a working musician, I still had a fairly normal life (family, friends, etc...) outside of that identity. I can't help but touch on that here and there, but as I said, the focus here is my life as a guitar player. (More like a perpetual guitar student.)



I think my fascination with guitar started with the singing cowboys I saw on TV. Roy Rogers and Gene Autry are the ones I mainly remember. But anyone with a cowboy hat, boots and a guitar, sitting on a horse or around a campfire would do. Now these were not really cowboys, but movie stars. However, that did not really occur to me since I was about 3 years old. All I knew was that I wanted to play guitar. (And wear a cowboy hat and boots!) I have a great picture of me doing just that. (Actually, I am playing a ukulele, but I thought it was a guitar.) My first guitar was a Roy Rogers model. It had scenes of Roy on his horse - ropin' and ridin'. The neck was wood but the body was just hard cardboard so when I accidentally left it out in the rain, it fell apart. (Luckily I still had my ukulele, and the guitar neck!)



My first "real" guitar was a standard flat top acoustic Stella. My older sister Charlene was taking guitar lessons and had acquired this guitar. One way or the other it became mine. I was about 11 or 12 years old at the time. Anyhow, I started guitar lessons on this guitar.

Now - about those first lessons.

My mom, God bless her, found a teacher from the phone book yellow pages, signed me up, and would drive me (and my guitar) across town. This was not the same teacher my sister had taken from. Not sure why not? Maybe my mom was not happy with that teacher since my sister had not continued her lessons? Anyway this teacher was the real deal, teaching at a real studio, a degree in music, a guy who gave concerts and stuff! This was around 1960-61.

Cool - Now I was gonna finally learn how to really do it! Not just fake it by moving my hands up and down and humming the guitar part. All right - first lesson - My dream come true! I couldn't wait!

FIRST LESSON: I was so excited I just blurted it out.
Me: "I want to learn Chuck Berry 'Johnny Be Goode'!"
Teacher: "First you have to learn to read music".

Ok, now this was a bit of a letdown (to say the least) because I had already had a bit of experience with reading music - and it wasn't pretty. It happened on clarinet. It happened at school. It happened in front of a lot of other students. Let me regress here.

REGRESS: First of all, let me say that I loved playing the clarinet. Benny Goodman was one of my dad's favorite players. We would sit around and listen to his records and sing and dance, and I loved it! I also loved Elvis Presley! So I mainly worked hard just teaching myself to play the melodies of his songs on my clarinet. I think I was doin' ok. Don't really know - but I was really having a good time.

I thought it would be cool to join the school band. Get out of the regular classroom once a week. This was about 4th grade. I thought I was doing ok there. You know, a bunch of kids in the band room, (getting out of regular class) playing songs, "rehearsing" (another word I'll get back to).

There must have been about 12 clarinet players. (4th, 5th, and 6th grades.) There were the ones that really knew what they were doing. (At least it appeared that way to me.) They were what was called "First part" players. Then there were the "2nd part" players. Then the "3rd part" players. Then the 1st chair - 1st part players - on and on.

Since I kinda' joined late, like the middle of the year, I was just thrown in there somewhere - no real formal placement. I played a little Elvis for the music teacher - he said "ok" and just put me there with all the clarinet players. The music teacher came around once a week. We would rehearse songs. Every one would have a music stand with pieces of "sheet music" on it. My parents got me a stand, my teacher gave me the paper.

Well one day the teacher announced that we would all be playing in this big citywide concert! All the kids from all the schools in Albuquerque. WOW! Uniforms, auditorium, big audience, parents, teachers, kids from all the grade schools. Anyhow he mentioned something about auditions etc... whatever..

So the next week during music class, instead of the regular practice the teacher was auditioning (testing) all of us to determine which "part" and "chair" we would get. He was calling each of us up to the front of the class and placing a piece of sheet music on the stand. Now I happened to be the first clarinet player called up. I sat down there in front of that stand - the one with a piece of music on it - the one in front of all those other kids - the one the teacher was looking at.

This was a mistake. You know, in class I had just heard the parts being played - then just copied what I heard. I think I knew that I was supposed to be looking at the music, but that didn't really matter cause I could still learn it. But now I was supposed to know what all those dots and lines meant. Wow, no one had ever really taught me that. I guess the teacher just thought I knew how to do it? Well, I didn't. So, what could I do? I played Elvis, real well, I thought. I really put feeling into it! That didn't seem to help.

So, at the big - citywide - all players - concert there were like 60 clarinet players alone. I was what they called "3rd part, last chair". In fact even my uniform didn't fit. The pants and jacket were also slightly different colors. Not sure what my parents thought. But I know they were out there with the millions of other people in the audience.

So that's my first "learn to read music" experience. Now back to that first guitar lesson.

Well actually, you know that just triggered another music instruction experience memory. (Now that we're at it.)

ANOTHER REGRESS: Just after I stopped playing clarinet (for traumatic reasons just stated above) a man came to the door. Not just any man, but a man who taught and sold accordions. Accordions were very popular around this time. There was this great player on TV, Dick Contino was his name - cool licks was his game. He was on the Ed Sullivan show like almost every week. (Unfortunately he got in trouble, scandalized and got a bad rap and more or less disappeared from the scene (I found this out much latter of course.)

Anyhow, back to the man at the door. So this guy would sell you an accordion, then come to your house and give you lessons. But, just to be "on the square" he would first give you a "musical aptitude" test.

I was really interested and so was my big sister. So he gave us the test. Well my sister did really well! I mean like high level! Then again she always did well in school so that was kinda' expected. I was never one to do very well on a test - but then again - it was not like a real test. I mean just a man who knocked on the door. I figured I did just fine.

But when the results arrived via telephone call to my mom I guess I had flunked, or whatever the equivalent of that would be. Anyway, according to his test I showed no aptitude for music. (Luckily my mom never mentioned it to me till many years later after I was well on my way as a professional musician.) That guy never came around again anyhow. I guess my sister decided not to do it. I figured it would just be note reading anyway.

OK, NOW: back to that FIRST GUITAR LESSON:

So, I took lessons from him (note reading and all) for about 3 months. Mostly me reading very simple (boring compared to Chuck Berry) stuff. You know, notes on one string, notes on the next string, etc.

My sister had shown me how to tune the guitar and showed me the few chords she knew from her folk guitar lessons. I had also transferred the Elvis melodies I'd played on clarinet to guitar. I figured I'd give up the lessons, shake my hips and knockout those chords, throw in the Elvis melodies and dance to the music. So I asked my mother to have a talk with him about me learning Rock 'N' Roll. Well it turns out he didn't actually know how to play any but he could teach me how to read and how he thought I should learn that first.

After talking it over with my mom we decided that she would find another teacher. Someone at that teaching studio recommended a guy who lived near campus. There was a rumor that this guy taught "that kind of music". So my mom got hold of him and signed me up!

NEXT FIRST LESSON:

Well he couldn't teach me "Johnny B. Goode" but he did "know some boogie woogie guitar". In fact he reached into his papers and pulled out the sheet music for "Guitar Boogie".(Or something like that.)

You wouldn't believe the amount of ink on that paper! WOW!
And we would go through it beat by beat. Note by note. Week after week. If only he had told me, "Look, we've got these three chords. Here is the order they are played in. Move your right hand for the rhythm like this." Man - I could have learned that sucker in no time! (In fact I would have been learning 100's of songs in that lesson. It's called a three chord - 12 bar!)

Oh well, so much for formal lessons in the early 60's, in New Mexico to learn Rock 'N' Roll. It was probably out there somewhere.(Maybe?)

But if it was, I didn't find it. (Thank God things have changed. Now you have the information everywhere!) Anyhow, I just had to start really using my ear. More or less like I did in picking out those Elvis melodies on the clarinet.

Eventually found my way to a big song book with tons of old standard folksongs. Now the melody was written out there in standard notation (which I couldn't read), but on top of the lyrics were the chords. What was cool was along with the chords were those little guitar neck pictures showing you where to put your fingers!

So I learned tons of chords and caught on to the idea of how to string chords together. I was always a dancer (thanks, Dad) so putting rhythms to it was natural. And all this music started making a bit more sense.

But wait! I needed an electric guitar and amp for Rock 'N' Roll!

My best friend Tim Conklin had a nylon string guitar and knew some chords. But he also wanted to play electric. So low and behold while walking down the street one day we saw a guy from school in his garage. We went to talk and hang out. Well, he was into motorcycles and needed some cash to buy a part for the bike he was working on and wanted to know if we wanted to buy his guitar and amp.

He had a Kent electric 6 string solid body guitar, and a Fender tweed amp. So, \$15 later (\$7.50 each) we had the stuff man! (Now I will mention here that \$7.50 was not that easy to come by back then. School lunch was .25 cents a day. Typical allowance was .50 cents a week. So we went without lunch awhile, scored an odd job around the neighborhood, whatever. Here it is! (About 1962 - '63?)



Well we kicked around on that guitar a lot. (I still have it.) We just traded it back and forth between houses every couple of days. Also hanging out a lot, mostly at my house since my parents were more tolerant of our noise (music) making. We also hung out with this guy on the next street over named Joey DePaulo. He had a Fender electric - I believe it was a Jazzmaster. We sort of "lived" at his house a lot. His mom would always cook up huge meals in huge pots on the stove and we would like just get in line with this huge family. His uncle whom we guessed "lived" there also, could play pretty well. He showed us all kinds of stuff on the guitar. I think he was an ex-pro player?

