

Chapter 1

The First Bit

“But why do I have to go when you never go?”

There was this old bloke in front of us, gyrating about in a suit and a highly agitated state. I believe he was actually trying to teach us something, but it went completely over my head.

He had his work cut out, struggling to keep an unruly line of approximately thirty, severely disinterested seven year old boys in check, all of whom were being held against their will by the might of the religious authorities. Fortunately for him we were imprisoned - by each other and three hefty solid oak planks. We had never seen a male teacher (even if it was Sunday School) and I suppose for that reason never realised what it was he was trying to do. The subject made no impression on me.

But something *was* making a deep impression on me - the scratchy short-trousered hem of my tweed suit (or weed suit as the wit next to me would oft quip) which I was required to wear every Sunday morning by my mother. My mother, who for deep and mysteriously religious reasons felt it necessary to cram me week-in week-out into that horrendous starched get-up and pack me off alone, trudging up a

quarter mile of steep, empty streets to a big smelly old white building that I “hadn’t to be late for”.¹

In spite of my life-long need always to get to the bottom of the question *why?* no matter how hard I tried I could see no purpose in the whole affair whatsoever. If I could simply say along with a generation that the experience of being forced to attend church each week as a child was boring, then fair enough, but it seemed to me to be far more than that. In retrospect a few adjectives spring to mind: pointless, farcical, surreal. I mean... would somebody please just tell me what’s going on?

Of course it is perfectly possible that I am being a bit too hard on the old Kirk of Scotland and on my mam’s well-intentioned (for I have since discovered that they were) efforts. Perhaps seeds were sown even then, sort of subliminally... who knows? Still, the fact remains that I can remember nothing whatsoever of the whole experience except for the scratchy breeks and the wit next to me.

Years later I discovered that all this palaver had a name:

Christianity.

¹ Doune Kirk, Macduff, (now Macduff Parish Church)

I tried every ruse in the book to get out of going, you know... sore bellies, mental exhaustion triggered by over-exertion at school, sherbet dab poisoning... but nothing worked. It seemed that nothing could come even close to matching my mother's spiritual zeal on my behalf, until, one fateful Sunday morning - almost by accident - the mystical phrase, "But why do I have to go when *you* never go?" slipped innocently and with uncharacteristic boldness from my mouth.

She faltered.

I noticed. Tentatively I repeated the phrase.

She faltered again.

I couldn't believe it... what wondrous secrets were locked up in those words I knew not, but I could tell that they were having an effect. The desired effect!

Christianity for me was now tried, tested, dead and buried.

The year would have been 1965.

Another aspect of what I took to be Christianity was school assembly. The constant herding about that happens of necessity to school children was a source of considerable frustration to me and I used to long for the day when I might be considered a valid individual (like the adults were). Anyway, the ancient ritual of primary school assembly dictated that we - little heathens that we were - must be made to sing a hymn, possibly two, and then robotically recite the 'Lord's

Prayer'. No-one ever took the trouble to explain either *why* we did this or what the Lord's Prayer actually *meant* (or was). In retrospect I now realise that this was perhaps because none of the adults understood it either. The conclusion arrived at by my young mind (and possibly everybody else's) was:

Its important that we sing it and recite it, not understand it.

Ritual is the cornerstone of religion, and religion, in my opinion, is nothing more than man's often pathetic and misguided effort to fill the vacuum, the void in his soul of which he is painfully aware. Life is tough, so if there is a God then he must be appeased. As to whether he actually is appeased no-one seems to know for sure (bad stuff still happens, so presumably not). Suffice it to say that we have all done what we could, what has been expected..

..by God.

Around this time my folks bought me and my five-years-younger sister Norma a guitar. Well actually I think it was from Santa, but whoever it was from it was a mistake.

Why a mistake? Well, certainly as far as my folks in later years would be concerned, because - in spite of the fact that it had a string action higher than a fretless 1929 National Steel¹, and a two inch, hand-

¹ A fine example of which I foolishly exchanged for a 73 Les Paul in 1985

impaling cup hook (from my old man's shop, *Do-It-Yourself Supplies, Market St, Macduff*) for a strap stud - I learned to play it.

Of course when I say play it, not being a big guy my fingers didn't stretch too well so I determined *never* to learn chords, and only ever to play single notes. Astoundingly this wilful and curiously counter-productive commitment worked in my favour, for as I got older most of my contemporaries seemed to become expert chord strummers who were too embarrassed and plinky-plonky to attempt a guitar solo, whilst I became quite good really. For many of them guitars became golf clubs which turned into cars, but not for me. And as my hands grew, chords fell naturally into my playing.

The year was now 1969.

By now I had taken to playing my old man's red and black Burns semi-acoustic - a big electric guitar by anyone's standards but especially on me!

Also I became aware that something was going on out there. I knew that somewhere down south (London perchance?) young people were wearing flares and growing their hair long. Me and my mates had to do something. So...

We came up with sidewings¹.

