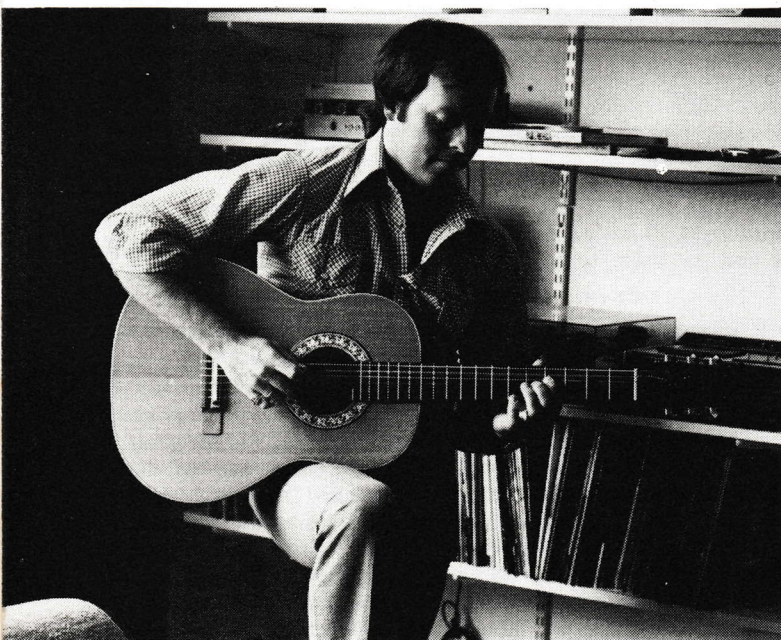


Jerry Donahue

talks to Jeremy Uwins



Trying out the Ovation 'electric' classic.

Jeremy Uwins: *You brought a country influence to Fairport Convention. Did you grow up with this kind of music?*

Jerry Donahue: Not really, no more than with anything else. I guess I started off as a rock and roll player and it was the mid-sixties before I became interested in country music at all. I really didn't like it too much when I was starting out. I developed a taste for it gradually and I guess the music itself has progressed a little during the last few years — more rock type groups have taken it on. Mind you, I'm still not crazy about the old-hat stuff.

Had your father influenced you about playing the guitar?

No. I guess it was just because I took piano as a kid that I got interested in music at all. Then, at a certain age, I just decided I wanted to play the guitar. My parents bought me a Spanish guitar for Christmas and said that if I got really good at it in a year's time they'd buy me an electric, which is what I really wanted. Well, according to plan I got my first electric which was a Fender Jazzmaster — a nice first electric. We lived in Los Angeles and at that time they weren't too expensive.

Did you start gigging then?

Well, I was just starting high school and only playing for kicks. A year later I moved to England and it wasn't until about 1966 that I went professional.

How were you first introduced to folk/rock music?

I guess with Fotheringay, although prior to that I'd been with a group called The Poet And The One Man Band. I got into this through working at Selmer's where Ray Smith was also working — he was forming the band. It later became Heads, Hands And Feet, the original members including Pat Donaldson and myself. When that broke up I did a couple of months tour with the Tumbleweeds around the country and western circuit. I then received a call from Pat saying there was this group starting with Sandy Denny and would I mind coming along and giving it a try. I did so and stayed with Fotheringay for about a year. I joined Fairport mid-way through the recording of *Rosie*, along with Trevor Lucas and Dave Mattacks who was returning to the band. We started by over-dubbing some of the things which had already been recorded.

Did you find that the transition to an essentially British music

came naturally?

I've always liked folk music although I'm not an ardent follower — there have always been things I've had a feeling for. It wasn't really that hard to make the move, specially with the country, blues, rock feel that I had already.

How do you get that pedal steel sound from your guitar? Do you use any special effects?

