



UNCOMMON SOUND

The Left-Handed Guitar Players That Changed Music by John Engel



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MARTIN JENNER

Born on May 26 1943 in Lindfield, Sussex, England

Died on May 7 2003 in Perth, Western Australia

Martin Jenner worked as a topnotch session guitarist in England from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. Virtually unknown to the public, he enjoyed an excellent reputation in the business both as a rhythm and lead player. He played with equal aplomb in a variety of genres, from country to raw blues to orchestral pop, whilst keeping a special fondness for old-time rock'n'roll.

His career includes performances and/or recordings for a dizzying number of artists, including among others: Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton, Elton John, Cliff Richard, Elkie Brooks, The Everly Brothers, Chris Rea, David Bowie, Bonnie Tyler, Andrew Lloyd Weber, Paul Anka, Smokey Robinson, The Platters, Bert Weedon, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Olivia Newton-John, The Righteous Brothers, Barbara Dickson, Deep Feeling, Sting, Howling Wolf, and many more.

Jenner got hooked on guitar at an early age, after his family moved down to New Haven in Sussex.

"I bought my first guitar out of a kit, and built it left-handed. At first I tried to hold the guitar the other way around but it took me about an hour and a half to finger an E chord. I figured that, since I had the ability to play left-handed, I'd just play left-handed. I'm totally left-handed, I can't play any other way. I started playing in skiffle bands when I was 14. Skiffle was what everybody was playing back then. Hank Marvin and The Shadows were a big influence."

After leaving school, Jenner had a brief flirtation with architecture. But the regular gigs and the revenues he could generate as a guitar player soon settled the dilemma. He joined bands playing a Shadows style of rock'n'roll.

In 1963, at the age of 20, Jenner took his bags and followed in The Beatles' footsteps down to Hamburg, Germany. He played in clubs on the Reeperbahn for three years, then returned to England in 1965 to join a 17-piece rock formation known as the Geoff Reynolds Band. With Reynolds he did long engagements in Belfast and Glasgow. Following up on an ad, he made his way to London, performing at the Lyceum Ballroom in Leicester Square.

"I went into the Lyceum Ballroom with the Ray McVae Orchestra. We were doing all the come-dance stuff. I suddenly went straight from nowhere right up to the top of the A-team session scene in London, where I stayed from the early 1970s to the end of the 1980s."

After learning to play guitar under the influence of players like Lonnie Donnegan and Hank Marvin, Jenner spent a few years gigging in rock groups. But then, for the following six or seven years he worked exclusively in big band settings with strict sight-reading arrangements.

Martin Jenner recorded and performed with British lady of song and stage Barbara Dickson from 1976 to 1978. Then, his most intensive touring experience came with Cliff Richard, with



whom he toured off and on for over ten years, from 1977 to 1986. He traveled around the world several times over and collected a string of road stories, some of which he shared with Stella Hemmings for her book, *Musician's Survival Guide to Life On the Road* (1998, PC Publishing):

"Everyone collected the large bags provided by hotels for dirty laundry, and we saved them until we were in a tall hotel. The person with the highest room would be the host. The laundry bags would be filled with water and ceremoniously hurled out of the window onto the car park below. 40-odd liters of water traveling at 64 feet per second!

"In Brussels a 'bombing' raid from the 32nd floor took place with us blissfully unaware that the Joint

Chiefs of Staff of several countries were having a NATO summit nearby and that the sonic results of our activities were causing much consternation among the troops guarding their hotel."

Mark Griffiths, a veteran multi-instrumentalist and former bass player in Richard's band, was in close contact with Jenner from 1980 to 1986. The band, originally called Thunder, included the great, late drummer Graham Jarvis as well as John Clark on second guitar.

MARK GRIFFITHS: "I first joined Cliff Richard's band in 1980. Mart Jenner was on guitar and I was on guitar for the first tour that I did. I had heard about Mart through his session work. He was very well-known and successful in the business.

"Cliff's band at the time was a marvelous band. Cliff's Rock'n'Roll Silver box set is a good example of Martin's playing. There's one album in the set in which we did all rock'n'roll covers in our own way. It's fantastic. Martin was great on it."

Over time, Jenner devoted more time to writing music for small studio projects of his own and then, starting in the mid-1980s, songs and instrumental scores. He wrote "Son of Thunder" for Cliff Richard (*Now You See Me... Now You Don't*, 1982, EMI).