In a committed display of solidarity with the hippy movement of San Francisco, and also as a flagrant act of rebellion against all forms of authority, myself and several of my cronies would stick small pieces of sellotape on the edge of our faces each time we had a bath. The idea of this was to tame the otherwise scimitar-shaped or (horror of horrors) fan-like strip of hair that protruded about an inch and a half down in front of our ears. This we then sported to school (minus the sellotape) to impress the ladies. And pretty well-impressed they were too no doubt. Also we were in a band - the Wanderers - which met at my house every Thursday (a few times) for being-in-a-band lessons from my Dad who used to play in the Deveronaires. I still remember our set:

In and Out of the Red Balloon.

Look out world!

I didn't mind it in Primary. Apart from a brief spell at 1st I was always somewhere between 2nd and 5th in the class, so brains didn't present too big a problem. Yes, those were the days of the dreaded class test, the result of which would determine your seating position for the next several months. We all had to vacate our desks and stand out at the front with our leather schoolbags around our feet, one by one filing back to our new desks as the teacher read out the results, beginning at the top and ending somewhere around 39th (baby

¹ Sideburn counterfeits - thirty years before Oasis!

boomers!) I felt so sorry for those guys diagonally opposite, the system never gave them a chance.

All the way through primary the same girl, Tracey, was always 1st. It just became her desk. She was a lovely, quietly reserved girl and she seemed above and beyond our world. Sadly I heard that she recently committed suicide. It would seem that even outstanding intellectual prowess cannot shield us from the buffeting and pain of life.

From about the age of seven - after the African explorer phase - it was my serious intention to become a Palaeontologist. In the days of the mighty Brontosaurus¹ I was daft on dinosaurs. Anyway it was fun telling adults the big word that I intended to be - always guaranteed to impress.

My future was virtually mapped out. My parents were proud of me, especially my mother who was academically minded but because she grew up in an age in which your parents had to have money to send you to university she never got the chance. From the age of dot it was anticipated that I would go to university - a big, big deal in those days. This ambition I might add did not come only from my parents but was very much what I desired to do. In fact, even when I later made the leap to Astronomy, I fully intended to become a scientist, move to

¹ Unhappily and weedily now renamed Apatosaurus, due to the fact that it turns out it didn't exist, or it did exist but it was an Apatosaurus. The fraud.

Florida (which was much farther away then than it is now) and live happily ever after in the sun.

This vision of my future excited me tremendously. My sense of paradise was awakened!

Shame about the guitar.

What was it about science in those days... it was the new religion of the post-WW2 era. Everyone seemed to believe in it without question.

The watchword at that time was *Progress* (funny how you never hear it now) Progress this, Progress that. Everything was happening in the name of Progress.

The belief was widely held that spiritual things were dead and gone, non-existent, a mere figment of primitive, ancient and medieval men and women's gullible imaginations, conjured up to explain the world and their existence in it before the invention of the light bulb.

But now... we had *Science*.

Science would explain everything, solve everything, prove everything, disprove everything, and improve everything... eventually. The moon landing of 20th July 1969 had us all totally convinced of that. My contemporaries believed it, my dad believed it, the TV believed it, and I believed it.

Then came Biafra, the world's first televised famine.

People began to contrast the billions spent landing two roly-poly Michelin-men on a barren lump of rock quarter of a million miles away against the impotence (or unwillingness) of the world's rich nations to aid the poor. The nihilistic belief began to take root in many that there was, in fact, no answer.

Because, if there is a God, and he is a God of love, how could he permit such suffering?

My steadfast faith in the future of science coupled with my rejection of Christianity (as a consequence of the scratchy breeks) led to a passionate certainty in me that there was indeed no God.

I was now an atheist and committed.

Many hours were spent during my teenage years attempting to blast holes in whatever fledgling faith may have been possessed by my friends, and heaping ridicule on their persistent attendance at church youth groups. Surely it was *obvious* that I was right and it annoyed me *so much* that others couldn't see it¹.

¹ A touch of the Richard Dawkins.

As first year at Banff Academy drew to a close it would've been 1970.

Decisions now had to be made that would (as is always assumed) dictate my future. The sad fact was that I had too many options... a bewildering array in fact, and far too many for a thirteen year old to cope with. Here they were:

Option 1: Science

Option 2: Languages

Was better at them than science and maths, but not interested.

Option 3: English

Was always good at writing stories but hated reading novels, so never considered this seriously until I discovered in my thirties that I absolutely loved writing. Eejit!

Option 4: Art

My father has always painted pictures - oil and watercolour landscapes mainly - and I had inherited a fair degree of artiness¹. However, as I enjoyed it I felt it might be best to do another academic subject instead, so I sacrificed it to do *German!* Why on earth I felt the

¹ I finally ended up painting signs for a living.

need to learn another language in addition to the obligatory French I've never been able to fathom, but there it was. I can still remember the textbook was called 'Sprich Mal Deutsch' which I always used to think meant 'Speak Bad German', 'nuff said.