No special effects really, I just use a volume pedal. I'm very interested in steel players especially Clarence White and I listen hard to what they are playing and try to bend the strings the way they do — of course they have the pedals to help them. I use the string bending in conjunction with the volume pedal and putting a little reverb on the amp seems to get the overall sound pretty close.

Even with the pedal, don't you lose some of the edge in the same way as when turning down the pots on the guitar?

No, because my volume pedal doesn't work between the guitar and the amp. My guitar plugs straight into the amp and the pedal has just one stereo lead going into a spare channel which has been rewired so that the pedal turns down the whole amplifier. Consequently I'm not altering the pre-amp sound at all, that stays the same and of course another advantage is that when you want to play quietly you pull off the pedal and you're not getting all that hiss. And you are still playing with the guitar full on. This method can give you some good effects with the reverb. If you hit the strings with the pedal up, just a muted sound, and then bring in the volume you get all the reverb shooting out.

At the moment I use a Fender Twin Reverb with JBL's. It has a better sound for my guitars. I'm still experimenting though and am anxious to hear Dan Armstrong's amp when he introduces it. I heard a prototype he has at home and it sure sounds good. I think it is going to provide answers to many of my problems and I believe it will have a volume pedal input built-in which will be more compatible than my present one.

How about your guitars?

I have four electrics — two Telecasters and two Stratocasters. Apart from these I have an Ovation Spanish model with the contact pick-up inside. This means I can get a nylon string sound on stage. As I've only just bought it I haven't had a chance to experiment fully with it yet.

Do you think there'll be any feedback problems?

I don't think so. Trevor uses Ovation and he hasn't had any problems up until now. I took it along once when we were doing the sound checks and although I didn't have too much time to work on it, I found I was able to turn it up pretty loud without any feedback. Apart from its amplified sound which is immaculate, it has a really lovely acoustic sound. It's as good as any classical guitar I've heard.

Do you feel that starting off on a classical guitar has influenced you in any way?

A little perhaps. The only lessons I ever had were Spanish guitar lessons. Actually I only took them for three months and I wasn't really interested — I only wanted to play rock and roll. But I guess it helped and being there right at the beginning there is still some influence.

Your right hand possibly?

Yes, but I stopped using that style when I started with a pick. What I should have done at the time was to have started using a thumb-pick but on moving to electric I naturally used a plectrum.

Are your electrics customised in any way?

Yes. The only one which is pretty much left alone is the '59 Strat. The customising on the others is mainly visual and they've had different bodies made. Dick Knight has many kinds of woods and he did these for me. They not only enhance the appearance but also the sound. One of the Telecasters was made absolutely from scratch. I got hold of a neck and a couple of pick-ups and Dick Knight made the body. This is mahogany and came from a counter at the original Elephant and Castle pub which was torn down some years back. Dick bought the whole counter and God knows how old the wood is — I bet it's had a good few beers spilt on it.

The other Telecaster is my favourite, though. The body's

made from bird's-eye maple which is beautiful and it really sounds great. It's kind of heavy but I've got used to that. Dave Pegg has had a bass made from the same material and that is really heavy — I think he is considering selling it just because of the weight. My other Stratocaster has a rosewood body and is the heaviest of the four — much heavier than a regular Les Paul.

Now on the Stratocaster which isn't customised, I have an interesting thing where instead of the normal arrangement with two tone controls and one volume control affecting the three pick-ups, with the 3-way switch, I've got it so one tone control affects all three pick-ups, with two volume controls. I still have the switch so nothing *looks* different. On the normal Stratocaster you're only meant to have one pick-up at a time and if you wedge the switch very carefully you can maybe get two. Well, I have it so that the first volume control with the switch works the neck and bridge pick-ups, the middle pick-up working independently on the second volume control. So, I can turn that off and have the top and/or the bridge pick-up(s) — the middle switch position gives both together. Then I can mix in the middle pick-up and have all three, or turn down the volume of the neck and bridge pick-ups and only have the middle one. And, depending on where I have the tonal switch I can get the top with the middle or the bottom with the middle. Therefore I have seven different sounds without having altered the appearance at all. It's such an obvious thing to do. The only disadvantage some people will find is that if they're using two sounds together and want to turn down the volumes fast, they have two controls to turn down. With the volume pedal I don't have that problem.

