

Andrew Calhoun and Waterbug Records – A Short History

Part 1 – All About Andrew Calhoun

***Introduction :** The quotations in this feature are taken from interviews, with Andrew Calhoun, that I conducted on Friday 23rd May 2003 on Kerrville's Quiet Valley Ranch, and by telephone between Illinois and England on Wednesday 26th October 2005.*

Andrew Calhoun was born on Saturday 30th November 1957 in New Haven, Connecticut. *"I was born there, but my parents didn't live there at the time."* His parents had been high school sweethearts, *"They lived across the street from each another in Bethany, Connecticut. Growing up I spent a lot of time visiting my father's parents in Bethany."* At the time of Andrew's arrival, the Calhoun family lived in Hamilton, New York where Andrew's father, Edward, was a Philosophy and Theology lecturer at Colgate University. Leaving the world of academia, Edward Calhoun joined Bell Labs, and worked for them at a number of their facilities while, respectively, the family lived in Basking Ridge and Long Branch, New Jersey and eventually Glen Ellyn, Illinois.

The youngest of four siblings – he has two sisters and a brother, Andrew recalled that in a house without a television his mother read continually to her offspring – classics such as **"The Odyssey," "The Peloponnesian Wars"** and the more contemporary work **"The Chronicles Of Narnia"** – plus **"The Iliad"** was also *traversed*, at least five times, from cover to cover. His father also read to his children, particularly the Bible. Even at the tender age of five years of age Andrew recalled, *"I got very used to listening to things that were way over my head. I would listen to the language and intuitively pick up the story. In some ways I maybe got more out of it then than I would now."* His subsequent facility with language and lyrics, Andrew believes, came from the latter, plus his mother would pay the youngster to memorise poems.

Even youngsters dream of the career they'll pursue - *"I remember deciding that I would be a poet. That's what I would be. Where it goes back to is, I'm a baby and my mother sings me "They Called The Wind Maria," "The Bonnie Earl Of Moray" and "The Cruel Mother." My father had a big classical music collection and then there were recordings by The Kingston Trio, John Jacob Niles and Richard Dyer Bennett...whatever. Several Ewan MacColl recordings. I listened to that stuff a lot when I was young."* Andrew recalled that both his parents enjoyed listening to folk music, and his mother would actively seek out new artists. *"She brought home Leonard Cohen records, and she was the reason my parents went to see John Prine. She loved Dylan."*

In New Jersey, Andrew's mother, Joy, had been a high school teacher. After moving to Glen Ellyn she would take in problem children from New Jersey, and one particular pair happened to own guitars and could play them - *"Which I thought was incredibly cool."* Andrew was given his first guitar when he was aged ten. *"I kind of messed around for two years with the guitar, but I really didn't care about it. I took some lessons, and I was kind of strumming chords. I was a very small weak kid, so it was hard for me to do things with it. When I saw John Prine play that was it. I turned thirteen that year and we went to hear him every weekend."* Andrew also recalled, from around the same time, listening to Kris Kristofferson's first album in the basement of his parent's home, while playing with his Hot Wheels toy cars. Urged to check out Prine, by the late Steve Goodman, Kris Kristofferson advised Chicago's singing postman to head for New York City and the clubs in Greenwich Village. Prine took his advice, and soon signed a record deal. Kristofferson penned the liner notes for Prine's 1971 self-titled Atlantic Records debut. Years ago Joni Mitchell called it, the circle game.....

Only just a teenager by the time his parent's relocated to Illinois, Andrew described Glen Ellyn as *"A very conservative suburb of Chicago. I was a complete fish out of water there."* When I enquired why, he added *"I was hippie in Junior High School – had long hair. I was a radical, and I did not fit in at all. I was called a Communist by my teacher, because I was one of two in my class who would not salute the flag."*

This was the late sixties, early seventies. The time of the Vietnam War and stuff. I was a young hippie. I didn't do drugs, and unfortunately I missed the sexual revolution – all the fun, but I had the long hair [Laughs]. I hung out with a group of people called the freaks, and in high school there was more of us."

