

Fergal's First Gig

The tiny Edwardian cottage stood at the end of a plain terrace, adjacent to an elderly pub and across from a little used train station. With its neighbours it had once been rented by railway, canal and foundry workers, but was now subsumed into the unobtrusive life of a small suburban town. It was here I would go in the late summer afternoons during that liminal time between the end of my undistinguished schooldays and the perplexities of my future working life. The sixties were just over and the seventies yet to take their gaudy shape.

Fergal, my best mate, a year older, and an apprentice engineer at a local factory, finished his shift at three o'clock, and most days I arrived shortly after to sit on the floor of his small uncarpeted bedroom and witness the miracle of his guitar playing. With a harmonica playing dad who, when persuaded, literally breathed music, Fergal had trodden a mystical path which had led, in those pre-internet days, to an esoteric musical world far beyond anything I could have imagined. Cultured in a way that no-one then thought of culture, he had started with Dylan and worked back through Van Ronk, Von Schmidt, to Blind Lemon Jefferson, Robert Johnson and Leadbelly. And then there was John Fahey.

Unlike those of us who knew only chords or the blatant riffs of the pop charts, Fergal played finger style in tunings he somehow intuited by listening to imported LPs with intriguing but uninformative covers, ordered from the high priests of Dobell's and other specialist stores. Outside religion, soon to be abandoned, I had never encountered such mystery, and outside of love would never find it again.

With the didacticism and tolerance of a natural teacher, plus a certain condescension, Fergal 'showed me things', and I practised diligently. A mundane life beckoned, and I yearned to escape it. The world of music, with everything it then meant, and the numbing life of office or factory, seemed deeply incompatible.

Fergal seemed to manage both. He could make things. He got on with his workmates. Girls found him easy to be around and thought him interesting, a perspective he cultivated assiduously by somehow managing to appear both friendly and enigmatic. He also worked hard at being insouciant, nowhere more than when playing music.

Later, when I came to know professional musicians, I realised that even the most talented spent thousands of hours learning and maintaining their craft. Those who didn't practise in any formal sense simply played all the time. So it undoubtedly was with Fergal, although even I, his best friend, witnessed relatively little of this. Fergal knew that what was done in secret had greater power to captivate.

Therefore, characteristically, it was in a casual manner that he mentioned he would be playing a concert in a couple of weeks.

"Where?" I squawked.

"The hall at St Peter's – I've got a half hour slot."

I tried to stifle an immediate visceral trepidation, imagining all too easily how I myself would face this magisterial enterprise. The oak floored hall Fergal referred to was large, sparse and resonant, annexed to the local church, and had been temporary home to a youth club, until it was realised that a certain joylessness and austerity that clung to the brickwork conspired to deflate any pleasure the company of our peers might offer.

"How did that come about?" I asked.

"I was invited to audition" said Fergal, nonchalantly dropping his bottom string to C. It later became apparent that Father Kirkpatrick, the parish priest and an alleged folksinger in his secular past, had been the instigator, after Fergal had been sent with a

ladder by his mother to re-secure a TV aerial to the rectory chimney. Adults approved of him as well.

“But what will you play – you’ll need eight or nine tunes?” Fergal had begun to doodle somewhere above the seventh fret, although even his doodling was relentlessly musical.

“I’ll do the Fahey stuff – keep it all instrumental. ‘Transcendental Waterfall’ is nearly six and a half minutes.”

“Do you think they’ll get it?”

“Well it will be something they haven’t heard before – I think they’ll find it interesting.”

In retrospect I realise that Fergal, for all the mystery that attached to his musicianship, was at that point pragmatic about the act of playing in public; my relationship with the realities of performing, as I then imagined them, being far more pliable. He also had a gift for quietening a room when he played, something intangible beyond simple accomplishment that drew and sustained attention. Perhaps because of this, an unspoken aspect of our friendship was that, almost as a form of sanctity, playing guitar took precedence over conversation. But my anxiety could not be contained.

“Are you sure you’ll have it all ready in two weeks?” It was not that I doubted him, simply that my own approach to challenge was more timid and incremental, and, without formulating the thought, by witnessing it in privacy had come to view his playing as a largely private act.

“I’ve thought it all out” he said, a dismissive eyebrow suggesting that I was being tedious.

So that was all I knew, except that very quickly our meetings assumed the formality of a rehearsal, and it became apparent that Fergal was going for it big time. There was no more doodling. He now only played entire pieces, often five or six times in a row, timing himself with his antiquated alarm clock, so that whenever I remember those tunes I associate them with discordant ticking. Aware that there would be no microphones or amplifiers, he adopted plastic fingerpicks which made his playing louder but, somehow I felt, less personal. He compiled a set list with introductory comments, adjusting the order to intersperse shorter, more tuneful pieces with the meandering and less accessible compositions for which Fahey became known, or indeed notorious.