Do you use very light gauge strings to be able to bend well for the steel sound?

They're not exceptionally light, for instance not as light as a Fender Rock'n'Roll set. I don't like using them that light because I like a lot of snap to the top strings as well as the bottom ones. I just have to bend a bit harder that's all. I use La Bella custom strings with such gauges as 009 1st, 012 2nd, 016 3rd and so on. The 3rd is plain obviously; I don't think anyone uses wound thirds these days.

But don't many players have problems of intonation when

The bird's-eye maple Tele in all its glory.

using a plain 3rd?

Well, my guitars are pretty accurate for a start and even though the 3rd is plain, it's not so light that it will keep going out of tune. There is the problem in any case where it tends to sound sharp when playing E major but I somehow don't seem to have the problem that much.

Your fingerpicking is very accurate when playing very fast. Is the need for accuracy at speed another reason why you don't use extremely light gauge strings?

Yes, because there's a tendency to get caught up with the whip of the strings if they are too light. I like the strings to have a certain stiffness so I can go over them without them whipping back and forth.

Do you abandon the plectrum whilst picking?

No, I still use it. If I'd started off with a thumb-pick I guess it would have been easier for that style but it's not quite so good for single string work. When playing fast runs many people use the thumb-pick and their first finger, but then again that's a different sound. If I have to I'll use my plectrum in conjunction with my little finger rather than with the others.

Good training for the little finger!

Yes. Actually I've never found it necessary to use all four fingers with a thumb-pick — in other words having five different things going. I guess some people do that though.

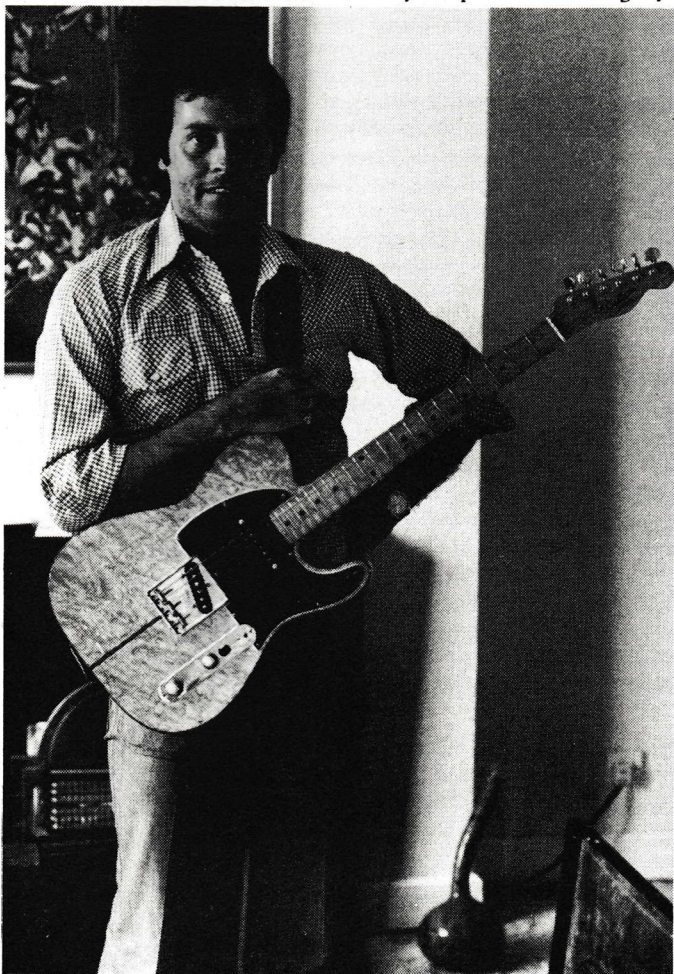
I find interesting the sound obtained by the pick and the second finger biting the string almost simultaneously. Do you employ this at all?

