

Arthur Wood – A Musical Journey Across Many Decades

An only child, I was born in mid-May 1946 in Banff, Aberdeenshire, and domicile to almost 4000 souls. This former county town is located on the shore of the Moray Firth in North-East Scotland. With the focus principally being music, we can skip the ensuing thirteen years. We owned a radio, but my working-class parents were not exactly regular listeners, or for that matter displayed any interest in music. My love affair began sans lyrics, while playing *air guitar* and listening to The Shadows and later The Tornados instrumental 7" hit singles [UK equivalent of The Ventures] in the first-year common room in High School. For that introduction, classmate David Cheyne deserves a name check. Residing in the North-East we were pretty much detached from much of the country. That changed for the better when the sixties rolled around.

The early sixties, as I recall, were filled weekly by hours avidly scouring the pages of *Record Mirror*, *Melody Maker* and *New Musical Express*. Here in the 2020's, only the latter publication is still with us, though only online. As for monthly music magazines I fondly recall the long-gone publication, RAVE. If only I had kept my collection! As the mid-sixties approached, working part-time job in a grocery store allowed me to purchase my own record player – a Dansette – as I recall, a piece of junk. Sadly, I no longer own the first 7" single I purchased - The Kinks "*You Really Got Me*" on the pink PYE record label, nor in glorious MOMO my first vinyl album "*A Hard Days Night*." My first *pop concert* – circa 1964 - at the long-gone Capitol Cinema on Union Street, Aberdeen was headlined by The Searchers, supported by the late Dusty Springfield, plus Bobby Vee and Big Dee Irwin.

1965 – 1969 in university, I studied Civil Engineering. Glasgow record store *Precinct 57* became my home from home. They even stocked import recordings!!! – sic. Judy Collins "*In My Life*." I graduated from Strathclyde with an honour's degree. During my first year, residing in Baird Hall, I met Neil Mulvey of Welwyn Garden City. He owned a copy of "*The Paul Simon Songbook*" [a UK-only release that, for years, the *diminutive one* refuses to release on CD] and it became a regular sound in the Hall of Residence common room. Subsequently I stumbled across early works by Al Stewart, Incredible String Band and Fairport Convention, and witnessed countless live concerts. Music had become an *unquenchable affair*.

Somehow, in what seemed like the blink of an eye, the late-sixties became the mid-seventies by which time I was residing in Birmingham, England's second city. The original branch of *Virgin Records* store may not have risen to the ecstatic heights of the *Precinct*; at least it furnished a lifeline. Circa '76, the store was located below the old Law Courts on the Aston end of Corporation Street. It was there that I purchased a local music fanzine titled *Nuggets*.

The mostly green cover of cover of # 7 mentioned a John Stewart article therein – I guess that's why I purchased a copy. Answers to the magazine quiz introduced me to publisher/journalist Mike Davies. Over the ensuing handful of years, I made mostly Sunday morning visits to his Harborne home. In the summer of 1977, he simply said "*Listen to this*." The LP cover displayed a black and white, hand-drawn, portrait of the musician's face. Circa '65, Paul Simon had sparked my interest in singer/songwriters; "*Joe Ely*" introduced us to the unique writing styles of Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore and Butch Hancock. That morning, I glimpsed musical *nirvana*, where rock met country met folk. I was on the cusp of a radical and seismic shift in the music I listened to. Introduced to a whole other musical universe.....I sailed on.

A yearning to attend the Kerrville Folk Festival grew from devouring interviews with numerous Texas folk/country musicians that appeared in the pages of Peter O'Brien's fanzine *Omaha Rainbow* (1973 -

1988). Post 1976, *Nuggets* introduced me to a plethora of fanzines, whose music coverage ran the gamut of countless genres.