All this contributed to the sense of something about to be shared more broadly, and so the sudden dilution of a particular type of intimacy, transitory anyway, that can only belong to a few early years of friendship.

Perhaps I should say something about Fahey. We felt exclusive in even knowing about him. Although to me, and doubtless Fergal, his music seemed the zenith of sophistication, his style of playing came to be known as ‘American primitive’, in fact I think he coined the term himself. The titles he chose alone set him apart: ‘The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death’ (also an early alias), ‘Dances of the Inhabitants of the Invisible City of Bladensburg’, ‘Revelation on the Banks of Pawtuxent’. I could go on.

There was a repetitious quality to his music which, as a burgeoning thought, I could imagine taxing the attention span of non-devotees, that is, most of the rest of the world. His pieces built slowly in a way that was spellbinding, or tortuous, towards a final crescendo of finger picking that rewarded the listener’s patience, at least when the listener was Fergal, or me.

Looking back, I can see why Fergal was inspired by his music. Some artists embrace their background as a resource throughout their creative life. Others, perhaps fearing the restriction of being so closely defined, seek to transcend it. When I remember our conversations I realise that Fergal, like Fahey, like Dylan, was drawn to the possibility of self-reinvention, and through his playing, even then, had moved a little way towards it.

The two weeks, for me an education in the art of preparing, passed quickly. On the eve of the concert I sat alone at the back of the hall – Father Kirkpatrick had passed us the key – while Fergal played the whole set, including rehearsed introductions, without dropping a note and within thirty seconds of the allotted half hour. Every piece was to be played in a different tuning and, as in those days tuning was done by ear alone, he had persuaded the local music shop to lend him a decent second hand Guild for one piece, which involved retuning five different strings.

Even now, when I think of it, this was an experience filled with portent. Fergal had asked me to sit at the other end of the hall because he wanted to ensure that his playing reached the whole audience. My role was to shout if his volume dropped, for which, as it transpired, there was no need. Watching him, tall, lean, composed but immersed in concentration, I had a brief sense of how very different our paths into the adult world would be. I didn't know then that development is rarely linear, had little experience of the tangle of success and failure, but realised that I was witnessing something indefinably momentous. Fergal was stepping into what had previously been an imaginal world, sparsely populated by those such as the mythical Fahey, hitherto an exclusive and adult domain. What I felt was complex: pride in our friendship, undeniable awe, an envy that was more sadness at my own ordinariness in comparison, and an early glimpse of how separate we are, even from those who are closest.

The following evening I sat in the hall again, not at the back this time, but near enough to see well without being a distraction. I was surrounded by my peers from school or the football pitch; other hormonal teenagers, compressed into a semblance of rectitude by the formality of the surroundings. Father Kirkpatrick, beaming, sweated and undog-collared, was to act as compere and master of ceremonies.

There was no stage as such, but a small dais had been constructed from pallets by a builder within the church congregation, over which was spread an elderly carpet. By this means performers could be seen from the back of the hall.

The concert began. Father Kirkpatrick set out the programme, extolled at length the virtue of youthful musical endeavour, and introduced Geraldine Hammond, a classmate from primary school, who began gamely scraping out arpeggios on a cello. Almost at once I became aware that the audience was benign. They listened quietly, they didn't snigger, they clapped in the right places.

I began to relax. I had visualised this occasion intensely since Fergal had first told me about it, and had become increasingly worried about his choice of repertoire. 'Transcendental Waterfall' for instance, apart from its length, was nuanced, impressionistic, and frankly rather formless. I had struggled to imagine it appealing to the Neanderthal sensibilities of some of our former classmates. But now as I sat amongst them my anxiety began to dispel. Perhaps it was the separation that occurs when someone we know steps on to a stage – even the makeshift, creaking specimen before us. Perhaps it was Father Kirkpatrick's unchallengeable bonhomie. But even Geraldine, undemonstrative, somewhat maladroit and clearly reluctant, was being treated with respect. Her performance, without the slightest pretence of artifice, met a kind reception: she was one of us and she was having a go. When she left the stage, shy and slightly flushed, she was followed by warm applause.

And so the concert unfolded. With the deliberate understatement integral to coolness Fergal had refrained from mentioning that he was last on, and therefore top of the bill. The other acts seemed to me to pass slowly, even though none had been allotted more than fifteen minutes. A small choir of ten year olds sang: 'Green Grow the Rashes'. A grade six pianist hammered out '*L'amour est Bleu*' disconcertingly from the rear of the hall, as it had been decided not to move the piano. Tim Riley, born into a family of musicians, played two pieces of Bach with aplomb on the flute, and was rewarded with some sparse cheering.