Mainly we would just pick up bits and pieces of many songs and styles, but enough to give me the idea about what goes into making guitar "licks". Some country guy (maybe one of our school mate's dad) would show us this, another one might show us some Mexican guitar "Ranchero" lick. A new chord here and there. A little cool riff. You would pick up some small morsel and just chew on it. Put it here, put it there, get your hands moving and put it everywhere. We just sort of built it as we came across the parts.

At this point, I was doing almost nothing but sitting in my room playing guitar. (14-15 yrs old) Playing when I would get home from school. I would eat dinner then go back into my room and play more. (My parents later told me that they were pretty relieved about this, because they knew where I was instead of having to worry about me being out God knows where getting into trouble.) School work was never that important to me and my parents didn't push it as long as I had passing grades. (I did of course notice girls and just had to spend a bit of time with them.) My guitar partner Tim was very involved in sports at school, so the guitar stayed at my house most of the time. (But, Tim comes back into the story later.)

There were a couple of other guys around who played. I would get together with each of them and trade chops. We would show each other what we knew, then play it together. I was in a great position because, as I remember it, they all knew more than I did! So I just learned however I could.

Thinking back on it, I would have had a whole different kind of learning experience had I been receiving any kind of formal instruction. I sometimes wish that I would have had some formal guitar lessons at that time in my "education". Judging from the lessons I did get later on, it would have really "jump started" my training and moved me along much faster. (Whiz kid style)

But I never regretted learning the way I did. I was able to see things differently by having to solve so many musical mysteries on my own. And also really appreciate formal lessons once they came my way.

So, as I recounted earlier, the formal lesson thing didn't really work out for me at that time. Actually the only other contact I had with lessons was a program on our local public TV station. Man, it was scary! The Master classical guitarist Segovia was teaching "master" classes in Spain. In Spanish and grainy B&W with terrible sound quality. These students could play wonderfully...I was so blown away. Of course this style and level of playing was way on another planet. So they would sit down with the -yes- dreaded music stand and written music. (See earlier experiences.) They would play for a short period (like 30 seconds), then he would stop them, yell something at them and start rapping them across the knuckles with a ruler, and correcting their playing in a really grouchy way. (So, really just another in a series of strange encounters with formal music training.)

Now instrumental "surf" guitar really caught my attention. Much of the cool instrumental guitar stuff was the "surf" sound. This music had good guitar playing melody and all manner of "licks". Groups like The Ventures, Duane Eddy and the James Bond movie stuff and on and on. There was other cool guitar stuff I would be hearing, (and doing a bad job copying). Like "Honky Tonk" by the Bill Doggett group. There was that really cool lead solo in Bill Haley's Rock Around the Clock. Then that fantastic Link Wray "Rumble". (I still own and listen to the 45.)

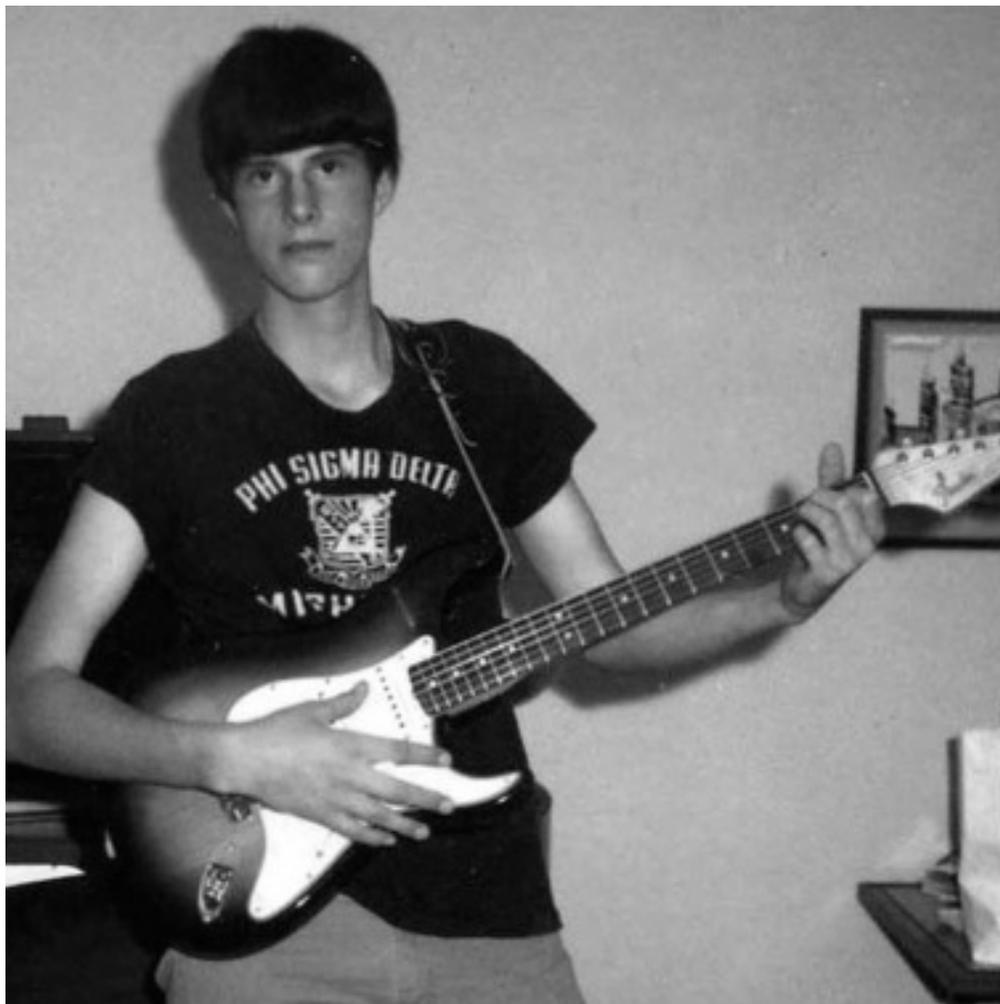
Figuring out this stuff was not easy, but, it was doable. Just listen and listen then listen some more - picking out the parts bit by bit. (Now this meant putting the needle back on the record, trying to find the same spot so you could listen again while all the while forgetting what you had just heard and scratching the thing and wearing out the record that you had borrowed. Getting a dollar together was a lot of money and having to go buy another one so you could learn the guitar part - like I said - bit by bit.)

Between someone showing me their version of how they thought some guitar lick went, and my versions of how I thought it went, I could come close to a similar facsimile of the thing. (Although in later years, as my skills improved, I made many, many corrections.) Sometimes I would be trying to cop the whole song with all of its parts. Sometimes just a short guitar line - would take forever.

I would work weekends and summers at my dad's store in downtown Albuquerque. There were two other stores down there where I spent my lunch and dinner breaks - the music stores! May's Music and Riedling Music. They sold the 45 records and also had the Fender guitars on the wall. Wow, I was saving up to eventually get one. At forty-five cents an hour that would be a long ways away! But, they would sometimes let kids like me pick them up and play them - but mostly I would just go in and stare at them.

One night while in my room (playing guitar of course), my dad peeked in and said he wanted to talk to me in his room. I figured he had found out about something or the other I had done wrong. Anyhow he sounded kind of serious. I followed him in there and on his bed I saw it - a Fender guitar case! He told me to open it - I could not believe it - a sunburst Fender Stratocaster guitar! He told me it was mine, a gift. He said I had worked for it and deserved a professional guitar.

I never found out how he knew which guitar I was dreaming about. But he got the exact right one! Thanks, Dad! I will always remember that most marvelous gift. Not only the material object itself, and not only the generous gift, but the way it showed his support for all the work I was putting into my guitar playing. Here it is! (1964-15 yrs old)



Ok, I figured it was about time to start a band. So I started looking for a drummer, a rhythm guitar player, a bass player. I figured I'd be the "lead guitar" guy. We could practice in my garage.

THE FIRST BAND: The Deltas - 1964-65 (Tim thought up that name.) I asked Tim if he wanted to play bass guitar in a group. "Sure!" We didn't have a bass guitar but, since I got the strat, we just took the top two strings off the Kent guitar. (It made it seem more like a bass that way.) Now unfortunately we had sold the Fender tweed amp to recoup our money for the Kent guitar. But I had the money that I had been saving up to buy the Strat. So we headed downtown to Sears and I bought a two channel Silvertone guitar amp! This one had one 12 inch speaker, and about 18 watts of gorgeous glorious power. (I still use that!)

I can't remember exactly how the band came together, but it did! Ron Cummings played rhythm guitar, sang well, and looked good. Dave Hake could actually really play drums. He was already making money playing in an old guys' band at the Elks Club on the weekends. All four of us were school mates at Monroe Jr. High School.

So we needed to set up that two channel Silvertone amp where we could somehow plug in three guitars and a mic. No problem - we just somehow wired together two guitar cords into one plug, then a guitar cord and the mic cord into one plug. (I still use that Silvertone amp)

We of course had to find a mic. My big brother David (who always supported my music making) had this little reel-to-reel tape recorder. Now that tape recorder came with a small mic. So we were set! But we needed a mic stand. Again, no problem - my family had a pet bird that had died and its cage stand was just sittin' there. We duct taped the mic to it, and we were set. A fully equipped band.