Let's recap – chronologically, *Nuggets* led me to Mike Davis, who introduced me to Joe Ely, which led me to *Omaha Rainbow*. The creative spark of the latter, Peter O'Brien's unfaltering love for the music of the late John Stewart. The song *Omaha Rainbow* appeared on the California bred musician's stunning solo debut "*California Bloodlines*" (1969). It can be argued until the cows come home, concerning the identity of the first musician/band to inject a rock beat into a country song. In the musically fertile mid/late-sixties, during a short stint with The Byrds, Gram Parsons was a front runner. However, other contenders include Michael Nesmith post The Monkees, while Buffalo Springfield spawned Stephen Stills and Neil Young. As for members of the of the (still) hardly known aggregations, Longbranch Pennywhistle and Shiloh – by the early 1970's the late Glenn Frey of Longbranch, and Don Henley from Shiloh birthed that county rock behemoth The Eagles. Also deserving mention is Rusty Young and his pre-Poco band Boenzee Cryque. While the movement was mainly California based, Free Ber, for instance, made their base New York's Greenwich Village. No definitive answer exists, only recorded proof of a concurrent North American musical movement.

While interviews with many of these, mainly, West Coast based 'country rockers' filled the pages of early issues, the adventures of Texas, bred or based, musicians became a significant facet as time passed. [A early alumni of Stephen Stills' Manassas] the late Steven Fromholz graced the cover of Issue # 14 in September 1977, although Houstonian Rodney Crowell appeared in the cover picture of Issue # 13 with Emmylou Harris.

The inner leaf of the back page, commencing with Issue # 17 (Summer 1978), featured the *Lomax Gold Record Collection*. While that title tipped a hat to the famed (Texan) Lomax family of music historians, for initiates wishing to delve deeper into this genre of music, this chart of fitty songs per issue is best described as a *Recommended Listening List*. *Smoke signals* that readers could acknowledge and pursue, or simply ignore. The foregoing "Lomax" legend was topped by the quote "*Only two things are better than milk shakes and malts, And one is dancin' like the dickens to the West Texas Waltz; and the other is something that's close to perfection.*" The latter, a quote from Butch Hancock's musically riotous in-concert staple *West Texas Waltz*. Drawn from his sophomore album, gracing the # 1 position in Issue # 17 was Joe Ely's interpretation of the tune. In just twelve months one gear wheel had engaged with another and another, and I was – willingly – being musically [and physically] propelling toward Texas.

The now late Michael Smith's *Ballad Of Dan Moody (Roving Cowboy)* featured at # 26 in *OR* issue 17, and therein lies a whole other enriching musical journey that I took.

Songs from *Kerrville Folk Festival Live Highlights* recordings debuted in issue # 31 (Autumn 1982), occupying positions # 17 through 21. The Festival had been mentioned during interviews with numerous Texan players in earlier issues. Had my son Paul, then aged 7, not been diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukaemia that September, I would probably have traversed the acres of the Quiet Valley Ranch before 1986. His medical treatment continued until 1985. A confirmed bachelor, he lives with us, and in 2020 he reached the age of 45.

1986 marked the sesquicentennial of the founding of the Texas state, as well as the 15th anniversary of the Festival. A few weeks prior to the event, I turned 40. I had never been an aeroplane passenger yet had signed up for flights of some 5000 miles that would deposit me in Austin, Texas via New York. I flew with the now defunct Trans World Airlines, from London Heathrow. Computers didn't enter my life until 1988,

so I possess no trip itinerary folder to guide me. Flying from Heathrow, I had to travel by bus from Birmingham's Digbeth Bus Station to that West London airport.

What I clearly recall, is that having crossed the Atlantic to the airline's hub John F. Kennedy's International Airport in the New York borough of Queens, two crucial events took place. Having passed through Passport Control, I failed to collect my luggage. More on that later. The latter omission was totally within my control, what ensued was not. The flight tracking system on the entire Eastern seaboard of the United States chose that afternoon to malfunction.

The flight from JFK to the old Robert Mueller Municipal Airport on Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard soared skyward some four hours behind schedule. I had been assured by a TWA representative that the Hertz Car Rental desk in Austin would remain open until my arrival. Having alighted from the plane at my destination, stood at the luggage carousel I soon discovered that mine had not been aboard the plane. Hours earlier, following Passport Control it had been my responsibility to pick it up, pass through Customs and a few hundred yards further on, pass it to luggage handlers who would have ensured it was loaded on the Austin flight. Five thousand miles from home, it was now 2am on the day after I had boarded the airplane in London. I had been *on the road* for almost 24 hours. If, finally, there was a small saving grace - the Hertz Car Rental counter was still lit and manned.