Jenner was a first-call session guitarist in London for about fifteen years. His ability to handle a wide range of musical styles had much to do with his own eclectic tastes as a listener; he believed "everyone has got something to offer."

Most of Jenner's high-visibility session work was either for the famed late producer Gus Dudgeon or referred by him. The list of artists with whom Martin Jenner played in the studio is dauntingly long and covers just about every genre of western popular music. A small selec-

"I allowed myself 48 hours to get over any jet lag [from touring] before piling back into the studio scene. Even though at the end of the tour everyone was tired and glad to be home to see friends and families, there always was an innate sadness that it was all over, almost a sense of loss, especially after a long tour. Fortunately for me there was little time to brood, as I had a full workload to return to, but the adjustment of the 'schoolboy' mentality of a tour to the 'real' world wasn't easy."⁽¹⁾

tion of names includes: Plastic Bertrand, Stephen Bishop, David Bowie, Sacha Distel, Roberta Flack, The Flying Burrito Brothers, Engelbert Humperdinck, Elton John, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Nick Lowe, Paul McCartney, Ralph McTell, Gilbert O'Sullivan, Chris Rea, Cliff Richard, Paul and Barry Ryan, Bonnie Tyler, and Sonny Boy Williamson.

Despite the range of styles he practiced, country music was for a time the genre with which Jenner's name was most frequently associated, encouraged by his proficiency on pedal steel, banjo, and mandolin. Even his work with Barbara Dickson bore a definite country flavor.

MARK GRIFFITHS: "Country music was in his blood. He was into Jerry Reed and a lot of country players. Always a bit flamboyant. He was great at the old rock'n'roll stuff, but he was very country-orientated. Mart had his own style, but a lot of it depended on how he was feeling at the time, which of course happens to us all, but it was quite varied in his case."

JOHN CLARK: "Martin was a great all-round player. But country was his strong area. I joined Cliff's band in 1981 and stayed until about 1985. We were the two guitar players. Martin could be flamboyant and a bit of a show-off, trying to impress in some situations. Otherwise he would be quite withdrawn. As a musician he was totally professional."

True to the session-musician ethos, Jenner also played bass, high-strung guitar, guitar synthesizers, and classical guitar. Every form and every technique he honed without any outside instruction, including learning to read music. His thirst for knowledge carried him from one development to the next.

"On some sessions I'd turn up and the part would be written out for me. On other types of sessions I might get booked to improvise or contribute. I was blessed, I suppose, with good technique right from the beginning. I am totally self-taught, I have never had a lesson in my life. When I first started getting into sessions, I would turn up and there'd be a massive orchestra and I couldn't read the part so I had to ask the keyboard player how it went. In the end, I just decided to shut the book up for a week. I went down to the library and got every single clarinet and violin part out. And I read and read and read and read, until I felt confident enough to go back into the studio. But, with the type of sessions I was doing, I might do a jingle from 8 'til 9, and then I might go do 10-to-1 and 2-to-5 with a full orchestra, and then a rockabilly session at 6 o'clock and then a punk session at 9 o'clock. It would be different stuff all the time. For example, I did a punk song for Plastic Bertrand, but I also did a lot of the *Hooked on Classics* stuff."

Besides playing on many single song sessions, Jenner sometimes contributed to entire albums, as with Cliff Richard (*The 31st of February Street*, *Now You See Me... Now You Don't*, *Rock'n'Roll Silver*, and *The Rock Connection*).

"All the time in London I did sessions all day, sometimes three or four a day, plus jingles. It's impossible for me to keep track of the sessions I did. That sounds terribly blasé, but I was literally racing from one call to the other."

MARK GRIFFITHS: "Sometimes we did sessions without even knowing who the artist was. You got booked to do a session, you played and did tracks for two or three hours, and then you went away. You didn't know what became of it. And then surely you wouldn't remember it."

As far as guitars were concerned, besides a preference for Telecasters,

Jenner had very particular demands for the neck contour because of his playing technique and the small size of his hands.

"Because I was left-handed I didn't have two sets of gear. A lot of the guys had two sets of guitars and amps. While they were in one studio, they'd have a cartage company take another set to the next date. But I was a lefty, so I had only one set and had to do all my own carting!

"Most of my instruments were custom-made because I like the absolute skinniest of necks that can possibly go on a guitar. These are V-necks with no cheeks to them whatsoever. They drop right away from the edge of the fingerboard. I'm not a grabber, I play very much over the neck."