Practicing in my garage every weekend for a few months, we worked up a song list. Duke Of Earl, Surfer Joe, Wipeout, Long Tall Sally, Bulldog, Perfidia and a couple of others. I think we had a dozen or so tunes. Time to look for "gigs".

Our first gig was a backyard birthday party. You know - Saturday afternoon affair - teenagers dancing - punch and cake and all that. (Not really that much different than hundreds I was to play over the next 50 years. People got older, there was booze and dope and the pay got slightly better.) Anyhow we each earned two dollars! Enough to go to the National Shirt Shop at Winrock Shopping Center and buy our band outfits. Matching \$1.99 red shirts. We were a real band now!

At some point during each school year, Monroe Jr. High had its big Talent Show. You know, the dork doin' magic, the sweet singin' pretty girl with piano accompanist, the even prettier girl on flute, the jock singin' a baritone thing, the theatre type guy reciting a Shakespeare thing - then us!

I think the teachers debated letting us in on it. We might get too loud, and only three of the guys were in that school, (I was one year older and in 10th grade.) But enter it we did. And we won! Man the kids all went crazy! Most had never seen a rock band live. I guess it was kind of like being The Beatles of our Jr. High.

That was a great experience. A really perfect first band. But after that night of our big TALENT SHOW WIN, things seemed to fade away. It was such a great high! With that kind of thing you know when you've plateaued. The few parties we played after that just didn't make it. Also now we were all going to different schools.

Then one day someone said they had seen an advertisement in the newspaper about a "working" group looking for a lead guitar player. I can't remember who it was, but they handed me the telephone number and really encouraged me to make the call. I talked to my bandmates in the Deltas about it and they said go for it. I made that call, and it set me on a different path.

THE START OF MY PROFESSIONAL CAREER: (1966-16 yrs old)

I had heard "The Morticians" on the radio. Their songs "Little Latin Lupe Lou" and "Baby Darling" had been #1 and #2 for weeks on our local pop station. I didn't know they were a local Albuquerque based band.

The ad must not have mentioned a band name, which is a good thing. Because if it had, I think the person who turned me on to the phone number for the audition would have mentioned it. And if they would have mentioned that it was a professional recording and touring band like "The Morticians", I don't think I would have made the call. I mean I could play some guitar, but not really. (I am not just being modest here.)

Ok, so I got an address and a time. All I needed to do now was get there with my guitar and amp. I asked my mom if I could use the car, told her I needed to go to a band practice or something, and loaded up the station wagon. It felt kinda like going to the doctor. You know, just figuring you're gonna be at their mercy, and that you gotta be there on time. Actually, when I arrived, there was a waiting room! A bunch of guys waiting on chairs in a hallway.

THE AUDITION: I think I was 4th or 5th in line, not sure what to do, but the other guys in front of me all had their guitars out. Nothing else to do but get mine out. We all had em' out. (I was so glad it was a "professional" "real" guitar. Thanks, dad.) If I hadn't already given someone my name, it would have been time to just slip away. But it's like you're now officially present, the dentist knows you're here, the principal knows who's out there. Then, it was my turn.

The band was there(5 guys),and two or three adults standing around. It was a big room with just an incredible amount of equipment! This wasn't like "my" band with one small Silvertone guitar amp and a mic on a birdcage stand. There were electronic keyboards on stands, 3 or 4 big Fender guitar amps, multiple microphones each on their own real mic stands. About the only thing in common was the drum set. They introduced themselves and invited me to plug into one of their amps. (As it happened, it was a Fender Super Reverb, the first of many I would end up plugging into.)

I think I got kinda lucky cause they just asked me to play something. If they had started going through some songs, I most likely would have gotten off and lost. You know, not known what to play. So I just played through a couple of guitar "surf" instrumentals. This worked out well because I really had the parts down and could drive it, pushin' it pretty hard. And that amp had reverb! So it was better sounding than anything I had ever played.

So then they showed me the chords to some of their songs and we played through them. I don't think I played anything real impressive. The guitar player I would be replacing seemed to know more than I did. But I could follow it and stay in good time. Man -- they really sounded good to me! And they were really cool guys. And they had a manager.

"Make sure to leave your number, and we'll let you know."

THE CALL BACK: In a few days I get home from school and my mom says that a man called about me joining a band. She asked me about it, like what's up, I told her about the audition.

(SLIGHT REGRESS: It might be helpful to mention here the fact that my parents were not really very involved in the details of my day to day activities. There was a lot of understanding and a lot of love, but they realized I was the independent kind of kid.)

(More regress: Like, ok, here is as good an example as any... the BIG TALENT SHOW that "The Deltas" won would not have necessarily been an event they attended. Not because they didn't care, or weren't paying attention, but because I probably needed the space. Cause you couldn't be cool with the scene with your parents there. Ok, enough regressing.)

Back to THE CALL BACK: Ok, so I told her about the audition. She then went on to tell me that they wanted a meeting with all of us. (Me, my mom and dad) So after talking to my dad, it was set up.

THE MEETING: Well it turns out that this whole affair is actually fairly involved. I mean, I just wanted to join a band, I didn't really want to get my parents all involved and everything. But the thing had been set in motion, and I think I passed the audition! (YEA!)

The deal was that my parents would have to agree to a bunch of stuff because I'd miss some school and needed the manager set up as a legal guardian for out of town and late night stuff, on & on. The bottom line was they had to sign some papers, you know, like give permission. (Thanks again, Mom and Dad)

THE BAND: Zack (Lead singer), Pat (Rhythm guitar), John (Keyboards, bass), Tommy (Drums), Keith (Lead guitar)
The deal was that Keith, the lead guitarist, was off to join the military. I assume he had turned 18 and at that time (Vietnam war) you could easily get drafted. Anyhow he was gonna be around for a few more weeks so we could play some gigs together and he could help me ease into the slot.



All these guys were really cool, you know, seemed like they had "been around the block". And they had been man! They had been traveling on the road, making records, earning a living playing music. I was absolutely thrilled to be in this band with them. The music was good and tight, and everywhere we played people loved it. They (we) had a record that was doing very well regionally. We headlined many pretty big shows, and were on the bill with some of the huge acts. (Paul Revere, Buffalo Springfield, Turtles, etc.)

We had management, plus outside booking agents, business cards, promo kits (with 8x10 B&W glossy), 2 records getting airplay, radio interviews, press kits, press interviews, three different stage outfits (uniforms), dance step lessons, equipment and transport. In short, this was my introduction into the professional entertainment field. "The music business."
(That's me standing top left.)

BACK TO GUITAR PLAYING: This situation really pushed my guitar playing abilities. I had to figure out a lot of stuff! All I really had was a couple dozen chords. I don't know - maybe that's all you needed. I mean, did I really have to name all the notes on the neck? I didn't know any scales, but I figured that was for like classical guys.

Sometimes I would see (hear) guitarists in other bands who seemed to know a lot more than I did. But then again, I had never met anyone who had taken Rock 'N' Roll lessons. Hey - maybe most of them were just winging it like me. I mean this really was just Rock 'N' Roll. (Before Sgt. Pepper.) Just really nice tight dance music, and our band always packed the dance floor.

I can only assume that I had a "good ear" to help me through. Another thing I've always been good at is extrapolation. I think my ability to do this is what really pulled me through. Let me explain it this way. If I figured out that this little shape over here works well in this song, then I could easily adjust it to the next song that has the same vibe. This shape was this vibe (sound), that shape was that vibe. Put em' together and get this third vibe for that kind of sound. And I had no fear of winging it and just improvising out on a limb.

During this time I was also starting to try my hand at writing songs. We wanted to record another record and needed an original song. I started writing some songs and presenting them to the band. I finally got a good one that everyone liked. (My 1st record: "You're Not Alone"). We went into the studio and recorded it. That was also my first experience in a professional recording studio! Man, still learning.

FINALLY, MY FIRST REAL ROCK'N'ROLL LESSON: Not long after I was in the band we played a gig on the same bill as a very good country band. Probably at some state fair somewhere, because otherwise we never played on the same shows as a country act. After the show we were hangin' back stage and the guitar player from that band approached me and started talking guitar. He asked me a few questions about my guitar and had me pull it out so he could look at it. He asked if he could play it, then whipped out a quick really cool country lick, then a great Rock and Roll thing, then a beautiful bluesy/jazzy guitar line. I was pretty amazed. I was wondering what the hell he just did when he said:

"You see this F chord here, just that 4 string 1st fret one? I can just bring it up the neck to whatever key I'm playing in." (He showed me A 5th fret, C 8th fret, D 10th fret etc.) "Now, with my pinky, I can grab these notes here for country, these here for rock "n" roll, and these here for a more bluesy jazzy type sound. All within this easy to see F shape chord. Can you see that?" "Yeah! Wow, thanks."

Days went by and the guitar never left my hands. That 10 minute lesson brought it all together for me. I didn't know the theory behind it, like I do now. All I knew was that it worked well, and sounded right! Everybody in the band noticed it immediately. Man, I was starting to get down on some licks! I still call that simple F shape chord, "The lead guitar chord shape." He had shown me the exact info that I needed at the time. What a perfect lesson for me. When I think back on it, I figured I'd just spent 10 minutes with the Cowboy Buddha.