Having signed for my pre-booked vehicle, the desk clerk directed me to the pick-up area, located beyond the glass exit doors adjacent to the luggage carousel. As I approached, the [automated] doors slid open and I was enveloped in a blanket of warm air. Locating the bay where the Ford Crown Victoria was parked, while engine ignition was easily achieved, as was putting the vehicle into gear, I simply could not figure out how to make it move in a forward direction. Switching off the ignition, I re-entered the terminal to find the Hertz desk shuttered and in darkness.

Exhausted, yet endeavouring to remain calm, I mentally posed the question *"What would you do at home?"* The answer *"You'd ask a policeman for help."* Thus far, significant misfortune had befallen me; immediately outside the terminal's main entrance, I found two officers sat in their patrol car. Explaining my predicament, they told me to *"jump in the back seat"* and drove to the Hertz car park. Think about this - I'd been in the States for less than 12 hours and was already incarcerated and cruising in a police car. The duo quickly explained the missing step relative to this automatic transmission vehicle. *"You gotta release the foot brake"* [equivalent to the hand/parking brake lever in Europe]. The latter being a ratchet type foot-pedal, located adjacent to the accelerator and brake pedals. Those officers were only with me for minutes, and I thanked them profusely for their assistance. I am certain that once their vehicle disappeared from sight the pair broke into howls of laughter. Doubtless they related their *"dumb tourist"* tale in the station house, on countless occasions over the ensuing years.

Through the tiredness, a streak of caution kicked in. The car park that fronted the terminal building was divided into three parts, the central area being circular (see pic. Looks more like a rectangle with round corners). The two-lane road that bounded the latter area allowed vehicular access to the parking areas on the left and right of it. Having entered this circumferential road, I circumnavigated it a few times, in the process, becoming accustomed to the foot pedals, steering etc. – the officers had recommended that I leave the vehicle permanently in DRIVE when proceeding in a forward direction. Satisfied that I was in control, I ventured to Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., heading west I then turned left on to North Lamar Boulevard. Having transitioned from South Lamar on to Highway 290 at what was, then, practically the south-western extremity of Austin, I decided to call a halt to my journey. It was 3am Texas time, while in the UK it was 9am in the morning and I was missing my breakfast. I was as hungry as hell.

With no iPhone to consult as to the efficacy of the local hostelrys, I pulled into the Sands Motel car park and checked at reception if a room was available ([https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Hotel_Review-g30196-d291290-Reviews-Sands Motel of Austin-Austin Texas.html](https://www.tripadvisor.co.uk/Hotel_Review-g30196-d291290-Reviews-Sands_Motel_of_Austin-Austin_Texas.html)). There were probably many rooms available, and it soon became apparent why. A few hundred yards away and still lit up there was a sandwich shop, so I walked over and bought some items to assuage my hunger. Back at the Motel, having got into bed, I decided to leave the room light on. From the many scurrying sounds, I had invested in a *Cockroach City* room. Despite the background noise, sleep came.

By 8am I was back on Highway 290, heading west I passed through Dripping Springs, Johnson City, Stonewall and finally Fredericksburg. Within the latter city limits I left 290 and, for the final thirty miles, headed south on Highway 16 to Kerrville. The 120 miles from S.W. Austin to Kerrville, involved two hours driving time. By telephone, a few weeks earlier, I had booked a room at the Hillcrest Inn in Kerrville, for the Festival's eleven-day duration. The town's Walmart store, back in 1986, was located in a small mall, a little ways further into town, on the other side of Sidney Baker from the Hillcrest (Sidney Baker being one of two main highways that intersect at ninety degrees in the centre of this picturesque Hill | Country town).

At that precise moment, the only clothes and footwear I possessed were those I had worn to travel. At Walmart I availed myself of clothing and footwear more suited to spending time on a ranch. It was Thursday 22nd May 1986, and the 15th annual Kerrville Folk Festival was scheduled to kick-off at 3:00pm.

A few days later a message received at the Hillcrest reception, from the airline, instructed me that my luggage would arrive from Austin, at the local bus station. Once back in my possession, I found everything was intact. It was great to be reunited.

