

Music. And me. Hmm.

I always loved music. Apparently I spoke French at the age of four, because my mother said I used to bounce around the house singing songs I heard on the wireless and my favourite was 'Boum' by Charles Trenet – not that I understood it mind, but I had and still have both a very retentive mind and a talent for mimicry – that has got me into trouble on more than one occasion.

There were no musical instruments at home but there were music lessons at school. I desperately wanted them whereas my contemporaries who were not given the choice hated them. Unfortunately as my parents' only son I was sent to 'the best school they could afford'. It was certainly a very expensive school but also completely failed me, not recognising that I was idetic and labelling me instead as 'stupid'. I'm not sure whether my parents were unable to afford the extra for music lessons or whether they were disinclined to do so in view of my reported miserable academic performance; either way, no music lessons for me. My musical education therefore was strictly secondhand; odd bits I could glean from aforementioned classmates together with listening avidly whenever I could to whatever was available; popular songs (Alma Cogan was a big star at the time), classical, crooners – I listened to them all.

Inspired by the first Buddy Holly album I bought my first guitar at the age of eleven with saved pocket money and earnings from odd jobs in my neighbourhood; my father was disgusted at my 'wasting' what had taken me several months to save and didn't speak to me for a similar length of time, but I loved it and practiced and played until my fingers bled. I learned chords from a book and could soon play a lot of the relatively simple pop music of the time; the three-chord trick reigned supreme and the addition of the relative minor seemed almost sophisticated. I've played guitar ever since as the proliferation of instruments in my music room will testify...

By the time I was sixteen I was already six feet tall which meant that if I dressed the part I could usually get into a pub if I remained inconspicuous. This was the mid-sixties when trad jazz was hugely popular – think Ken Colyer, Johnny Dankworth and Monty Sunshine – so I used to visit a local pub which had a trad jazz evening on Saturday nights and became fascinated by the double bass. The player was an affable chap who showed me the basics during breaks and occasionally he and the band's female singer would disappear out of the pub's back door for a fag and I'd stand in for him – it was great. In my sixteen-year-old innocence I never questioned the 'fag' excuse but apparently others weren't quite so gullible. After a few weeks it turned out that the two of them were having moments of passion that would have delighted Bernardo Bertolucci in the yard at the back whilst her supposed boyfriend who was the band's cornet player was blowing his best solo in yet another rendition of 'Hold That Tiger'. This state of affairs came to a climax which involved a broken nose, a badly dented cornet (these could be said to be intimately related!) and a band vacancy in the bass department. So whilst most of my spare time was spent exploring the possibilities of six strings my Saturday evenings became filled with four, Dixieland jazz and having to learn fast.