

My Brilliant Friend: A Lifetime of Love, Devotion and Surrender

By Phillip Hoffmann 29-08-2018

I don't remember the exact date, but one day in 1972 my life changed forever. I was in the schoolyard at our high school, and a guy I barely knew came up to me, introduced himself and asked if it was true that I played guitar. He had somehow heard that I did, but the strange thing about the encounter was that he was a year older than me. For whatever reason, the unspoken but strict caste system that prevented kids from different years fraternizing apparently meant nothing to him. We fell into conversation. He told me he was keen to learn guitar and wondered whether I would mind getting together to share what I knew. We must have agreed about the music we liked—the Beatles, Dylan, Elton John, Neil Young and Paul Simon were among his early loves—and that was that. A friendship that would change everything for me was born. Thinking back on it today, I now suspect that day might have changed everything for him, too. His name was John Baker.

Before long we were visiting each other's houses, jamming, practicing, exchanging tunes, playing records, haunting music stores, doing all the usual things that guitar-playing friends do. I had a proper instrument, a huge Harmony Sovereign country and western jumbo that my parents had given me a couple of Christmases earlier. It was a bit too big for me, but it had a great action and an even better tone. John's first guitar was wretched: a cheap, department store toy guitar that was barely playable and barely even an instrument. But John was undeterred. He worked hard to coax a halfway decent sound out of it, transcending its limitations, and I think he knew all along that he was in it for the long haul.

A fast friendship blossomed, and to my delight it was from the very beginning about much more than guitars and music. John was the oldest sibling in his family. He was family-oriented, caring toward his brothers and his sister Lorraine, and respectful toward his parents (Mumsy and Bones, as he nicknamed them in later years). He was warm, witty, funny, a great conversationalist, and he had a teenage romantic interest in my younger sister Monika, as I had in Lorraine. The ties that bind. But barely six months after our first conversation we were separated when I went to Oregon in the US as an exchange student for all of 1973. I missed him keenly, but we wrote on a regular basis, hand-written aerogrammes or long letters that often ran to five pages or more of his delicate, spidery hand-writing. The letter-writing tradition we established that year was to sustain our friendship for years at a time, even decades, as our paths diverged later on.

Despite our frequent contact, I returned at the end of 1973 to discover that much had changed. John had practiced like crazy in his final year of school, expanding his musical horizons and starting to find his way in the world as a professional guitarist. He had no role models, mentors or guides, and it didn't help that we lived in the far-flung western suburbs of Sydney, where traveling to play with other musicians often meant long train trips or caddy rides with friends. But he made the most of the nascent social and musical scenes we had at the time, jamming, soaking up influences and making tons of friends in the process, a lifelong talent of his! He took up electric guitar, assimilating British prog rock (especially Yes and Genesis), blues (especially Hendrix), jazz fusion (John McLaughlin, Miles Davis, Weather Report, the Mahavishnu Orchestra and Shakti), and all the guitar-based folk, pop and rock music of the day. He started picking up gigs and forming bands.

An early project I remember well was Jewell Parc, which mostly played covers of Yes, Steely Dan and Santana, and featured John's blinding, note-perfect guitar solos. He became the epicentre of multiple, overlapping and ever-widening circles of friends and musicians in and around Sydney. John made and maintained friendships effortlessly. Virtually everyone who met him recognized him immediately as someone they wanted to be with because he made their lives better in one way or another. Everyone who knew him had their own stories about him, and every story was different. Among others he jammed with locally at the time were Kieran Egan and Kevin Adams (both bandmates in Jewell Parc), Chris (later Boris) Kelly, David Mason-Cox and Kevin Bennett. An important early professional call for John was playing in the house band for "Paradise Regained", a rock opera about life in the Western suburbs written by David and Kevin, which helped burnish his credentials as a versatile guitarist with serious chops.

I went to Macquarie University and before long we were sharing a rental house (34 Hunter Street, Parramatta) with Santo Cimino, another guitarist friend. A cockroach palace terrace house, it featured a living room so full of amps and equipment that navigating a path through it was a full-time occupation. The kitchen was a borderline public health hazard. But we loved the hive of activity it created, not to mention the characters and substances it attracted at all hours of the night and day. John played mostly electric and acoustic jazz fusion then, and he would patiently teach me John McLaughlin's acoustic guitar parts on the Shakti albums. I would play them as extended live loops while he and Santo honed their skills exchanging endless, improvised solos. I was perfectly happy with my back-seat role, thrilled just to listen and help their progress as musicians.

The homies from Rooty Hill High who were always up for the next party or gig back then included Peter Sardyga (Chook), Ian Crellin, Garry Pople, Barb Wozniak, Anita Lubimowski, Rhonda Campbell, Monika and many others. Around that time, Peter bought a turf farm on the Hawkesbury River between Windsor and Richmond with his business partner at the time, John Brann. Our social centre of gravity swung back to the far western suburbs and lower Blue Mountains, where John and I continued to cross paths and cohabit various rental houses. One memorable occasion that era was a huge party Peter threw at the turf farm that ended up attracting about 500 people. Bands played on the flatbed of one of the farm trucks, including Jewell Parc. They ended their set with Europa, by Santana, ending with an extended jam that allowed John free rein to do his thing. Did he ever. He got into the zone and launched into one of the most inspired, ferocious, improvised solos I've ever heard. It was one of those times when John transcended physics. I was standing next to the sound desk, smiling contentedly, when I noticed the guy on the desk, who had never heard John play. Convulsing, he ripped off his headphones. He was wild-eyed, awestruck, almost terrified. He simply couldn't believe what he was hearing. I just turned back to watch John and smiled some more.