In terms of early performing experiences, Andrew was in a trio with his older brother Matthew, and Doug Tursman [banjo] called The Osbornes, their speciality being humorous songs. Short-lived Andrew was soon performing as a solo act. *"I started writing serious songs of my own and performing them. I played at a place called the Edge Theatre in Lombard, Illinois. I had my mother driving me to open mics. in Chicago before I was old enough to drive. I have written good songs, I think, since I was fifteen. I still sing some of them. Sometimes I wish I could still write that way, in a completely intuitive manner."*

I went on to ask Andrew about how disciplined a songwriter he had managed to be over the years. *"There's two ways of interpreting the word discipline. There's the taskmaster forcing you to do things discipline. If you think about the word disciple, it's that you are serving something. You are following something. A farmer can't harvest a field every day. You've got to plant seeds, and sometimes you've got to sit there and let it grow. I can't write a song every day. I need to be learning something, go through a transformation or a change....whatever. I often don't write for six months. I'm never happier than when I have new songs cooking, but I don't force it. I feel it's disrespectful to force it."* That said, throughout his [recording] career Andrew has regularly revisited his compositions, often marginally altering the lyric or music. Occasionally Andrew will re-record a song, his perception being an improved end result.

By the time he was nineteen, once a month, Andrew would go and sing at an uptown social centre for alcoholics called The Centre For Street People. *"It wasn't a paying gig, but they were a great audience. My songs were pretty edgy at the time and so were these people so it worked."* In 1978, Andrew attended a Coffeehouse Festival in Wisconsin where singers could arrange bookings on the College Coffeehouse circuit. It was there that he first heard Michael Jerling – *"I was quite inspired by his music."* College coffeehouse gigs paid a little better, and Andrew began working a few of those. On another occasion, in the early eighties, he met Dave Moore and Greg Brown *"They helped me get work in Iowa. I started working regularly in Iowa City, which was a town of 50,000 at the time, with an incredible music scene. Ever since, I've found that there are parts of the country where people accept me, and parts where it's kind of a closed door."*

Andrew Calhoun's debut solo recording came about when a couple on the Board of The Centre For Street People funded his debut album. The eleven-track **"Water Street"** was a 1983 release on the local Hogeye label. *"After I made my lp people finally started booking me in Chicago, but the scene that had been so exciting and vibrant a few years earlier died totally in the eighties. It was over. Goodman and Prine had left – there was a songwriter in Chicago named Mike Jordan who was killed by a drunk driver a few years ago. It has always been one of my dreams with Waterbug to do an edition of his work because it was tremendous. There are demos. The tape of his last sessions is one of the best albums I've ever heard. It's really stunning."*

Andrew later recorded two albums for the now defunct Flying Fish label, **"The Gates Of Love"** [1984] and **"Walk Me To The War"** [1987]. *"Bruce Kaplan – boy, he was a character. He was an extremely smart guy. He's one of the guys I would have hung out with in high school. He liked **"Water Street."** Flying Fish didn't do a lot of songwriters, so that was a special thing to get on there."* Although his Flying Fish releases gained him national exposure, with a young son, and later a daughter to tend to, Calhoun didn't relish jumping on the treadmill and touring on a full-time basis. As a result, during the latter year of the nineteen-eighties Andrew regularly worked as a guitarist at Evanston's Blind Faith Café, and also in Chicago at the Third Coast Coffeehouse. In 1990 Andrew self-released the cassette only recording **"Banks Of Sweet Primroses,"** which featured guitar instrumentals he had been performing at those café and coffeehouse shows. The same year, with his first marriage now over, Andrew attended the Kerrville Folk Festival, and met Kat Eggleston and Steve Fisher [*] - *"Just to sit and listen to Steve Fisher sing songs, there's nothing like it"* – the pair were finalists in that year's New Folk Songwriting competition. *"In the eighties it seemed like I wasn't hearing any songwriters. I thought they'd all gone into*

computer programming. I was still listening to the radio but I wasn't hearing anything. I came here [Kerrville] in 1990 and it just lit me up, and I started getting out and touring more. In 1991 I met Michael McNevin [] and Hugh Blumenfeld [*] here. In 1992 it was Cosy Sheridan [*], Chuck Brodsky and Tom Payne. I became part of this tribe of people who were doing what I did."*