One thing I always tried to convey to students was that with all the information load out there these days, we don't cherish some small bit and really chew on it. You know, really absorb it. It is just so easy to find more, just go on to the next thing.

MY CAREER CUT SHORT:I have a lot of great stories about my almost two years in that band. We all got to be rock stars for awhile. There were "groupies", "parties", "trashing hotel rooms", and much teenage havoc. I wasn't really awake enough to realize what all was happening, mainly because I was just 16-17 years old. Chalk it up to young age.

But, I learned a lot about the entertainment business, the good the bad and the ugly. About being on the road with a band, and performing on large and larger stages. The gear and equipment. Also a bit about writing songs and arranging them for a group, then using professional recording studios. And most important for me, I learned more about guitar playing and music in general. ("Cool. Thanks, guys.")

I was turning 18 years old. I had two choices...

- (1) Get drafted, go to boot camp, then most likely Vietnam
- (2) Go to college full time and get a school deferment

I had somehow managed a High School diploma, our state university was very affordable, and they would let me in.

EVALUATION: So where did I stand here, at this point in time?
What were my musical (guitar playing) skills/goals?

In a sense our careers had been cut short. If there had been no draft and no war going on, we -the band- were going to move to LA - swim in a bigger pond. We had real good momentum built, and were being "looked at" by some major players in the business.

My skills as a player and musician in general were decent. Yes, I had been a guitarist in a professional band for almost two years. But that only meant something if the band stayed together. I was not a whiz kid, stand up, "knock their socks off" killer player. I wasn't bad for a 17 yr old kid. But that's not how it works.

Either way, I had no choice but to leave the band. I could still play local gigs, but could not really be involved with the band thing and the music career road for awhile. I sold my electrics (OUCH!), got an acoustic guitar and worked on finding a different path. I could learn to manage as an independent act, thereby keeping the commitment low.

The weird thing here is that I never considered doing anything else but being a guitar player. College was just gonna be a penalty I had to pay.

STAYING IN SCHOOL: (1967-1972)

I spent five years keeping my grades up and the draft out.

But all the while I was working at my guitar playing. I was writing tons of songs. Naturally a lot of protest stuff. But the acoustic solo thing started really getting into my blood. I was putting the whole "finger-picking" and chord "strumming" thing together. Learning and studying all sorts of folk guitar styles. Stuff like Dylan, Woody Guthrie, Donovan, Patrick Sky, Taj Mahal, etc.

I started learning a lot of acoustic blues. What I called at the time "Folkblues". Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, Dave Van Ronk, etc.

Weirdly enough, years later, this repertoire would prove to become a great asset for me. But at this point I had to learn more than that.

I met a lot of other players in and around the school scene, also around the folk music scene. Most were just ok players, some were pretty good, some could sing well. Almost all liked sharing their music. (Much more so than "pro rock band" guys.) Most enjoyed having me play with them. I could put on a pretty good 2nd "lead" guitar part and improve the overall sound. The ones who had gigs would often hire me and share the small pay. So I guess this was also the start of my "sideman" work. The idea here was to listen to them, then add something that would really make them sound better. A skill well worth learning if you're looking for work. Something I actually ended up doing a lot of through my career.

Another thing that helped facilitate these skills was that I got into multitrack recording. My dad always had music audio equipment. (i.e. hi-fi systems, then later stereo systems.) That was his main hobby, listening to music. So I was into things like tape recorders, amps, receivers, and tuners, even in the vacuum tube mono days.

I ended up with one of his reel-to-reel stereo tape recorders and a few recording microphones. This particular unit also had sound with sound capabilities so I could record one part and then, while listening back, add another part. So I could make up and record one guitar part, then lay another one on top!

I was also doing some low level solo gigs. (Low level usually meant food, drinks, and tips, and sometimes a bit from the door.) I played guitar, had a harmonica on a holder around my neck, and sang a bit. The "folksinger" thing was not really a good career move. I guess I had also been a bit spoiled. I did get to play a few bigger gigs opening for some great acts like Earl Scruggs. But I figured when this college/draft deal was over things would just sort of magically open up and I would go back to fat times.



So through these five years I actually ended up learning quite a bit. I was getting good at being a quick study sideman. By that I mean I could quickly learn other players' material, and start adding nice guitar parts to their music. I acquired the skills to put a solo act together. Both really contributed to the overall scheme of earning a living playing guitar. So although my "fast track to fame and stardom" professional career had been interrupted, I learned a lot.

(Footnote: In 1972 I graduated college, the draft was over.)

MY BIG MOVE: (1972 Europe. World, here I come...)

I had an acoustic guitar, a harmonica, a copy of "Europe on \$5 a Day" and a backpack. I was going out on my musical quest in that big land across the sea. I could be a wandering troubadour. You know, come into town, pickup gigs, meet cool people, get stoned, crash at their pad.

I heard that hitch hiking thing was safe and easy. Sign me up! Took a cash pay full time construction job for three months. Saved up enough to put some up, get a ticket and be gone. And you know what, many of these things did turn out to be more or less kinda true. (I had a fun cool cultural experience, but I was looking for work.)

I had heard that "over there" they really appreciate good old fashioned "authentic" American grown music styles. Ok, so I'm not that old or authentic. There were low level gigs: got fed, got a room above the bars. You know, not bad for just hanging out. But business is still business, and I didn't really know how to get it. I couldn't really manage a career thing over there. (I did get a sideman offer in a country band with a bunch of Swiss guys. "What? Ah, not now Thanks.")

But I did have this whole big new song list, a bunch of new styles, and I had landed squarely on the stay in the music business box after college. I started picking up gigs around town, arts and crafts fairs, restaurants, some soft in the background "wallpaper" stuff. (More on that later.) By this time most of the players I knew had gone on to different careers. Some still played casual gigs on weekends, so I could always find sideman jobs at weddings and parties. However, a few were still in it for the long haul.

Speaking of players who were still in it:

MY NEXT BIG MOVE: ("California, here I come.")

A short while after arriving back in the States I got a call from Zack Head. Zack had been the lead singer in The Morticians. He had moved to California, learned to play bass guitar, been in various bands out there in the L.A. area, gotten burned out, moved up to Northern Cal., gotten a big house out in the country in Napa County. Did I want to move out there and start a band? ("Well golly, let me think for...OK!")

NEXT BAND: I had sold all my electric gear, didn't have a car, and had come back from Europe pretty broke. My at that time wife, Barbara and I, who had always encouraged me and was very supportive in my quest, make up a bunch of rings, bracelets and roach-clips out of a stash of silver and stones we had scored awhile back. I had learned silversmithing in a jewelry making class at college and taught that to her. We figured we could sell them for a good price at some "hippie" arts and crafts fair or "head shop" out there in California. Then I could buy an electric guitar and amp once Zack and I started gigging.

Zack said they had a room for us in a big house for free, and they had this huge garden that provided most of the meals. Plus a couple of acres of walnut trees and an acre of table grapes. Wow! (They were vegetarian.)

So we packed up my acoustic, our jewelry making tools and supplies, some clothes, and took the Greyhound out.

We got there and things were looking pretty good. Not all as promised, but not bad. I was really ready to start up a new music project. Zack had met a lot of musicians in the area, there seemed to be many opportunities for gigs. We were close to "THE CITY" (San Francisco). So let's start gettin' it together!

Zack already had a drummer whom had moved up here from L.A. This guy was pretty set on doing the Santana, Hendrix, Cream type hard rock thing. But, here I show up with an acoustic guitar ready to start rehearsals and get the basics of the stuff down. I was thinking about a folk/rock fusion thing based on my writing and Zack's lead singing. I had the guitar skills for something like that. I could get some electric equipment going in a month or two once we had the framework.

So obviously we had some problems here. First, this drummer did not really do the soft hand drum acoustic playing that would allow us to proceed as things stood. Secondly, he didn't really care to go there, and I couldn't go where he wanted. I hadn't a clue how to play the loud screaming virtuoso type guitar style that he had in mind. I had totally dialed out of that electric scene for the last 5 or 6 years. So all that Santana, Hendrix, Clapton stuff was not a part of me. It was however the direction he wanted to develop the band around. Zack was sure that once I got electrified it would all come together.

THE END OF THAT BAND: I did get an electric guitar and amp. But it still was not working. I was working hard at trying to come up with material that would please the drummer. Zack was ok with it all and in it for the long haul, but the drummer decided to move back to L.A. We picked up another drummer, got a setlist together, started booking some gigs, but it was not going to happen.

LESSONS LEARNED:

(1) THE BAND BUSINESS: Once I thought about it, I realized that I really hadn't had much band experience. The Deltas was just a friends band and The Morticians was a well oiled machine before I was hired. (Although it started out as and basically remained a "friendship" band.)

But a few things about putting a band together became clear to me. You must first all share the same vision for the band. Have the same goals and purpose if the thing is truly gonna work out well. Really just the stuff they would teach you in business school about starting a company. You know, have a meeting and state the goals and direction.

(2) THE ANTAGONIST AS A MOTIVATOR: This situation motivated me to learn, to study and work more on my guitar playing. Yes, I had learned a lot of stuff over the past ten years, and yes, it was really great stuff, and yes, in retrospect it would really end up serving me well. But the realization that struck me at that point was - I wanted it all! I wanted to be able to play everything. All styles. Of course I know you can't master all the guitar styles. But that didn't keep me from wanting to try! I mean, why not? Maybe I could be a "jack of all trades but master of none."