If I ever use that sound I'll get it by burying the pick into my thumb a little bit so that my thumb is hitting the string just after the pick. I have seen people doing it in the way you describe though.

With the first three fingers being inherently stronger than the little one, did you go through a stage of consciously having to strengthen and develop control of the little finger?

Yes, and it's hard. Jerry Reed's number, *The Claw*, which I've played on stage a couple of times, is a rocky, chunky, fast instrumental. It requires bass lines with plectrum and chords with the remaining three fingers, so requiring the little finger, ►

The other side of the axe.



◀ if only in conjunction with the second and third fingers. However I do some arpeggio stuff including the little finger and that really has to be worked at. Just to get it to move at the right time is hard.

Do you use the nails or the pads of the fingers?

Oh, I use the pads, my nails are quite short really. I found that my nails broke a lot and I somehow prefer the sound of pads on the electric guitar anyway — you can get more snap when you need it. Really pulling on the strings with my nails made them keep breaking.

What about your plectrum?

I use a fairly small pick of real tortoiseshell. They never break although like many people I keep losing them. Plastic picks not only break but I don't even like the feel of them. My pick is fairly hard because I don't like it to have any give. If I want to play really hard, other picks just bend over the strings.

You have a very clear sound. What are your criteria for good amplification?

Well, I'm not totally satisfied with the Fender sound because although I need it to be that clean at times, particularly when doing fast runs, for instance on *Tokyo* or something like that, other times I'd like to have a much fatter sound, one with more punch. So here again I'm waiting for Dan to get his amp out.

From the guitar side of things have you ever been a Gibson follower?

I find that Gibsons don't give the clean sound I need and anyway I've been playing Fenders for so long that Gibsons feel really strange. Little tricks like bending strings behind the nut I can't do on Gibsons because the head is too close to the strings. I've come to rely on goodies like that.

I mentioned Gibsons for their reputation of giving fatter sounds than Fender, which is something you seem to be searching for...

Well, I have that pretty much on my maple Telecaster because I have a Stratocaster pick-up in the neck position instead of the normal Tele rhythm pick-up which isn't very powerful. This Strat pick-up is really husky. It's been rewound really, really well and it's louder than any of the pick-ups on my Stratocasters. Now I think much of that may be due to the fact that I have this bird's-eye maple body which kind of fattens the sound up a bit. Overall I think the problems lie with amplification and not the guitars. I would rather have the fat sound in the amplification than in the pick-ups. For me, Gibson pick-ups are so poky that it's hard to get a clean sound. I've tried out most of them and admit they're all louder than Fenders and really good for that one sound. I like the fat sound on the top strings but I find the bottom three tend to sound a little muddy — they don't have that 'twang' the Fenders have. I'd like to have a combination of the two. Hendrix used to get it with his Strat — a nice sound on the bottom strings and really wailing away up top.

