

The story of how music touched my life begins in an unusual way. I was in school looking out the window. The education system had long since given up on me as a future prospect in all known fields of academia. In fact, they would have preferred me to leave as soon as possible. It's not like I'd been any trouble to them. I turned up every day, answered my name during registration, and then the teachers and I would *choose* to ignore each other until it was time to go home.

One particular day, somewhere around the summer of 1961, Michael, the boy sitting next to me in class, said:

"Do you want to form a band?"

There you have it, the first touch of music.

At the time my music taste focused on The Shadows and all things similar. I loved listening to the sound of Jet Harris playing bass guitar. The way he played made the audience tap their feet and want to dance. I was instantly attracted to the pulsating beat. The unexpected arrival of an invitation to form a band created a connection, a lifelong connection, binding me directly with Jet Harris and the like. At last, the reason for me being at school suddenly became clear. Music wanted me!

My excitement on arriving home with news from school took everyone by surprise. Surprise turned to laughter when I explained to my father how my future lay not as a miserable failure but as a musician. I asked for a bass guitar and amplifier. Mother, father, sister and brother laughed even louder before reluctantly agreeing to my request.

I waited impatiently for my bass guitar to be delivered. When it did arrive, it wasn't a shiny electric instrument with an accompanying amplifier boxed in cardboard. Instead, there before me was a very old six string guitar with one string missing. My very first step towards following in the footsteps of Jet, Hank, Liquorice, Buddy and Elvis was an almost insurmountable disaster.

Michael, therefore, quickly asked Stephen to join our band as bass player. I switched to lead guitar, taught myself to read music and could play Apache pretty good. From that moment I began to work like I had never worked before. Always playing loudly to drown out the derision aimed at me from outside my bedroom door. Finally, after a lot of persuading and a lot of practice, I managed to convince my parents to buy me a better guitar, and together, my guitar and I trod a mainly solitary road, improving my skills with every step we took.

I didn't have a natural ear so I spent many hours increasing the speed I could read music. With the passing of time, I could read the dots very fast. Playing tunes and being on stage was where I wanted to be. Chords were still a mystery to me. I didn't need them and even worse I couldn't play them.

Inside my bedroom, I convinced myself I never wanted to be a rhythm guitarist. At the same time I convinced myself that without me the band was nothing. Ego is a terrible thing!

That is until the day my band's rhythm guitarist discovered he could sing. My place in the pecking order slipped down from being top dog to lower than my grades I constantly got from school.

Overnight my status as one to watch changed into something nobody wanted to see or listen to. My bubble had truly burst.

It was important to reinvent my presence in the group. Officially I was still the band's lead guitarist. I used my skills as a reader of music to learn the intro to 'Oh, Pretty Woman,' and the Beatles', 'I feel fine,' while incorporating anything else I could take from the original version of the songs Michael wanted to sing.

The problem still haunting me was I didn't understand how chords worked. Practice and patience overcame the physical problems of playing and strumming chords but the way my brain functions if I don't understand something it will inevitably refuse to play ball. A melody I could learn, perfect and perform but the ability to feel comfortable playing a chord sequence was way beyond me and the interest I had for it. Chords had always been what were The Supremes to Diana Ross.

During one rehearsal it was hinted that unless I could play an alternative rhythm to Michael, the singer/rhythm guitarist, my place in the band would evaporate. Knowing my replacement was literally waiting in the wings, I bought a book called 500 chord shapes and began the arduous task of getting fingers to do things they didn't want to do. Music wasn't being very kind to me at that time.

Time might be a great healer but not a close and personal friend to someone in a hurry to learn barre chords. As a diversion I began to play more lead guitar solos. Thanks to my early days when sight reading music was essential I realised a simple truth - a melody read from the printed page and improvisation had a common ancestry, namely the key the song was written in. Both started from a scale, the only difference was the melody was repeatable and improvisation was not.

I knew all about scales. All I had to do was change my approach to the eight notes. Instead of playing a scale as presented in the shape of a melody on the staff I messed about with it. Nobody I knew, could find scales on the fretboard the way I did. The effect was instantaneous, my spontaneous bursts of lead guitar became melodic, beautifully timed and above all, they were attracting positive comments from the band and my growing number of fans. A new form of music touched my soul, its name was creativity and it was also reaching out to the audience.

I had bought myself some time.

Chapter 2. The coming of the chords.

My chord progressions were now usable and clean but there were still a lot of things I didn't understand about how and why they worked together. This was important to me. I was developing a more natural ear, a closer affinity with music. Basically, I was relaxing and exploring why chord sequences belonged to the key the song was written in.

Everywhere around me guitarists were mastering chord shapes and finger positions without even a sideways glance to what the names of the chords really meant nor the structure that created them. All they cared about was the chords sounding clear and the rhythm was its time. They could hear that somehow the chords belonged with each other and supported the tune being sung. I began naming the notes in every chord. The big breakthrough came in a song written in the key of A major - three sharps. Using pencil, paper and a ruler to draw chord diagrams I worked out that every chord played in the song was made up from notes belonging to that key - A major. It's obvious now but wasn't then.