The thing is I really loved all styles of guitar playing. (Most all-) And I didn't even want to flirt with the idea of "mastering" anything.

All I knew was that it was not happening for me. There was a lot of work ahead. I needed to find a way to learn more. I needed the kind of instruction that goes beyond "folk" styles. Those you can teach yourself, with a bit of help. I needed someone who really knew some shit to instruct me. The way these new guys were playing meant that there must be some better ways of getting that information. Hangin' with more knowledgeable players, schools, books, teachers, whatever. It must be out there.

I decided to move back to Albuquerque, hunker down, find a teacher, take lessons and woodshed like crazy. (If not there then elsewhere.)

MY FIRST "REAL" GUITAR LESSONS: Got home, had a guitar and amp, rented an apartment, got a job in a music store downtown. Took the bus to work 5 days a week and found a teacher. A couple of different employees and customers in the store recommended a guy named Steve Maase. I got the number, made the call, set up a time on my day off, grabbed my guitar and the bus, headed uptown. Steve had known me from the Morticians days. He had also played in local bands here during the 60's. I could tell he had his shit together, and trusted what he did.

He had me play a few things, asked some questions, and figured I could really use some music theory. Man, from that first lesson things started clicking. We're talking basic simple stuff here. I now knew how all the notes were named, so the entire guitar neck appeared to me in a whole new way. As in "Oh wow, that's why this thing and that thing works". I started to understand why I played the things I did, and why they worked. I now understood all those chord symbols and what they meant, and where they came from. Keys and scales and modes. Anyhow I just inhaled theory guitar lessons for like eight months! (Then on my own for about another 10 years.) The music store I was working in had a sheet music dept. So I also ordered all sorts of music theory books. Mainly jazz oriented cause jazz guys had really thought about music theory. Also Steve was really into Jazz Fusion. Players like John McLaughlin, Jeff Beck, etc... and that pool is a great place to swim while learning music theory and technique.

He also gave me a bunch of the guitar scale picking exercises which boosted my technique. I now had a much better idea of how it was done. And most important - the ability to keep teaching myself things! To see a much bigger picture, a much wider musical world.

Another couple of cool benefits of working in that music store were that you met a lot of musicians (many of them full time pros). Also you learned a lot about the equipment and how to use it. So one of those pros came in one day and asked me if I wanted to gig like 5 or 6 nights a week and get out of the music store thing. What he was talking about was new to me. This was steady work without too much business structure. Just put the song list together, get a band name or join an existing one and work the bars, nightclubs, lounges, whatever you want to call them. But it could be steady work.

What was also cool was that when I gave notice to the owner of the store that I was leaving, he totally knew what the trip was! He had played for many years in traveling dance bands and club bands before he settled down and bought that store. He said I was welcome to come back and work for a spell anytime I was between bands. (He knew!)

THE BAR BANDS: (1974) (and sort of 40 years more?)

Again, these bands were for full time working musicians. You played 5 or 6 nights a week, started around 9 pm and got off around 2 am. Because of the hours and frequency involved, people with "day jobs" could not do it. Note: This actually helped keep the pay up a bit because we were not competing with part timers who would work cheap. Let me regress a bit in order to explain about "Bar Bands".

The thing about "Bar Bands" is that once you plug into the program and have the skills you can work forever. It's probably like being a waitress or something similar. It pays ok, and you can work most anywhere.

It seems like there are always a lot of musicians either trying to get into the bars (gigs) or trying to get out of the bars (better gigs).

There are a lot of kinds of "bar gigs". From tips and drinks down at Joe's - to fancy "Vegas" show clubs. With like 10 levels in between. Sometimes the music is the main attraction, but many times the music is real secondary to "selling drinks" or "entertaining gamblers".

IN MODERN TIMES:

You will find those 10 levels of musicians in these circumstances. From beginning amateurs very first band with a 3 song set list (usually all original) opening up for another local amateur band sharing the stage that night with 4 other acts with each band member owing the bar \$25 each after paying their tabs. - to - Absolutely incredible artists that are every bit as good as anything in the big time out there playing for 25,000 fans at \$300 a ticket.

IN EARLIER TIMES:

Bar bands, lounge acts, club work. These musicians were for the most part very well prepared "working musicians". (They earned a living.) There was usually dancing and drinking going on. Weekend nights were more packed, but most weekdays did ok. Some were very narrow in their taste, like "Jazz Clubs" "Rock Clubs" "Country Honky Tonks". Ones in hotel lobbies might be more general catch alls "lounge band-ish".

It was generally steady work, and you didn't need to live in a large metro area that had big time "opportunities" for musicians. (Like L.A. or N.Y.C.) You could usually find full time work in your local area or if you wanted also travel around on a regional circuit. Sometimes the same band might work the same bar for a year straight, or 20 years. ("Curly Snow and the Snowmen at the Hitchin' Post") But mostly these would be one or two week engagements and you would be on a "circuit" where you might come back and play each place every 2 or 3 months. Actually I can remember at least three of the bands I was in that played for a year or more at the same club!

MY FIRST BAR BANDS:

Like I said, these bands consisted of players who were all full time professional musicians. There were two general categories.

The "front man" - could be male or female, could be more than one per band, they generally did most of the talking, usually did most of the singing, most would be able to shake a tambourine or strum a guitar or play some keyboards. Most usually looked and/or dressed better. Sometimes they were "artists" looking for a backup band. They were more likely to be into the entertainment business and therefore book most of the gigs.

The "sideman" - as I said before - these players had the ability to learn songs and arrangements quickly. They needed very little rehearsal time. They followed the dress codes, had their equipment in order, showed up sober and on time. In bar bands, they are generally all equal contributing members with strengths and weaknesses.



One thing they all had was a nice 8x10 black & white glossy! That's me in the back with the guitar. Most clubs had a little "Now Appearing" show case window outside where you could slide this photo in.

Many of them had the skills to go on tour if they wanted to be sidemen in some bigger name band. Some did. They could learn songs from the artists' recordings note for note really well and then improvise on it as much as was needed depending on the circumstance.

There were a lot of "shades of grey" in many bands. It wasn't always a clean frontman - sideman division. In some cases, none.

Again, everybody's main interest was to stay employed, closer to home without the big time show biz commitment. Success was based on keeping the people there and keeping them coming back. Sometimes the bar had the following, sometimes the band had it. Many times it was a bit of both. The more successful bands did not necessarily consist of the most accomplished musicians. (Two key words - entertainment business!)

The last full time bar band (of this type) I played in included all sidemen. We really didn't have a "frontman". My ex-teacher Steve approached me about putting it together. I had mentioned that the band I was currently in was about to split up. He had not been doing that scene for awhile. He had been doing the all original Jazz Fusion thing. (Which of course meant very little paid work.)

We figured we would center the band around a lot of high powered guitar stuff. Really pay tribute to the great guitarists, Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Clapton, Al Dimeola, Allman Bros., George Benson, etc. We gathered up our favorite drummer and bassman. Put together some killer sets. Easily booked up a bunch of gigs for the "super group".

It was a super group - at the time, easily the highest caliber gathering of music abilities I had been a part of. Unfortunately, it didn't work well in the bars. When I left they hired a female and male lead singers as front people. Kept the name and did a lot better.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM BAR BANDS:

For me, this was a great experience in learning more about playing many styles on the guitar. It was really cool working on copying all these licks note for note even though many times the band didn't really require me to do this. I had more or less done a bit of that before, but now I knew so much more and could apply all the music theory and new hot technique I had spent so much time working on. It was a chance for me to really grow as a guitar player. I finally arrived. I knew I could jump up on stage with anyone and do the do. I'm not sure what that meant, but I knew it. (Whatever it was.)

Anyhow, this steady bar band business phase lasted long enough. I still continued to play bars, (all my life actually), but not in that same way. A lot of these gigs still exist in places like hotels, Vegas, New Orleans, places where the crowd constantly changes and the bands don't have to. But the scene changed and I had acquired what I needed to grow and carry on. And I now had more skill under my belt.

I didn't want to get stuck here being comfortable and congenial. I had written a bunch of new songs. I knew how to put bands together. I had moved back to Albuquerque and accomplished the goals I had laid out.

In fact I had written tons of songs that I was ready to unleash on the world. Now I had the skills to put together that band that didn't work out last time. I was charged up. Called up Zack.

He was still living in Napa County. Had been kicked out of the big house (non payment of rent). But we were talking about moving down closer to the city. Closer to the action - at least Marin. Now that I was good at scoring better gigs, I was ready for a 2nd round!

MY FIRST "MY" BAND: ("California here I come")(again)

I think I sort of thought about the Bay area as a smaller more manageable music scene than say L.A. or N.Y.C. So that's where I thought I would take it to make it. Not really sure what make it was, (I had sort of tasted that at 16 years old) but I figured I was thinking about a higher caliber situation of some sort. You know, better players, better venues, certainly more opportunity for - ?

Didn't have a car so arrived by train. Got picked up and crashed with an old friend from Albuquerque who lived in Marin. Made it up to Napa, visited Zack, bought an old car from him that had been parked in his back field. (That story would be way too much of a regress.) Anyhow, got it running, jammed out with Zack and gang, but didn't want to repeat the same Napa band trip, so moved down closer to the city.