Jenner's guitar playing was usually confined to supporting the song in a subdued rhythmic capacity or with graceful accents that complement the lead vocal line. On occasion, his accompaniment was more prominent or he ripped out on solos that unleashed his versatile chops as, for example, on Cliff Richard's "It Has To Be You, It Has To Be Me" (*Now You See Me...*).

MARK GRIFFITHS: "Martin went at a lot of things from a completely different angle. He was quite a puzzle sometimes. Sometimes we used to have chuckles about the way he was and the way he did things. You never quite knew what you'd get with him. Some nights he'd be really controlled and very tasty and other nights he'd be completely bonkers."

In September 1983, after more than a decade of estrangement, Don and Phil Everly staged a historic reunion concert for which they chose London's Royal Albert Hall. Preferring not to compete with guitar heroes for the limelight, The Everly Brothers picked two eminent English guitarists who were relatively unknown to the general public: Albert Lee and Martin Jenner.

"I have been privileged to work with so many talented people, but perhaps my favorite call was The Everly Brothers' Reunion Concert. They picked Albert

Left, sitting with Aussie country band Jive Rocket, 1990s.





Right, with Hank Marvin (center) and Tommy Emmanuel.

Lee and myself only, because we could play country music and do the job properly without detracting from the fact that it was The Everly Brothers' night and no one else's."

MARK GRIFITHS: "As a rhythm section, the three of us [Jarvis, Jenner, Griffiths] did quite a bit of stuff. I don't remember how it came about but we were asked. It was an incredible honor for me to do it. To this day it's one of the highlights."

Jenner's contribution to the concert is tight and discreet, in keeping with his usual tack. He provides a couple of fun-loving solos and plays pedal steel on "So Sad to Watch Good Love Go Bad."

Alongside his heavy studio-playing schedule Jenner also had his own recording studio which he managed for thirty years, first in England then in Australia, working as a composer or as an engineer, arranger or producer whenever the occasion arose.

It was during the tours with Cliff Richard that Jenner met his childhood hero Hank Marvin, who frequently came by to visit with Richard. Marvin

and Jenner became close friends and went on to work together on co-writing songs and recording off and on through the 1980s and 1990s.

Personal circumstances motivated Jenner to change scenery and he moved to Perth, Western Australia in 1986 – three years after Hank Marvin had settled there as well. Jenner continued to do session work, either in Australia or in England. He joined various bands (most notably Perth's own The Jive Rockets) and juggled a variety of writing, co-writing and recording projects, mainly for television programs, commercials, and films. Most notably, he wrote the score for the 1997 award-winning nature series *Hutan – Wildlife of the Malaysian Rainforest*.

Martin Jenner has never hankered for the front-man role. Rather, he has always been content to work in the background, focusing on the canvas he lays down on rhythm guitar and the succinct craft of an occasional solo to support the artist's song. Emotional and demonstrative as he may have been on guitar, Jenner was a very guarded and private person, which has contributed to keeping his career in the shadows of more ambitious personalities.

MARK GRIFITHS: "Martin would never talk about anything [personal]. There was so much about Martin that we didn't know. He tended to keep a lot of things under his bonnet. He was quite mysterious in his ways."

"I'm sort of a shy person. I've shunned the limelight all the time. But I never had any problem with what we used to call 'redlightis' – fright when the red light goes on. I got on and did the part, gave it my best shot. If it was a written part or if it was a part for improvisation, I'd do that, no problem."

Jenner was quite capable of lunging into flashy solos whenever the mood seized him. His considerable technique and self-taught musical erudition informed his guitar work with a detailed clarity and a talent for changing attitude and tone on a dime.

Additionally, he was proud of the exposure, albeit limited, that his compositions and songs received. With his writing as with his guitar playing, he did not like to push himself forward, but he enjoyed the respect of his peers. The more fanciful and vivacious side of his live guitar playing now has been silenced by his untimely passing following a long struggle with cancer. Yet the bulk of Martin Jenner's musical contributions will remain discreetly embedded in hundreds of records by diverse artists of his day.



Plastic Bertrand
ÇA PLANE POUR MOI
Single - 1977, AMC



Elkie Brooks
PEARLS II
1982, Spectrum



The Everly Brothers
REUNION CONCERT
1984, Mercury



Stephen Bishop
BOWLING IN PARIS
1989, Atlantic



Cliff Richard
**NOW YOU SEE ME...
NOW YOU DON'T**
1982, EMI



Cliff Richard
ROCK'N'ROLL SILVER
1992, EMI



Cliff Richard
THE ROCK CONNECTION
1992, EMI

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