Option 5: **The Family Business.**

My father was by now a fairly successful and ambitious local businessman. He owned two DIY shops and was always on the look out for a new venture. Going into the family business was always an option, and one which many young folk would have given their right arm for. Although I felt bad about not wishing to have anything to do with it I was still sticking to my scientific guns.

Option 6: **Music**

We'll come to that...

Anyway, moving on. At the start of first year I got friendly with a lad from Paisley named John - a diminutive left-handed bloke with bright red hair, enthusiastic in everything he did, especially supporting Glasgow Celtic. In addition to being a Catholic (unusual in these parts, but it meant nothing to me) he was a totally unselfconscious and fearless singer. I can recall us knocking on the doors of Macduff at Halloween, me with the old Spanish guitar with the lethal cup hook and

John belting out at the top of his voice ‘My Lady D’Arbanville’, a hit at the time for Cat Stevens.

But above all John was a drummer.

Actually in my opinion John was a drumming genius. Why do I think that? Well, in spite of the fact that he had four younger brothers (all similarly named after saints), lived in a small mid-terraced council house and had been informed by his folks that there was ‘no way he was ever getting drums!’ he could literally sit down behind a right-handed kit and play like Gene Krupa, his hero! Not a few jaws hit the floor when John played.

We started a band.

Well actually we were the band. The Double Suite, as I recall. I think we spent more time designing red and black logos and planning world tours than actually playing but we did manage to win the school talent contest with a self-penned instrumental - me on bass, John on sitting on a chair playing a tambourine on his lap like a bongo drum. But success had finally come our way, and the morning after we received a message from a certain attractive girl¹ that she “wants to go with one of you”. I selflessly (*but stupidly*) left her to John.

It ain’t easy bein’ a rock god!

¹ Maggie Neeps!

Sadly John left school after third year to join the army and we lost touch.

For some reason John and I never discussed religion. He was an altar boy (whatever that was) and faith was important to him, but he never talked about it.

It's probably just as well, considering where I was at.

Several things happened to me musically in 1970.

I bought my first records: singles of Voodoo Chile by Jimi Hendrix, and Layla by Eric Clapton (or Derek and the Dominos for purists). Black Sabbath were also at Number 4 in October with Paranoid whilst (amazingly for the British charts which didn't tend to favour heavy rock bands¹) Deep Purple were at Number 2 the following week with Black Night. Some older guys at school were organising a bus in to the Music Hall in Aberdeen to see Deep Purple so - much to their chagrin² - three of us second years put our names down. I don't think they acknowledged our presence once the entire trip!

But there we were - John, Lyall and me - front seats in the balcony and thrashing out a beat on the handrail 'til our fingers bled as the band below *totally* overwhelmed our young impressionable souls with their wall-of-sound rock and mighty purple strobe lights. What an awesome experience!

¹ Understatement alert.

² The guys... Deep Purple didn't seem bothered.

Deep Purple became the band.

Other bands were important to us at that time, all very guitar-based it would have to be said. Bands such as Humble Pie, King Crimson, Atomic Rooster (*not* to be confused with the kitten of similar disposition) and Groundhogs took their place alongside the more compulsory bands such as Free, Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath and Status Quo. All this corrupted me wonderfully.

As the years rolled by Lyall would come down most nights ‘for a practice’ and we would play along with records or simply jam endless 12-bar blues together.

Lyall was and is an excellent musician. He had an ear for music that was totally effortless. He played mainly bass, I played lead. We both played solely by ear for several reasons - mostly because no-one had ever taken the time to teach us to read music, although I suppose that wasn’t entirely true. My folks did put me to an old lady music teacher when I was 11 but since she couldn’t actually play the guitar herself I concluded (with a certain amount of justification!) that there was no way she could teach me. She pooh-hoohed my use of the plectrum. She informed me “All the best guitarists use their fingers”, to which I stoutly replied “My dad uses a plectrum.”

I never went back.

The thing was of course that at that time most of the aforementioned early blues/rock guitarists were self-taught. They learned their trade as we did - in their bedrooms. It grew into a foundational principle of the genre that one had to be musically illiterate. *Thou shalt not be seen to be able to read music!*

Ignorance turned virtue in the name of freedom - and of course, Progress.

Lyall was my best mate in secondary and our friendship endures to this day. We shared a view of life (i.e. we didn't have one, a view that is. We did have a life, having been told often enough to go get one). We also shared a love of cheesecloth, Monty Python, fyachie pink corduroy and grotesquely shaped boots, coupled with a deep desire to underage drink.

But above all we shared an inferiority complex with regard to the opposite sex that bordered on an artform...

At approaching girls we were exquisitely incompetent, though we did occasionally manage to bluff our way to success before inevitably exposing how desperately immature we actually were, and consequently what a mistake the said females were in process of making. Such mistakes can be quickly rectified! I can't recall what Lyall used to use for a chat-up line (not a lot) but I tended to resort to things like contemporary politics...

“What do you make of the three-day-week then, babe?”

“On yer bike, dweeb!”

“Hmm, ok...”