It was really cool! Man - got an apartment in San Rafael, just like 12 minutes from the Golden Gate bridge and "THE CITY". Right down the block they rented rehearsal space and guys like Steve Miller and Mike Bloomfield were practicing there. And Mike Bloomfield would regularly do gigs at a "bar" just a block away. A "bar" I could most likely get a gig at. And the guy who handmade amps (Boogie Amps) for the Santana type guys lived down the street. It was happenin' here.

I guess Zack didn't want to move down here, or maybe just had other plans. But that was ok cause I was not depending on that situation. I had a real strong vision for what I was looking for. I needed a bass player and a drummer. I could start with a nice trio, the maybe add horns and/or keys. Cool funky shit was really popular in this area (Sly, P-Funk, etc...) and Bloomfield was doing a blues thing, and ...

I had a great rig that I brought out with me. (On the train) That last "super band" bar band I was in played loud and hard in fairly big clubs (when we could get gigs), so I had some really awesome equipment. A nice 100 watt all tube hand wired Hiwatt amp with a 2x10 cabinet and a 2x12 one also.



And I had this great '65 Strat (The one in the picture) with 2 old "soapbars" and a PAF "Humbucker". I know that no one would "butcher" an old '65 Strat anymore. But back in those days they weren't collectable. They weren't treasured - just played! You couldn't buy a Strat with Humbucker pickups and those old Gibson soapbars just screamed! And I loved the feel of that guitar. Yes, you could buy a Gibson - and not have to put those pickups in the Fender. Hey, I had a Les Paul and a nice 335 at this time also. Both 60's guitars. Now gone - as I said - to us at the time they were all just tools.

So I put up ads for bass player - drummer needed. Man I got some good responses. Auditioned the players who had responded and were still interested after talking to me about the trip. I settled on a couple of guys - actually a drummer and bass player who already had a nice big house with a big rehearsal room with PA and whatever. Maybe that's why I went with them? But they could play well enough and both had great attitudes and a strong open willingness to work on my material. They had some kind of independent income happening (I didn't ask) considering they had this great house in Mill Valley and a nice BMW and a nice big van. That was cool because they didn't need to start making money anytime soon. But I did. After a two day stint at the Little Red Dog Motel (another story), I got lucky and scored a day job at the local music store. Things were looking good.

The band house was 10 minutes away and we were rehearsing about five nights a week. We started to build a song list. They were really good at listening and trying to catch the vibe of the grooves. We may have spent a little too much time partying. They had a great group of friendly folks by all the time, and plenty of party "favors". And, I think things were going sort of pretty well.

For the past year or so I had been also working on some instrumental music for solo guitar. Some of it was arrangements of popular tunes (jazzy, pop, fusion, quasi-classical etc.), some of it was original music. The guitar techniques were very challenging and I was enjoying the demands it was making on me. And I was also enjoying the compositions that started to flow.

The music store I worked at was very quiet. The owner would give keyboard lessons back in a studio and sometimes at students' houses. So basically I could sit there and get in about 4 to 5 hours of practice a day between customers.

I'm not sure what happened but somehow the solo acoustic stuff started taking over my brain. The original music band stuff just didn't seem to be a direction I wanted to continue spending so much energy with.

The guys in the band didn't seem to mind this change of mind. They really took it in stride and were incredibly friendly toward me. In fact thanking me for all I had taught them. - Cool.

I guess what happened was that the guitar playing trumped the entertainment business. I was just compelled to spend time working in this new direction. Some kind of muse had taken over and I followed my heart on it. I figured I could still get a bunch of sideman gigs and whatever.

The main problem was that the local gigs here paid less than back home. I guess because of the competition between musicians. Also the living expenses were much higher. So if I didn't need the "bigger biz scene" pickings were much easier back home where I could live cheaper and had more contacts. My old teacher/bandmate Steve had also turned me onto some teaching. He had passed a few students my way. I could most likely pick those back up and get a studio where he taught.

I mainly wanted an easy place to work on my composing and playing. And some steady gigs again - get out of that music store scene.

SOLO ACOUSTIC INSTRUMENTALS:(No Vocals)

By this time I had built up an extensive new song list. Like I said, all instrumental pieces. I was arranging pop tunes like Beatles stuff and José Feliciano. Even stuff like Stairway To Heaven. And the Carlos Santana stuff like Samba Pa Ti and Europa worked really well. I was doing a lot of "Mexican" type things like Vaya con Dios and El Paso and Adalita. I had a bunch of those Bossa Nova things like Girl from Ipanema (Jobim) and Corcovado. I bought albums and studied the solo jazz guitar styles of Charlie Byrd, Lenny Breau, Joe Pass doing bluesy jazz standards, mostly ballads & also swinging it strong. I also worked hard on trying to phrase like my favorite vocalists. Billie Holiday, Ray Charles, Sam Cook, Etta James and Aretha Franklin. So I worked out a lot of their songs as solo instrumental pieces.

A few years back while playing in the bar bands I had taken some lessons from a classical guitarist and from a Flamenco player. I took some of that and applied it to my style so I could throw in a bit of the classical guitar like the Fernando Sor stuff and standards like Romance, also toss some of that Flamenco flavor into the mix.

Shortly after arriving back home, while out hustling gigs, I ran into a performer/guitarist named Will. He and his wife had an act called Will And Poppe. They were gigging at all the really "high class" places. Fancy hotel restaurants, cruise ships, Tahoe, stuff like that. He strummed guitar, she played flute. They dressed really up town and wore nice jewelry. Anyhow we talked for a couple of hours covering many subjects like "selling out", looking more professional and earning more. Really an informative conversation. So anyhow I tried to apply some of his suggestions to my act. This promo picture was one!



I figured maybe I would try to move my act more "uptown". I could start performing these solo acoustic arrangements in nice restaurants, hotel lounges, high class cocktail parties, and casuals like weddings, company convention dinner stuff.

Yes, I know this was like a step back in prestige as far as "pure artistic values" were concerned, like playing "wall paper" gigs. But it might pay more while giving me the chance to work on the technique. The variety in my play list was challenging to both play and to arrange. And I was doing a zillion styles.

Ok, so I mainly wound up doing Mexican restaurant background sound. And through contacts made there many wedding and private party casuals. Those always pay pretty well - people spending bigger bucks. Along with this I was continually picking up sideman jobs for your basic "weekend warrior" type bands in bars and at parties. I also did a short stint with a really good Hotel Stage Show Band.

I actually received some good performance press reviews! But it was not where I wanted to be. My eyes were on the original stuff I was working on. That was the prize! The "wall paper" stuff and the cocktail mentality were kind of draining my soul. I was listening to those live Keith Jarrett albums recorded in Europe. Serious listening audience stuff. A lot of improvisations on various themes. Which is what I was doing with my compositions. (Still am!) This stuff wasn't for plain "gigs". At this point I really needed an outlet for my artistry. I might even "take it to Europe" again. Find a more sophisticated audience. Which I tried... but it didn't work out - again. I just hadn't figured out how to do business over there. (A nut I finally did crack!) But no big deal...I was still learning how.

Thinking I would maybe only do my own music. All the compositions I had worked on. And only play them for concert/listening audiences. I started limiting the types of gigs I'd do. Something that Will and Poppe would call being a prima donna. But their kind of act didn't work for me. I didn't care about pleasing those people. Like I said, I had some art to create. I needed to alter my approach.



COMPOSING GUITAR INSTRUMENTALS:
(With free improvisation.)

I thought this promo picture would be a bit more appropriate for this next trip.

I would still do all the sideman stuff cause that wasn't really any of my doing. I mean I wasn't responsible for it. I would do a good job and enjoy doing it. That was always the nice part of those gigs. My job was just to play guitar and try to add nice stuff to the music... make it all sound better than if I wasn't there. That's what I was getting paid for.

I was also doing some studio work. Playing behind artists who were usually coming in to cut singles. I worked at one studio that did a lot of country and another that was affiliated with TV and radio. In that one I did a sound track for a PBS documentary called Roly Poly Blues. It was about people eatin' too much. Like a health thing. At some point I even did a nice "top hit" music video with Pam Tillis.

With a hand full of students at the time, I was teaching a couple of afternoons a week. That was nice for two main reasons. First, I enjoyed it. Secondly, it helped with building up the bucks so I didn't have to just take any gig. Now that I'm on it...

You know I always learned so much from teaching. I worked out songs for my students by different artists that I would have never worked on myself. I also got to keep going over the fundamentals. And I was challenged many times in many different ways, where I had to really think about answering and explaining things well. Anyhow...

I would put on a little concert here... a little one over there... not bad, you know, just small listening audiences. But it wasn't gonna grow. I needed a way to build momentum. A way to push it to the next level. I needed to record an album in order to promote the music.

MY FIRST ALBUM: (1984) Stan Hirsch - "Solo Acoustic Guitar"

I recorded this the same way I ended up recording all my future albums. (Not counting the "live" ones with Eric McFadden.) I would have all the songs well worked out cause I'd performed them live many times. The way I recorded was just like you would hear me play it if I just sat down in front of you and started playing. No overdubs or second tracks. I recorded 28 songs in a two hour session. I picked the 14 I wanted to include in the album. Mastered them and sent it off.