Post Kerrville 1990, Calhoun and Eggleston formed a musical partnership. Eggleston who had been raised in the Pacific North-West, was listed in the 1990 Kerrville Folk Festival programme as being, currently, based out of Seattle, Washington. Calhoun left Kerrville's Quiet Valley Ranch following his first festival experience – having lost, in festival terms, his Kerrvirginity – with a lot on his mind. Far from having heard a stream of very ordinary, sing-along campfires songs, his recollections were far more vivid. *"I heard Doyle Carver in 1990. He's completely extraordinary. He's like William Faulkner, there's nobody anything like him. He's an auto-mechanic in Houston. He couldn't get into the New Folk contest for ten years. Have you heard "The Deerhunter"? It's on "**American Impressionistic Songwriters**" – oh God, what a song."* To date, Carver has recorded two cassette albums, **"At The Circle K"** and **"High Ground,"** that are still available via Waterbug, and in addition to owning DC Mach Inc., is also the proprietor of the custom made steel art company Fishiron.com.

If Andrew's 1990 memories seem vivid he swam even deeper in to this gene pool, where significant words are wed to challenging melodies, during the following year's eighteen-day long extravaganza. *"There was a night on Chapel Hill in 1991. I had just met Hugh Blumenfeld [*] and Michael McNevin [*]. I met Gina Forsyth at that circle. She sat next to me and shook my hand. Hugh sang a Richard Shindell song. A woman named Diane Chodkowski sang his "On A Sea Of Fleur de Lys" and when she stopped the chimes [#] rang. Then McNevin sang "Busy Life" and there was a siren. How often do you hear a siren at Kerrville? It just was the most amazing night. We came down the hill, a bunch of us, at about five or six in the morning and then sang more songs. I remember Michael did "Castaway." Margo Hennebach [*] did a Susan Osborn prayer. It was a love song to God and I'd never heard anything like it. It wasn't "give me this" it was a love song to God. It poured out of her and nobody spoke for about five minutes. I realised that I was with a group of people who respected the sacred and I'd never had that experience. That's what you want to get out of church, but I can't go into a church."*

A finalist 1991, McNevin was a New Folk winner the following year, and apart from having listened to the Californian sing on the ranch, Andrew was rather impressed by Michael's debut recording, **"Secondhand Story,"** which first appeared as a cassette-only release early in 1992 [\$]. *"I remember hearing McNevin [*] and feeling humble, and going "These are great songs and they are unlike anything I could ever write." I listened to "**Secondhand Story**" literally every day for a year, and I always heard new meanings. That line "If you could start your life again, You stop and wonder where you'd be, On an island far beyond their reach, A pearl in your hand, a pearl in your hand." I'd just weep it is so beautiful."* The aforementioned "pearl" appears in the lyric to the 1991 McNevin song "Morning Pearl."

By the late Spring of 1992 a plan was coalescing in 34 year old Andrew Calhoun's mind. Bitten by the entrepreneurial spirit, he had an artistic end product in mind. *"I wrote to my brother, I think it was a little before Kerrville in '92, and I said "I'm going to start a record label and get America's real singing poets on the airwaves." It was a pipedream and then I just did it. I came down here in '92 and did it. Nobody had two nickels to rub together. It was a renaissance. It was like the French Impressionist period. I saw people doing new things with song forms. They were using it in new ways."*

to be continued

Notes.

[*] – Steve Fisher, then based out of Wellington, Kansas, was a 1990 contest winner. A finalist in 1991, Michael McNevin [Berkeley, Cal.] was a contest winner in 1992 as was Cosy Sheridan [Portsmouth, N.H.]. Hugh Blumenfeld [Coventry, Ct.] and Margo Hennebach [Hoboken, N.J.] were 1991 contest finalists.

[#] – A rather large set of tubular steel chimes hang from one of the trees on Chapel Hill – the sacred area on the Quiet Valley Ranch. It is not unknown for a light breeze to set the chimes off. The Quiet Valley Ranch is located in a rural area, 10 miles south of the town of Kerrville.

[\$] – Bearing exactly the same track listing, Michael upgraded **“Secondhand Story”** to CD in 1993. It’s one of the finest contemporary folk songwriter collections to surface during the 1990’s, and is still available from Waterbug.

Arthur Wood.

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