The Quiet Valley Ranch had been the Festival's home since 1974. Located on Highway 16 about ten miles South of town. kitted out in my new store-bought clothes, after turning off Highway 16 I drove up a long, rocky entrance road, and collected my tickets and wrist bracelet from the Ticket Booth. A few hundred yards farther on I parked my vehicle in the vast field that bounded the fenced-off mainstage area. Walking back toward Mixmaster, aka the entrance into the Festival campgrounds, I was barely fifty-yards inside the campgrounds and headed toward – what I would later learn was – the Kerrtree Store, when a fellow with a peculiar crab-like gait, and a beer can in each hand accosted me. His name, he told me, was Jerry Earwood, and he was a *dyed in the wool* true-blue Democrat from Denton, Texas. His opening words “*My friend you look like you could use a beer.*” I soon discovered that beer, ice cold or warm, would not be my drink of choice while travelling in Texas. Too gassy, by far. In the over thirty years that ensued, when visiting the Quiet Valley Ranch, I can count on the fingers of one hand the number of beers I consumed.

In retrospect the 1986 Festival more than fulfilled my musical expectations. From the Ballad Tree to mainstage and the, literally, 24/7 campground song sessions, I soon concluded that this would not be my one and only Festival. Soon aware of the significance of the letter ‘K’ in *Kerrvert vocabulary*, if only in name the title *Kerrville Kronikle* came to me one day while walking around the ranch. As for my entry into the world of festival musician interviews, that arrived on Tuesday 27th May when the late, great Bob Gibson agreed to be interviewed.

While I wrestled with bringing the *Kronikle* to fruition, the almost six-page Gibson interview appeared in Issue # 39, of *Omaha Rainbow* during the Spring of 1987.

Publication of the *Kerrville Kronikle* spanned the period 1989 – 2004. During the 1990's I contributed the bi-monthly series *Currents* to the nationally distributed, UK monthly print publication, *Country Music People*. Most of the mainly American performers, had never previously been featured in a UK music publication.

Based out of West Des Moines, Iowa, *Folkwax* and its sister, online, music publications *Blueswax* and *Nuwax* were launched in the Spring of 2001 by entrepreneur Charles 'Chip' Eagle and his enterprising Visionation.

As a founding editor I began contributing in late May 2001 and remained with the online publication until the Spring of 2009. I understand *Folkwax* ceased weekly publication about a year later.

Midway through the noughties, Eagle purchased two, nationally distributed print publications *Dirty Linen* and *Blues Revue*. Under Eagle's management, the former folded in early 2010, and the latter [folded] around 2012/13.

During my tenure with *Folkwax* I penned around 250 Features (much of this total being multi-part), 875 Album Reviews and 500+ Solo Artist/Band Biographies. Put another way, across some 400 weeks I contributed over 1600 pieces of writing.

From late 2008 through 2014 I regularly contributed to the nationally distributed, UK monthly print publication, *Maverick*. From the late 1980's through 2015, I also contributed to *Folk Roots*, *Brumbeat*, *Country Music World*, *No Depression* and more.

A few random Festival thoughts and occurrences....

Within an hour of my arrival on the Quiet Valley Ranch for the first time, I ran into Kate Wolf's guitar player, Nina Gerber. One of the main reasons I was there, was to witness Kate's mainstage performance. In conversation I learned that Kate had been diagnosed with leukaemia. Sadly Kate passed on 10 December 1986. Her career had been on the rise, and I still grieve for the musical wonders she would have created had she lived.

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1987 saw the Festival duration increase from 11 to 18 days duration. According to those who were there, rain fell on all eighteen, reducing the ranch roads and campgrounds to a mud bath of Caliche (a cementitious mineral deposit of calcium carbonate that binds itself to gravel, sand, and nitrates; introduced to moisture, it becomes a footwear adhering, *incredibly heavy*, sticky composite).