Back then you had no way of marketing or promoting your own album. (within reason) The idea was I could use them in making up a promo package. (Along with the 8x10 B&W photo and a few news paper clippings.) You could sell some to friends, family and devoted fans. But the main thing was to send them to the record companies and see if they might want to take you on. That was the only game in town, the only hope of really attracting some air play and a bigger audience. And with this kind of music I couldn't do the bars.

The amazing thing was that back then you could not only call up and talk to someone at a major record company, but you could get an address and contact person's name. So I not only mailed out a couple of dozen or so of these, I heard back from six or eight! And some of them had listened to the music. Anyway a few of them really complimented the music and encouraged me to keep shopping it. But, I didn't end up getting signed. Hey, that was ok. I mean what would have been the chances of that? Really, what the heck was I thinking?

About this time I ran into a great musician, James Lascelles. He was an Englishman living in the New Mexico desert. (Another story.) We put together a duet, he on keyboards and percussion - me on nylon string acoustic. James was very much into my "John McLaughlin style", (fast scales, modal rides, etc.) because he had also gone through a "Jazz Fusion" period, and had actually recorded with some of the same players in London as McLaughlin. But at this time he wanted to work on "World Beat" type music. (Which was fine with me.) I had actually gone through an "ethnic music" type phase myself years ago. I had even owned a sitar and a Japanese lute and had done things like attach all sorts of percussion instruments to my guitar. I had also devoted much time to studying various rhythms. Percussion books on "Latin" rhythms, East Indian books on the different talas. I actually owned and messed with some tablas. And then there were the Flamenco rhythms I had studied on guitar. So I, along with James, was also excited to start composing music in this "Tribal/World Beat" style.

After awhile we added a trap set drummer and bass player and did a few concerts. We also did some recording, but nothing very commercial. James is living in London and still doing that music. In fact, I had a chance to jam with him there recently. It was fun! (Thanks, James.)

The "art" type music had been really fun and challenging. Developing new techniques in order to pull off the compositions. Applying all my compositional skills while aligning them along a truly inspired path. Absolutely no commercial considerations entering my flow. So, I walked away from that a better guitarist and musician. (Cool!)

I decided to go the other way for awhile. Since my solo music demanded a quiet listening environment, and that was hard to find, I would go for some really strong easy to relate to and get into stuff. And as far as quiet goes, I would start an electric band. I also needed some better paying gigs. I sort of wanted to get back into the clubs again.

MY NEXT "BANDS":

I had to buy an electric guitar and amp. (Sound familiar?) Fender had just started re-issuing the '62 Strat and I thought it might be a lot like that first Strat I had. I also bought a nice Fender tube amp. So I was very excited about this new project. I also figured I'd keep the music uncomplicated and leave out a lot of sophistication. Also I was looking for a style that had plenty of instrumental material and where I could try to handle some of the vocals. (So, it couldn't be that pop rock stuff with the great tenor singers.)

Problem was I didn't really want to start up and lead a band. But I didn't want to join one either. I wanted to keep the commitment kinda low and also be in control. I had gotten used to doing a solo act. The solo thing was nice because you could do whatever business you wanted without asking a bunch of other people. What gigs to take, what songs to learn, what pay to accept.

So the idea came to me that maybe I could do all that by being a solo act, but hire sidemen for each gig! I needed quick study guys. Musicians who didn't really need to rehearse the material. We could just meet up at the gig and blow. Wing it...jam a lot! No rehearsals!

Not a band per se, but pros who could catch on fast and play tight and sound like a band. Guys who really knew how to blow, good confident jammers. I had to think about a song list. Which songs might work out best not only for me to lead, but for sidemen to follow.

I knew that experienced jazz guys did that all the time working with the "Jazz Standards". They knew the same songs, had lived with them, and learned on them. But I didn't want a jazz band. First off, I wasn't really a jazzer myself. Secondly there wasn't that much work around for that style.

Then the obvious occurred to me...Blues! I had always loved it - I could rock it or funk it, swing it or just endlessly grind out boogies. And I could keep it all just 12-bar and variations on that. (For non-musicians this 12-bar form is a standard "song" formula and arrangement that all pro sidemen would instantly recognize.)

What I decided to do first was just start up some jam sessions with students and ex-students of mine to test material. I would throw out songs and see which ones would work even with amateurs. But first I had to do a lot of work lining up and learning the songs myself.

Between me and my brother David we owned about 60 blues albums. Probably about 90% of those were electric blues bands. So I just started listening, picking out the songs, working on them for awhile, moving things around to see what keys I might sing in. And of course memorize the lyrics to like 50 songs. I also had a couple of dozen instrumentals. I was working them all out with a trio in mind.

I would then dissect the grooves by working out the bass lines and the drum parts. I was also dividing these "feels" or grooves into categories. I did this not only to make sure I had a good mix, but also so I could make up a good shorthand way of calling the song by not only its name, but by its type of feel. A quick signal and direction to give the sidemen while starting the song - unrehearsed up on stage. These players I would be working with may not have ever heard these recordings. Also I could try out ways to introduce intros and quick "head arrangements" that would work.

Along with this, many times a particular sideman would suggest songs that we all knew and we would go on those. Things a bit outside the straight blues. Classic rock - blues stuff like Hendrix, Allman Brothers or Cream, whatever. (Stuff most sidemen from that era knew.)

But on most of the stuff I had to come up with ways to quick feed not only grooves but example bass lines. And ways to quickly vocalize the basic part for drummers. This way I could build a song list that I knew would work using pro sidemen in a no rehearsal - meet on stage - sound tight that night environment. Because I wanted it to sound better than a typical "blues jam".

This obviously took a lot of study on my part. But I knew it was well worth learning. It proved its worth even more than I thought it would! I started booking gigs and started calling the players. I would hire different players for different gigs, hired guns so to speak. It was working very well. I started getting calls from club owners. (Which is always cool!) So now I had a whole new act with a really different way of doing things. A new set of skills.

This was working out well. (Cool!)

STRATMAN AND THE MYSTERY BLUES BAND:

Stratman cause I played a Strat and mystery band because you never knew who was in the band that night. (I did of course.)



(These two I used a lot - Tim Ruger on drums and Tim Ruiz on bass.)

I would be learning a lot about what the differences were in bass and drummer combinations. I would be learning a lot about leading and directing rhythm sections! These two guys worked well together. And I used other players who were really tight and fun.

A new club called The Dingo opened up downtown. They were starting a "Blues Club" scene. It was very cool and I was very fortunate to be invited by Miguel Corrigan (The managing partner) to be a part of that. I started working down there a lot. Drawing big crowds on weekends. At some point I suggested I host a "Blues Jam" on a slower week night. I got a small budget to try it, I hired a bass player and drummer as the "house band". I usually stayed up on stage unless I could hand it over to someone I knew.

The skills I had developed for my "Mystery Band" worked perfect here. We usually had around 20 "jammers" up during the night. It was a happening thing - lasted about 5 or 6 years.

Along with this I was still doing plenty of casual sideman gigs and teaching private students a few afternoons a week.

Another thing that was going on at The Dingo was that I would be asked to do other week nights just solo. Basically so they could keep expenses down. So I would work there at least on average one other night. I was also asked to do some of the Friday early evening "Happy Hour" gigs. Miguel would also ask me to open for touring blues bands that played there. And the list was impressive for a small downtown Albuquerque club. A lot of great bands came through there!

So I started pulling out a bunch of blues songs that would work for me doing a solo acoustic act. I had some experience with this back in the late 60's and early 70's as I mentioned earlier. Anyhow this was a nice variation from the trio stuff.

SLIGHT DETOUR:

It just so happened that one of my favorite people and guitar players (and ex-students) Eric McFadden was also doing this down there. He had a band that was always booked on weekends at a different club, but a week night here and there or Sunday or a Friday "Happy Hour" was a chance to pick up a few extra bucks. (I felt the same.) Anyhow this was cool because we decided to start playing some of these together, and also picking up a few other gigs between band commitments. We did this for a short while before he moved away and on to bigger things.



NEXT ALBUM: (First CD)

Eric McFadden and Stanton Hirsch -
Live At The Dingo (1997)

Actually Eric had moved out to San Francisco and was touring through Albuquerque - played at The Dingo - asked me to open the show with him - and his sound man recorded our set. I didn't even know it until Eric sent me a copy. How cool is that! The CD had been put out on the label he was signed with at the time.

This picture is of Eric and I just chillin' out in Mexico. We were playing a week long guitar festival there and had lots of time to hang. (2010-?)

We have been doing the duet thing now for almost 20 years. We put out another CD "Captured Alive" and perform together when we have a chance. Unfortunately this doesn't happen very often, but when it does it's really fun. We are very simpatico and can jam very well together.

And this turned out to be a whole other great chapter for me. The guitar techniques I employed for this duet were pretty much the same ones I had developed for my solo guitar instrumentals. I used a flatpick/fingers "hybrid picking" style. Same as Eric, and we generally both used nylon string "classical" guitars. Actually we hardly played any blues at all. We were all over the place in our repertoire. From John McLaughlin and Miles Davis to Tom Waits and Bob Dylan to Hendrix and Hank Williams - and everything in between. We would also just improvise on some groove laid down with some standard chords. And throw in various originals. We could catch on so quick to what the other was doing because we had a strong bond.

OK, BACK TO BLUES AT THE DINGO: As I said, I was starting to do a lot of nights as a solo acoustic act. I was also opening for some of the many traveling blues acts that Miguel would bring through there. It was a great opportunity to start getting some more high powered solo stuff together. Mainly because this was a rockin' club, not some laid back place. So I had to be able to create a strong presence as an acoustic solo player.