And then came Fergal's turn. As he brought his guitars onto the stage, propping one on a borrowed music stand before taking his seat, I was aware of a qualitative difference in the attention around me. This was something we would all like to be able to do, maybe would dare to imagine that we could do, and perhaps we were curious of the attributes that made it possible.

Fergal took some time to check his tuning and feel his fingers on the strings. This was a different level of composure from what had gone before and I felt expectation grow further. He cleared his throat and, in his normal voice, told us what little was known of Fahey: an American guitarist, blues influenced, who wrote his own compositions and appeared to be obsessed with turtles. Fergal, being Fergal, managed to make this sound intriguing. Then he announced the first piece, 'Poor Boy Long Ways from Home', a tune both rhythmic and melodic, and by Fahey's standards a crowd pleaser.

As the first notes began to sound I was more than ever aware of witnessing a seminal moment. He was doing what our heroes had done, suddenly inhabiting their world, seeming comfortable and assured there. In the full hall the acoustics had changed and his guitar sounded quieter than on the previous evening, causing the audience to bend forward as though being drawn towards him.

By the third tune I was mesmerised, feeling that strange combination of immersion and detachment from one's surroundings that music can elicit when you are young, your ear is fresh, and the world a vehicle of possibility.

Then two things happened. Half a dozen latecomers arrived, one or two in football shirts, bringing with them the rude outdoors. Father Kirkpatrick, without concealing his irritation, ushered them to the rear of the hall. They were not loud or even obtrusive once seated, but the private sense of being initiated into something unknown had been dissipated.

At that point also Fergal picked up the borrowed guitar. I knew from our many conversations that he prided himself on his ability to adapt to different instruments. Now, however, he began to struggle. Perhaps the ergonomics were wrong: the fingerboard too narrow or too long. Perhaps the unaccustomed picks were bunching together, costing him accuracy. Nevertheless, whether it was the change in the audience or his instrument, or the combination, his playing began to disintegrate. Playing in tunings requires greater kinaesthetic memory because there is no standard fingering, so no reassuring chord shapes to fall back on. Fergal was suddenly very alone, and the audience quickly grew restless with discomfort. It was as though, through decency or cowardice, we would have preferred to look away, but were prevented by the conventions of the occasion.

I had yet to learn much about the unsteady relationship between self-expression and context, still less regarding the psychic interplay of performer and audience, but I recognised in those moments how fragile a phenomenon can be atmosphere within a group. Nothing could bring back what had been before.

Fergal's playing grew more and more discordant, also stilted, as his natural fluency deserted him. The audience, still sympathetic, murmured and squirmed. Had this happened to any of the previous acts I doubt there would have been such a sense of disquiet. When Fergal began to play we had glimpsed something magical and colluded with it, willing to dream and be transported, and now we were confronted by a most public manifestation of human fallibility. Basically Fergal had lost it.

Finding a chord that offered some semblance of musical resolution, he ended the piece. Although he was only half way through his set there was obviously no prospect of continuing, and clutching his guitars like a vestige of dignity he left the stage, as far as I knew never to return.

Father Kirkpatrick, experienced in redemption, behaved as though all had ended naturally. He thanked the acts, praised the audience, and promised a follow-up next year,

by which time he hoped to have acquired some funding for microphones and refreshments. I noticed that he took time to speak to Fergal as the audience dispersed.

I also waited, and when he had packed his guitars walked back with him in the warm summer evening, carrying the borrowed stand. We said little, it was a moment when the affinity of a rare friendship felt almost tangible. Unusually, when I left him at his doorstep we shook hands.

For a short time our afternoon meetings continued. We never spoke about the concert, to which I had come to feel a guilty witness, and within a couple of months I became, albeit briefly, an office worker. Within a year Fergal and his parents had moved away, and eventually the letters we exchanged dwindled into silence.

My interest in music never waned, but nor in all my latter acquaintance with professional musicians did it capture my imagination so vividly and completely. For years I listened out for him in the hope that he had made a record or joined a band, and yet in my heart I doubted this possibility. Over time I came to wonder what might have happened had that fledgling attempt gone differently.

And then one day, surfing YouTube, I came upon 'Blind Joe Death', an anonymous torso with a guitar, playing the music of Fahey. It could have been someone else, but all the tunes I knew were there, still played with élan. And as I watched that headless form, in a featureless room not unlike the one in which we used to meet, I knew those were his hands, and felt again in my body the hope, and confusion, of youth.