

MEMORIES OF THE 1960'S FOLKESTONE MUSIC SCENE

I first became interested in the guitar in the late 1950s when my older brother, Fred, bought an acoustic guitar. He was about fourteen years old at the time, five years older than me and quite keen on the latest record charts. The charts were full of American artists such as Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, The Everly Brothers, Little Richard, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly, Chuck Berry, Fats Domino and Duane Eddy. There were also British bands and artists like Tommy Steele, Joe Brown, Lonnie Donegan, Cliff Richard and The Shadows.

In the late 1950s, the guitar was a relatively new instrument in Britain and unlike the piano, few people seemed to know how to play the instrument. There were few guitar teachers. I always had the impression that the guitar never seemed to be regarded as a proper instrument. If you were interested in learning to play a musical instrument, you were usually guided to play the piano or violin. However, I was not deterred and proceeded to teach myself. My tutors were 'Radio Luxembourg' and my parents' 'Dansette' record player. I tuned the guitar to my own pitch and tried to pick out the melody by ear. The first problem I found with learning to play the guitar, was mastering how to produce a note. Unlike the piano, where hitting the key will produce the note, striking a fretted note incorrectly on the guitar produces nothing. The second problem is that guitar strings, especially steel strings, are not kind to the fingers. Consequently, many beginners give up because of the pain. But I persevered and learnt to pick notes.

By 1960, my brother's guitar (a 'Martin Coletti' arch-top), had been handed down to me after he decided it was not really for him. I had progressed my playing and by then had managed to find out how to tune the guitar and play some chords. I also managed to persuade my Mum and Dad to buy me a guitar pickup and a small guitar amplifier for Christmas. Now I could play to all the neighbours!

At school, the music teacher's name was Mr Hall. Most of the music covered was of a classical type (no Chuck Berry), the most modern music being Gilbert & Sullivan. But I did not mind that as I liked most music and we did cover some music theory. I brought my guitar into a lesson one day. I could see by the look on the teacher's face that he was not really sure what to expect. But when I started playing he seemed pleasantly surprised and I even got applause from the class. The school used to put on a school play every year. That particular year the play was a musical and Mr Hall asked if I could play along to one of the songs. The song was called 'Nothing' and was about a group of young boys hanging around the streets doing nothing. It was a modern type of song and was sung by three members of my class. Unfortunately, Mr Hall left the school before the play was staged and a stand in pianist was hired. However, I played and it seemed to go well. I even got my name mentioned in the local Folkestone Herald write up.

By the age of about thirteen, I began to want to be in a band and play with other musicians. One day, while entertaining the neighbours, there was a knock on the front door. Upon opening the door, a young chap named Martin Vinson introduced himself and asked if I would like to join his band. He was a bass player and his

friend Ian Milton, played the guitar. They were both a couple of years older than me and seemed to know all about the local bands. This was my introduction to the music scene in Folkestone.

In Folkestone there were several venues to see live bands. I remember Tofts, which was originally run by Harold and Doris Toft and situated next to the Old Pleasure Gardens theatre in the West End of Folkestone. I remember seeing a resident band called The Playboys from Dover play there. When the building was pulled down in 1964 it moved to Grace Hill in Folkestone. It was there that some of the more well known groups appeared. I saw the original Fleetwood Mac play in the late 1960s. Not far from Tofts in Dover Road was the Empress Ballroom where, on Sunday nights, some of the London bands would play. I saw a band called The Tonettes from Dartford play there. The lead guitarist was left handed and played a right handed Gibson 335 upside down, which I had never seen before. Almost above the Empress Ballroom was a smaller venue, which later became known as The Hillside. The Leas Cliff Hall was another venue that used to feature the well known bands. The Rolling Stones played there in the early 1960's.

The main music shop in Folkestone was called Golden & Wind and was in Tontine Street. They sold mainly guitars, records and sheet music. I was a frequent visitor, always wanting to see if there was anything new in guitars and sheet music. Most of the guitars were British or European, never any American guitars. Across the road there was a record shop, which used to have a better selection of records than Golden & Wind. They also had little sound booths, where you could listen to the records. Later on the shop also started selling guitars and amplifiers.

Guitar instrumentals were all the thing in the early sixties. Tunes by The Shadows, John Barry Seven, Duane Eddy, and Bert Weedon, to name a few, were frequently in the charts and I could play many of them. Bert Weedon was Britain's answer to Duane Eddy. He had a hit in 1960 with his cover version of Arthur Smith's, 'Guitar Boogie Shuffle'. He also produced a guitar tutor book called 'Play in a Day'. The book was popular and anyone buying their first guitar usually purchased the book.

We had no name for our band and no one wanted to sing, so we basically became an instrumental group and rehearsed at each other's house. Martin and Ian went to the same school (Hillside School in Folkestone). Martin had a home made bass guitar that he had made at school in the woodwork class. Ian had an arch top guitar, similar to mine. He also wore blue jeans, cowboy boots and rode a bicycle that had 'cow horn' shaped handle bars. I was still in my grey flannels and wore a tie. He was a chatty person and he seemed to know quite a few people who played in the local bands. The Lonely Ones were one such band. They used to play once a week at the Co-op hall in Tontine Street. When I first saw them, their line up was Noel Redding on lead guitar, Bob Hiscox on rhythm, John Andrews on bass and Buster on the drums. Peter Kircher was the vocalist. The Lonely Ones were the first live band that I had ever seen, so it was quite an experience. They used to play Burns Vibra-Artist guitars. I remember asking Noel why the volume of the rhythm guitar was always so quiet. He remarked that he did not like the rhythm guitar too loud. I was not surprised when he eventually moved to a three piece band line up.