Suddenly, my music eyes opened wide. Whether this was clear to other guitarists I neither knew nor cared. Turning page after page of my songbook I saw patterns emerge that made everything understandable. Then, much to my surprise, something remarkable happened.

While my brain was thinking about the notes found in the harmony of that sequence of chords, my eyes were reading the melody written on the staff below. Music was about to open a game changing door. Almost without thinking I played the melody and the rhythm at the same time.

Olympus was mine.

With every new and exciting piece of knowledge I forced into my once uneducated brain, my playing began to shine. All guesswork vanished, replaced by facts that nobody else seemed to want to know. Scales gave birth to modes. Modes produced chords, and when put together everything made sense. It was logical - I had found the final piece of the jigsaw. There is a place in a musician's mind for both, logic and creativity, neither one more important than the other.

If, dear reader, you don't know what I'm talking about, it's time to find a good music teacher to show you. If your music teacher doesn't know, I would suggest you ask them to find a good music teacher to explain the theory behind scales > modes > chords to both of you.

I was now earning money playing guitar; clubs, pubs, theatres welcomed me. Musicians asked for me because I didn't need to rehearse. Show me a stage, stand people in front of it and I was away.

The development of my music knowledge continued throughout those years. When performing alone on stage I would entertain the crowd with a combination of rhythm guitar, bass and melody interacting at the same time on my fretboard to produce remarkable, memorable music. No singing of course. Why not? Well, it's best not to ask. The RSPCA have been called out on many occasions when I have burst spontaneously into song. Instead my guitar did the singing for me.

Did I play with anyone famous?

They all came and went but their fame did neither interest me nor impress me. I was only in it for the music, working as a session man live every night on stage. Many names and faces shared the various platforms with me, sadly I don't remember any of them now. I accompanied vocalists and instrumentalists in the warmth of their limelight and shared the cold glow of streetlamps with buskers too.

All day, every day, I played guitar around England and a few trips abroad. I built a mountain and climbed it to the very top.

My music was a combination of technical skill, relaxed style and a fired up imagination forged together by hours of practice, working with other musicians from all styles and cultures culminating every day with a live performance. Even if I wasn't being paid there was always someone to play for, or to, or with.

I could rock with the best of them, swing with the rest of them, when needed I played so loudly walls would shake, rattle and roll.

Babies fell asleep to each soft lullaby I gently played to them. Brides wept while walking down the aisle accompanied by their father and the sound of my music. Mourners wiped their eyes to my interpretation of melodies found in the hymnbook. Dance halls, jazz clubs, blues and soul. Pop, rock, be-bop - I could play it all.

My life had been touched by music and my music touched the people who were listening to me play.

For those interested in that sort of thing, I was never one for having a collection of guitars. During those long, exciting years as a musical journeyman I never lived anywhere. At the end of each gig I would be invited to share someone else's home until it was time to move on, normally the next day.

My guitar was a short scale Rickenbacker It was given to me on the day I left home. Some see it as a coincidence but I don't, you can only be put down so many times. On the occasions I needed a good quality acoustic guitar there was always one around for me to borrow. I don't care for brand names only the skill of the craftsman who made it.

I thought of pop stars in much the same way, they were only as good as their music.

Sorry about the lack of glamorous names. Would you be more impressed with my story if I told you tales that would shatter the illusions you keep in your head?

My two favourite gigs were playing under the Eiffel Tower to a select group of onlookers at 3am in the morning in Paris and performing to a packed crowd standing shoulder to shoulder in Trafalgar Square. My final gig as a professional guitarist, forced on me by total burn-out, was also in London sharing a cabaret slot at a very smart hotel next to Lords cricket ground with a lovely girl named Rita. Also performing on the bill was a swing band, the leader of which handed me a horrible red shirt and told me to sit near the drummer.

This was news to me. Off we went with me reading the dots and occasionally upsetting the band leader by improvising when I thought fit. Keys changed, rhythms altered, tempos rose and fell. Swing high, swing low it was exactly where I was meant to be. I was, as usual, once again playing with the best.

Rita and I did our thing which included an instrumental played by me containing almost every music style known to man and woman. At the end of which the whole audience including the orchestra stood and clapped. That was it, I stood proudly at the top of my mountain, bowed and stuck a flag in it.

There is one more twist in this tale of music and me. I returned to my chair with the red shirt on it next to the red faced drummer. On the way back the bass player asked if we could swap instruments. There you have it, full circle. That was the last professional performance I ever played and it ended with me playing bass guitar.

One door closed. Another door opened. It was time to pass the wealth of knowledge I had accumulated over the years on to those who needed it.

Next: The teaching years

Len Collins 2016

www.stavebreakthrough.co.uk