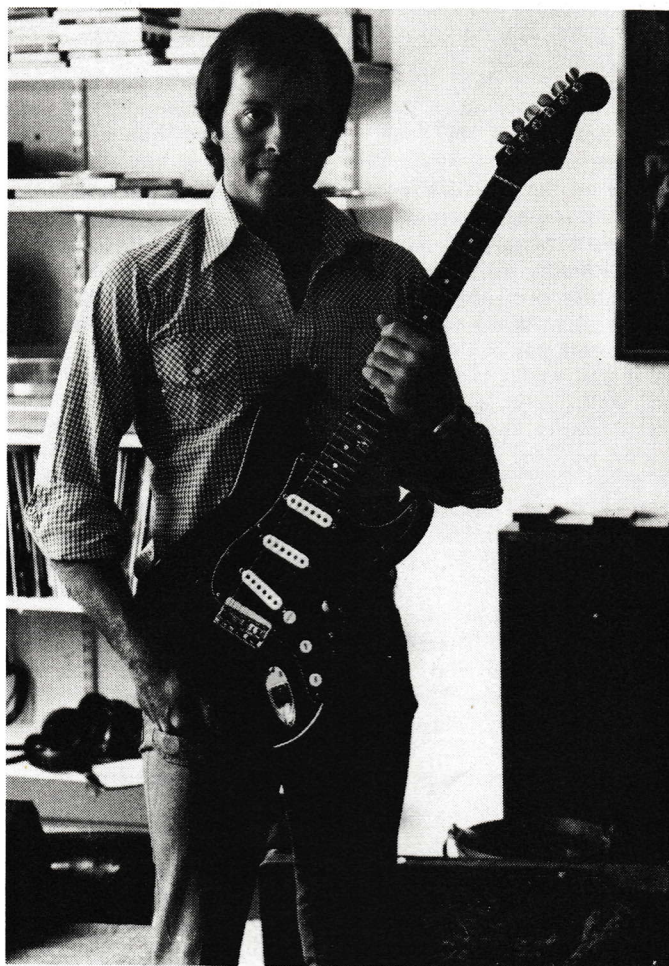
Something I've thought of doing with the rosewood Stratocaster is fitting Gibson pick-ups just to see if I can get that thick sound I'm looking for — I'd maybe then use it as a second guitar. The Gibson pick-up I prefer is the black one they had on the Les Paul Junior; it's got a great sound. If I could come by three of these I think they'd be ideal on the Strat. I'd still keep the wiring circuit getting seven sounds from the three pick-ups. The sound characteristics of the rosewood tends to make the guitar sound a little too shrill for Fender pick-ups — too lacking in bass. This would be corrected by using thicker sounding pick-ups and I hope I'd have a nice compromise — a Fender action and feel with sort of a Gibson sound.

Have you any other numbers like Tokyo up your sleeve?

Not exactly, although it would be easy enough to write another instrumental along those lines — far-out blue-grass! If I do another instrumental I think it will be a slower, more melodic number.

Tokyo seems a very demanding piece and I imagine any guitarist would be pleased with himself if he could break it down and play it at full speed. Was it fairly spontaneous?

Oh no, I sat and worked at it. I had part of it going for a while



The weight of the rosewood Strat demands a firm grip.

but I really finished it off when I knew I was going to join Fairport. I don't really know what to say about it. It is hard to play even now and I have to warm up beforehand. I like to have at least half an hour in the dressing room to limber up. Generally speaking knocking out rock'n'roll with groups I've played with in the past wasn't nearly so demanding as playing with Fairport. Jigs and reels require a lot of speed so I have to warm up, making sure I don't get too pissed before going on stage, which blows it completely.

I understand the band practises infrequently, and yet the jigs and reels involving unison melodies at break-neck speed must require a fair amount of rehearsal?

Yes they do. When we *do* pull ourselves together for a rehearsal we don't freak around too much, we work very hard. Numbers like *Dirty Linen* and *Sir Barry MacKenzie* I learnt from records because they were already recorded. The same with all material already recorded — I just did them, the arrangements were already there. *Tokyo* we worked on but I think we had it in a day. After that it was just a question of getting it up to speed.

How about your personal practice schedule? Are you a religious practiser?

No, I'm really not. I used to do some every day; like when I came home from school I couldn't wait to pick up the guitar. When you're sitting in school all day working, the prospect of playing is something to look forward to; practising a couple of hours before deciding to get stuck into homework. Lately I've had such a screwed-up schedule that it's just not a question of doing it every day, although I try to. I really pick it up when I feel like playing.

What happens when you do pick it up?

Different things. I might go through a couple of scales to see if I still remember them. Mostly it will be in order to limber up or to practise a new idea.