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My second festival sojourn came in 1989. I planned to camp on the ranch and travelled with a miniscule 'pup' tent in my luggage. I had no idea where I would pitch it and was confident I would find a shady spot. Diving into the campgrounds, around lunchtime on the opening afternoon - Thursday 25th May - at literally the same location, but sans any containers of gassy liquid, I met Jerry Earwood. Spooky!!! I had experienced many strange coincidences during the 1986 event, and they continued unabated on the QVR over the ensuing three decades. Those coincidences led me to the conclusion that the Quiet Valley Ranch

is sacred Native American land that you either 'tune into' or discount. My perception remains the former. No other explanation seems feasible.

Having notified the Denton Democrat that *"I have a tent,"* he replied, *"Follow me."* And that's how from '89 onward, when visiting the ranch, my base was Camp C.A.L.M. – aka the Conroe Association for Live Music (CALM is located to left of # 12 on the Quiet Valley Ranch_Map_with Index). No questions asked, Blair Powell and his wife Lendell Braud adopted me. Blair passed in November 2006. I miss his truly gentle ways. He never verbally acknowledged he was camp 'leader' – he rebuked anyone who even suggested he was - yet the area C.A.L.M. occupied, just above the lower meadow and adjacent to a group of male/female toilets, was always neat and tidy.

One of CALM's 1989 campers was Steve Fisher, a Kerrville New Folk Songwriting Contest finalist that year. The following year, Steve became a Contest winner. I believe that Fisher's song catalogue is the equal of the late Guy Clark and Eric Taylor. In the decades since his win, touring North America's folk venues was never a career priority. Nevertheless, over the period 1989 - 2016 he recorded, and mainly self-released, nine albums. Unhindered by fame or fortune, Steve Fisher is truly a Texas musical treasure. He should be a legend.

<https://stevefisher1.bandcamp.com/>

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For many years, until his passing, one of the regular Festival food vendors at Main Stage, was Big Earl's BBQ, whose main outlet and smokehouse was located in Kerrville just off the outbound carriageway of Sidney Baker, about 700 yards south of the Guadalupe River bridge. His festival booth was regularly manned by his daughter, who I got to know over the years, and with whom I would regularly exchange banter.

When my newly retired, schoolteacher wife accompanied me to Texas [for the first time] in early September 2004,

in Kerrville, we visited Big Earl's one afternoon before driving out to the ranch. Who happened to be serving that day but Earl's daughter. Approaching the counter, she recognised me and the words *"I've never seen you with a woman before. Who is this?"* flew from her mouth. My wife took careful note of them.

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In May 2006 we undertook a month-long Boston to Austin road trip. The distance between those cities is just short of 2000 miles, but we drove on to Kerrville for the opening weekend of the Festival. In Sept. 2004 we stayed at the YO Ranch Resort Hotel in Kerrville, so returned there. The hotel is composed of a reception block c/w restaurant and a series of linked rectangular accommodation blocks surrounding the swimming pool, located in the central area. We were allocated a room on the outside of one block; my wife desired a room on the inside, with direct access to the pool. Walking out the double doors at one end of the room, and you were practically within yards of the pool area. We requested a room change and were told it would take around forty-five minute.

And that is how, with time to kill, we began inspecting the various artefacts in that hotel's cavernous reception area. Mounted on the wall adjacent to the restaurant entrance, was a three-shelf, glass panelled, brown wooden cabinet. A small plaque stated construction of a Texas Rangers Museum was

planned, adding further to this Hill Country town's visitor attractions. I'm not aware that the pan reached fruition.

Sat on one shelf was a gun, smaller than the classic Colt 45 handgun, but larger than a Derringer. The card beside the weapon stated, *"Smith and Wesson .32 caliber pistol, used by one of the Dalton Gang."* Early in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, the Dalton Gang were active bank and train robbers in New Mexico, Oklahoma and the Indian Territory.

We had recently invested with with an American company named Edward Jones. Conveniently, they retained a branch in Harborne High Street, a few miles from where we lived. The branch manager was an American named Bart Dalton, a bona-fide descendant of one of the Dalton brothers. Another strange Kerrville coincidence? In his *Pretty Boy Floyd* lyric, comparing gangsters with bankers, Woody Guthrie wrote *"Yes, as through this world I've wandered, I've seen lots of funny men; Some will rob you with a six-gun, And some with a fountain pen."*

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Arthur Wood.

Kerrville Kronikles - written 20th through 26th February 2018

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