During the 1980s John and I gradually drifted apart physically, but the bonds between us held firm. John followed his muse and opportunities to gig wherever that led, including stints at resorts such as Hamilton Island (where he met and played with luminaries including Van Morrison's guitarist, John Platania, and George Harrison). He also played on cruise ships on and off for a few years, where his versatility was a highly prized asset as a working musician. Although I saw less of him in the 1980s, I followed John's career closely and was well aware of his growing reputation. On one occasion I sidled up to Tommy Emmanuel at a bar and mentioned John's name, because I figured they would have crossed paths on Hamilton Island. Tommy glanced at me with a serious look on his face. He nodded slowly and in a soft, reverent voice he simply said: "great player".

So John and I reverted to corresponding. Our long letters tended to follow a rough pattern. First came newsy updates about life, loves, family and work, and then it was all about ideas, literature, metaphysics and whatever we were finding or creating that was providing meaning for us. John's prose was often poetic, impressionistic, full of sentence fragments and peppered with quirky punctuation. He continued in this vein even after we switched from paper to electronic media, and while I used to think that the idiosyncrasies of his writing style were simply carelessness, I now think there was method to it all along. John lived in a very existential way, and I think he wanted his writing to reflect his thinking in the most direct and immediate way he could. We think of him primarily as a musician and song-writer, but John was artistic in many deep and subtle ways.

One example of this was the way he played soccer in his high school years. Many of his friends know that he was a soccer fan with a real love for the game, but not many of us got to see how he played the game. For him, soccer was less about tactics, strategy, scoring goals and winning than it was about figuring out how his body and ball could combine to create a form of ballet. It's hard to describe how he played, but he was one of the most elegant, stylish and skilled players with the ball that I have seen.

As for literature and ideas, we would discuss and write about favourite authors and books at length. For a time in the late 1970s we got on a Krishnamurti kick, reading thick books full of dialogues of the famous protégé of theosophy that were captured when he held court with various audiences. Much of Krishnamurti could be boiled down to a few precepts about living in the moment, letting go of the mental habits that imprison us, especially judgement, and cultivating a dispassionate, self-observational way of life. Looking back, it basically seems like a non-scriptural combination of existentialism and Buddhism. Although it seemed John was deeply influenced by Krishnamurti, I think that in many ways Krishnamurti merely confirmed for John how he already tended to live and think. John was highly moral but not at all moralistic, wise without it ever occurring to describe himself in that way, compassionate, empathic, intuitive, and deeply religious, especially in his last years as he returned to Catholicism.

There is a story that haunts me that speaks to what was so special about John. We were living at the Hunter Street house when I turned 21. My mother invited me to a family birthday dinner to celebrate, but I was enjoying my unfettered freedom and was content to visit my family on my own terms. I didn't care in the least about celebrating my birthday, and I don't to this day, but I was completely self-centred about it, stubbornly turning down the invitation. John found out about this and he called me on it, reasoning that it wouldn't take any effort to go, and imploring me to do it for my parents. It was one of the only two times I can ever remember us disagreeing on matters of principle. I held out and I didn't go. A few years ago I found out that mum was so hurt that my father found her crying in a field and had to console her. John was right, and I will never feel good about the decision I made.

In 1989 I moved to Canada, where I have been based ever since. In 2002, I started hearing big news about John. He had relocated to Adelaide and was in a relationship with Gayle Buckby. Not only that, but he was going to focusing on being a singer- songwriter in a new project with her. Whaattt? Peter and I discussed it and we scratched our heads.

To be honest, we were concerned about this career move. I was aware that he had started to sing and write for a couple of bands in Sydney (notably the Cavers (featuring Jack Thompson) and Frozen (with his old mates Kevin Adams and John Hancock), but John was a guitarist. Everyone knew that, at least everyone in Sydney. With his obvious talent as an improviser, I thought he should concentrate on fulfilling his potential to become one of Australia's best jazz guitarists, and I told him so in at least one letter.

However, I was the one who had missed the boat and was missing the point. Yes, John had been a jazz guitarist (past tense), but deep down he was an artist, with an artist's urge to continue creating something new. The great Jerry Reed once said that he wasn't a guitar player, he was a guitar thinker. John was a guitar thinker, too, in a very pure sense of that term. He paid very careful attention to tone and using his instrument to convey musical ideas, but I think that for him, straight jazz was ultimately too bloodless and cerebral. And from all our years of corresponding, I of all people should have known that John had things to say. Now, finally, he wanted to say them in song. John and Gayle went on to form The Baker Suite, and the rest is history, culminating recently in his richly deserved honour of being inducted into South Australia's Music Hall of Fame. Their albums made a believer of me and I was reborn as a fan of his music in a whole new way. The last time I contacted him was about a week ago to let him know that a couple of his songs, Hindley Street and Big Bill's Dream, were running through my head. I was in Mexico City but those songs didn't seem to want to leave me. I didn't know that he was most likely in hospital at that point and was quite possibly near the end. It's funny how that works: the things that come into our heads, and when they do, and the reasons why. I never heard back from him.

But I want to end on a different note. If I painted John as overtly serious person, it's only because I am. All of us he befriended will remember how much he made us laugh. It didn't take much to get his incredibly funny, witty inner self going. He could free-associate as effortlessly as Eminem, but in a wittier way, and always gently. He didn't want or need to offend anyone, and I never, ever experienced him doing so in a conscious way. And we all have our favourite John stories. Ask me some time about the cars he used to own and his driving, which would turn something as simple as hopping into his car to get groceries into a hilarious, madcap road trip. He showed us how to be, how to love life, how to live on this planet, and how to leave it, with grace and dignity and without self-pity or complaint. Toward the end of his life, my dad lamented that he never had a lifelong friend. I remember reflecting on this and about how lucky I was, because I knew that I did have one. His name was John Baker.