Are you a reader?

A very slow one. I can just about fake it if there aren't too many melody lines. I've never really got my reading up to speed and I'm pretty lazy in that sense I suppose. I don't know whether it's unfortunate that it hasn't progressed with

my playing but most people I know who started off reading have tended to rely on reading and have never really developed their ear. I used to read when I played piano so at least I know what the notes are — it's knowing where they are on the guitar at the right time that matters.

I remember hearing a short while back that there was a possibility of the band doing another Babbacombe Lee type album. Is this so?

I don't know whether we are actually going to do that but I believe there's a TV thing coming up which is concerned with *Babbacombe Lee*, with the band doing the songs. This means I'll be learning all the material.

Do any songs from this album figure in the set at the moment?

No, and the only one we used to do was during a so-called acoustic set within our overall set. We'd all go off the stage leaving the three Daves behind. They would then do the *Cell Song* with Dave Mattacks on piano, Peggy on mandolin and Swarb on violin. Having finished that, Trevor would come on and do something, then on I'd come and play *The Claw* on acoustic guitar. I haven't really been involved with *Babbacombe Lee* but I like some of the material.

Generally we are looking forward to Sandy writing numbers with the band in mind so we can kick them around and give them a Fairport arrangement. Something I'd really like to see is Sandy singing a really fast traditional style number with jigs and reel-type breaks. I guess *Walk Awhile* would be a previous example of this. The instrumental breaks in that are actually traditional so I'd like something like that but even faster.

Have you turned your hand to other fretted instruments?

Only to fool around on. What I'd really like to get into is the banjo. I don't want to go out and spend a lot of money on one until I'm convinced I'm going to have a positive interest in the instrument. But, if I can find an old second hand one I'll pick it up and start working. It seems like the obvious thing to do because I have something of a head-start with my right hand technique. Come to think of it, it would have been nice to use banjo on *Tokyo*.

Everyone has influences. Who were yours?

In 1960 I guess it was the Ventures. They never really made it big over here but they were popular in the States at the time. There was also a guy who I dug listening to — his name was Gerry Maghee. He played in this place on Sunset Strip called the Seawitch — it's now a leather shop. There was just Gerry, a drummer and a bass player and they'd whack out instrumentals all night. He used to thumb pick using a chunky sound on the bottom and bending strings on top — he was a really wild player. He was certainly an influence although I never got that thumb-pick style together too much. Later on I got into people like James Burton, Glen Campbell (when he was playing some rocky stuff) and of course Jerry Reed who is one of my favourite players.

Did you go through a blues phase?

Not really. I like playing with the dirty sound now and again but it's not Clapton style blues. I guess I went through more of a rock/blues period.

Something which comes through on Down in the flood is that when you play a rock solo, it's still Jerry Donahue and not just a series of clichéd licks joined together.

Well, I was playing those licks when they first came out but I never thought to myself, 'This is a rock number so I'm now going to do my rock solo.' I don't really listen to rock any more but when a number calls out for that kind of style I just mix it in with what I normally play — just turn up the volume and whack it out.

The band's sound on Nine was different to what had gone before. Did it require any changes from you?

Possibly yes, although I think it happened naturally. No one said you've got to do that or you have to lose that. I had to learn jigs and reels which I was looking forward to as I'd never done them before. Playing violin parts on guitar is very interesting and I've certainly been influenced by Swarb and I think, he by me. So overall I guess I've changed a little bit but I've never had to give anything up — it's still very definitely me. ■

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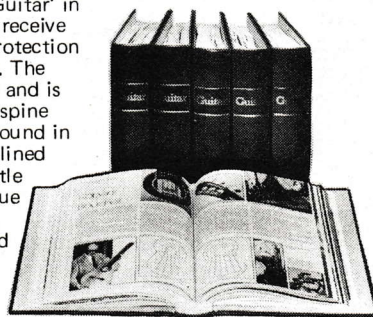
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