I needed the technique to sound like my trios, but with just one man one guitar. I had to learn how to incorporate the bass and drums parts mixed along with my guitar. I spent a lot of time studying players like John Lee Hooker and Lightnin' Hopkins. Guys who could really heat up a club solo. I was thinking of ways to "Fire your bass player and drummer and still keep em' dancin'". I spent about three years doing this type of gigs at the Dingo with this study in mind. It paid off.

Then the Dingo had to close down. Miguel and I partied down there that last night. We figured I'd played like 600 gigs there! Wow! I had learned so much.



Now I decided to make up a new promo pkg. and start shopping around for venues.

I had a nice video of me doing my solo blues thing. A guy from the New Mexico Jazz Workshop had filmed it at one of their gigs I had played. He made up a nice short edited version so I had that and a photo someone had taken at that Festival - and had printed up and given to me. (As seen here.)

As it happened, that "just right" new club just opened. So I dropped my package by and in a few days got a call from a very excited Eddie Adams from The Club Rhythm And Blues.

Needless to say, the trio stuff was taking a back seat. We did continue to do a few gigs here and there, but I was starting to really concentrate on my solo stuff again. And the "Mystery Band" was starting to feel too much like a "real" band. In fact, the players did become like permanent members, we renamed it as if it was a band, and because of changed expectations the formula didn't work anymore.

MY NEW ACT: MY NEW HOME: (Late 90's)

A guy named Eddie Adams was managing Club Rhythm & Blues. He was a New Orleans man, and A Cajun Chef. He really dug the old acoustic blues and was very happy to help me. (Which he did.) Unfortunately he moved on, but I had gotten in and the new management dug me as well. So it begins. Time for a new act. My most commercially successful. (That's a nice thing to happen to a budding young 50 year old guitar playing student.)



I had some very clear goals!

I wanted to be able to perform solo acoustic blues guitar on a very high level. I wanted to incorporate not only my own guitar style but my own style of vocals and song writing.

I had decided to really push the thing. Not only musically but business wise also. To put my best effort into it.

I wanted to "get out of town".

I reconnected with all the finger style players I had studied in the past. I knew I would have to really develop a strong independent thumb/finger(s) approach in order to play what I needed.

So I pulled out all that "folk blues" stuff I had learned in the late 60's-early 70's. Restudied it and copped it a bit closer. All the "Piedmont" stuff. Mississippi John Hurt and Dave Van Ronk type stuff. Also the Chet Atkins and Leo Kottke styles. And the boogie guys like John Lee Hooker, Lightnin' Hopkins, Mississippi Fred McDowell. Then the older Delta guys like Robert Johnson, Sun House, Charle Patton. I wanted to make sure I understood and could solidly play all that so I could take it somewhere else...make it my own. (Own it, imitate it and expand it.)

Playing it clean and "old fashioned", but often with a bit more of a greasy club house rock attitude. An acoustic guitar plugged into my Silvertone vacuum tube amp. (Remember that amp I bought in 1964? Wow!)

STAN HIRSCH AT THE CLUB RHYTHM AND BLUES:

The most productive thing I did there was start an "Open Mic" night. It was kinda like the blues jams at The Dingo, except I didn't have to work as hard. Things sort of took care of themselves as long as you initially did the work of putting into place a solid system and policies. Like signup list, keep things moving, be polite but firm with the players getting up and most important - make it a good entertaining show so that the place would have a good crowd that would come back week after week. (And the "artists" would also.) This lasted about 5 or 6 years. (When I left town I would have someone else run it and it would be waiting for me. - Sweet!)

The great thing for me was first and foremost a nice steady venue with - a good stage, a very good sound man, and a good audience where I could open each show with a 45 minute set of my own material.

George Ripley, the sound man would record my set each week and hand me a CD at the end of the night. (Thanks, George!) This really gave me a chance to listen back and work on perfecting the material, and also get feedback from an audience. People telling me what songs and parts they really enjoyed. I also got very comfortable relating to an audience. (Talking with them on and off stage, etc.) In short, I had the perfect opportunity to grow my act here and hone it.

MY FIRST BLUES CD: NO ROOM TO REASON (2000)

After about a year I recorded a CD of all original tunes. These songs were again, (just like my 1984 album) recorded "live" in the studio pretty much just all first take. I had performed them so often in front of audiences that I had them nailed. (Although I always change things up virtually every time I play them.) Recording albums like this became one of my "trademarks" and I always prefer it!

Anyhow, I guess it was the right time and right place because this CD did extremely well for me, and my place in the entertainment business definitely went up a notch or two. (Thanks in no small part to Trish!) (It's great to have a partner in life and love who also teaches me a bit about business.)

Many things started to happen...it was really cool! Music critics and press reviews placed me and my music up there with the best within the genre. In fact, I received great reviews for all three of my acoustic blues CD's. I couldn't believe it. I mean I just mailed a copy in and after a short while...bingo...there was a review. No Room To Reason -2000, Covered In Blues -2003, and Compelled To Play -2009. (Also Captured Alive -2004 "Doin' Jazz", my second CD with Eric McFadden.)

Now all those album reviews along with some performance reviews and a CD made my promo package a lot stronger and fatter than the one I had handed Chef Eddie at Club R & B just a few years earlier.

I think another reason the timing was right was because the whole computer internet thing was starting to really happen. Sure, I was still mailing off a lot of physical promo packages. You know, the old 8 X 10 black and white glossy, photo copies of magazine and newspaper clippings, etc. But the game really changed when I got a website!

Now I was no longer relying on just the phone books, expensive "snail-mail", and advertisements in trade magazines etc.

Venues and promoters from around the world were starting to show up "on-line". So it was much easier for me to get "my stuff" out there. I could make contact with the people who made the business!

It just so happened that this was the leading edge of the whole easy internet contact thing. The beginning of the DIY (do it yourself) movement. Within a few years it was all over the place. Artists were getting really good at it. Of course that meant that the internet just became another competition in how well you could do business. But early on it really gave artists a unique way to make contact.

I was able to make contact with festival promoters which scored me gigs I would have never been able to find! It was wonderful to share the stage with artists I had admired from afar. Not only at the big festivals in the U.S.A. and Europe like Telluride (Colorado) and Guinness (Ireland), but also in the smaller, more personal venues where I could do gigs and hang a bit with past idols.
(European tours... I finally cracked that nut!)

I could get the names and addresses of radio stations that had blues programs. And I could get the DJ's name and telephone number. So that meant "airplay"! Wow! Back on the charts again like 1966.
(Which translated to CD sales and gigs.)

Talking about CD sales: You could sell your recordings at gigs, always could, still do. (Like I did with my 1984 cassette tapes.) But a brand new company had just gotten off the ground. CD Baby was an idea started by a guy named Derek Sivers. He would act as an "on-line" record distributor so that you didn't need a record company in order to sell product everywhere. In these early years I would actually exchange e-mails with him. Wow! Like I said: "timing".

I also started getting invited to some of the oldest and most prestigious "Blues Workshops" where I taught alongside many well known artists and others in the music business. That was a real high.
(I got to hang with people whose work I had raved about.)

So, I finally "got out of town". Traveled around doing gigs both big and small, in the USA, Mexico, Europe, (rose above the local scene) but...

A strange kinda drawback is that you can't really go back to your "local" kind of gigs. You have to keep goin' out there and continue climbing. You have to keep "growing" the business and can't let it slide. I never wanted it to be about the business. For most of my life it had always been like "my guitar and me against the establishment".

And you get spoiled out there where you are treated special. It is just so different when people are charged more money and are paying for the privilege of listening to you. It's still just "Stan playing the guitar", but you start becoming more demanding of your audience. (I am not sure I felt comfortable being that special.)

The other thing about becoming better known as a certain style musician is that you need to be just that. Which makes perfect sense of course. You have developed and cultivated a brand, and the consumers expect that you be that. (And rightly so!)

Luckily, I really enjoy the music that is my "brand"! But, and this is a big but - I finally figured out that playing guitar is the transcendental act that keeps me balanced. Not business, not being an entertainer, not being a professional musician, not being an artist, not being better known, but just studying and working with my craft. (I guess I kinda had to get there to figure that out.)

At any rate, there is a world of music calling me. Different projects I want to put my energy into. What really drives me is going on new and different musical adventures. It's a perpetual student kind of thing. (You know, the "Boy meets Guitar" story.)

I've started putting all the kinds of music I write up there on my website. Audio & video. Also putting up more of my ideas and philosophies. Not so much geared to business.

Actually, I think I am moving backwards just a bit to being just that "Boy meets Guitar" guy. I am changing my life style more than my musical directions. Trish and I are wandering around the world "open ended" these days. Back down to a backpack and guitar. (If we forget about all our shit back home.)

To quote from what I wrote about my 1972 trip:
"I was going out on my musical quest in that big land across the sea. I could be like a wandering troubadour. You know, come into town, pickup gigs, meet cool people, get stoned, crash at their pad."

Hey, I know, you can't go back. But all I've ever done is look forward to playing and learning. Like I've said from the start "just studying and working with my craft". (My craft as an extension of my will.)

Think I'll shut up and play the guitar... - Stan Hirsch (c)(2015)