Meanwhile, Martin, Ian and I continued with our own practise sessions, still without a drummer. Drummers were in short supply. We eventually managed to recruit a drummer, Dave Taylor, who was a farmer and lived in Peene, just outside of Cheriton. Dave Taylor was the former drummer with a band called The Doltons. Once Dave joined we changed to rehearsing at the Woodwood Hall, on The Bayle in Folkestone. However, it was the summer time and Dave was often working and could not attend the rehearsals. Eventually, he left and we were without a drummer again.

At school one day, I found out that Derek Goodwin had a drum set and was having drum lessons. Even better, his parents had vacated their front living room so that he could use it to practise! I introduced Derek to Martin and Ian and we tried a practise session. Martin Vinson was not impressed. He was ambitious and wanted high standards. He had just bought a Hofner 500/5 Blonde bass guitar and a Selmer True Voice amplifier and intended going places!

Ian and I would sometimes cycle to Seabrook to watch the The Lonely Ones practise at Noel's mother's house, where she used to run a guest house. The band used to rehearse in the guest sitting room. I remember one time playing 'Wonderful Land' on Noel's Burns guitar, while he played the drums and John Andrews played bass. The last time we visited the house, Pete Kircher had taken over on drums and a new member Pat Barlow/Neil Landon, formerly of The Cheetahs, had become the vocalist. Eventually, they became Neil Landon and the Burnettes, with Bob Hiscox on bass, Noel Redding on guitar, Pete Kircher on Drums and Neil Landon the vocalist. They turned professional in 1962 and played a promotional gig at Folkestone Town Hall. They looked impressive in their suits, playing brand new pale blue Burns Bison guitars. Local support bands The Vostoks and The Avengers and our band also played that night.

Trevor Williams was a friend of Martin and Ian and he lived quite near Ian's house. He would sometimes turn up at Ian's house while we were practising. He was learning to play guitar. Trevor went on to play with the band called The Avengers. Their drummer's name was, Ewart Pinch, and Martin was impressed by his drumming. Their bass player, Terry Hughes, was also the vocalist. At The Burnettes' promotional gig, where The Avengers were also playing that night, Martin seized the opportunity and offered his services to play bass and was accepted. Their line up became Trevor Williams on guitar, Dave Hammonds on guitar, Martin Vinson on bass, Ewart Pinch on drums and Terry Hughes was the vocalist. The Avengers went on to play many of the local venues including a weekly slot at Morelli's Coffee Bar in Folkestone. They later went on to be managed by a professional agency and their name was changed to The Nothings (Oh dear!).

Terry Sexton was a friend of Derek Goodwin and was keen to be Martin Vinson's replacement. He was learning to play the guitar, but felt sure he could play bass guitar. I could read bass music score, so I spent several weeks showing Terry the bass parts to the instrumentals that we played. Eventually, things did start to improve. We decided to call the band 'The Checkers', a name suggested by Terry's mum. One of our first gigs was playing at the Youth club near the Old Dover Road School in Folkestone. We also got a gig playing at St Martin's Fete. This was the

first time we had played outside to a large audience. Another booking we got was playing at the Oddfellows Arms, in the Shade by the Folkestone sands, on Saturday and Sunday evenings. This was a useful booking as we also got paid! In the meantime, Ian had left school and started work as an apprentice green keeper, at Folkestone golf course. He also managed to buy himself a new Hofner Verythin guitar, for £78, with his earnings. At the time, this was my next best choice of guitar to a Gibson. It looked similar to a Gibson 335, but was half the price! It also came fitted with a Bigsby tremolo arm. It was about this time that Ian became involved with a girlfriend and decided that he wanted to leave the band. He decided that he no longer wanted his new guitar and asked if I would like to take over the hire purchase payments. I was still at school, but used to earn money from a paper round, a grocery round and a Photographic delivery round. My parents agreed, so I got the guitar. We continued playing as a trio at the Oddfellows Arms for the summer. The place used to get very busy. We mainly played instrumentals, but Terry eventually plucked up courage to sing a few songs. One night someone asked if they could sing a song. He said his name was Jack (it turned out that his name was Peter Godden) and he wanted to sing the song called 'Whole Lotta Shakin'. It was not unusual for people to request to sing, especially when they had had a drink! However, this time the singer was actually very good, so he sang another song and ended up being our singer. Jack was five years older than we were and he was also married, but we tolerated that. He could sing Rock 'N' Roll and he seemed to have a rapport with the audience. We eventually found a replacement guitarist for Ian Milton. His name was Dave Caswell formerly of The Vostoks. Dave played a Burns Split Sonic guitar and was only three years older than we were!

I had always been interested in electrics and electronics. I decided that I needed a larger amplifier, as my little 5W Amplifier was not loud enough. A new 30W amplifier, like a Vox AC30, cost over £110 in 1963/1964. While looking through an electronics magazine one day, I noticed an advert for ready built kit amplifiers for sale for £15. I purchased the amplifier and two 12inch speakers. Derek's dad, who just happened to be a furniture upholsterer, made a cabinet for the speakers. I used this set up for some time. However, the amplifier was not suitable for constant transportation, the valves would come loose and it became unreliable. I also bought a Selmer Echo Box. Unlike today, a clean sound with echo was popular then.

Up until now, transporting equipment to gigs was always a problem, because no one drove or owned a van. On several occasions Ian Milton had managed to persuade his brother in law, Stan Howard, to drive us in his old van. Stan was quite a bit older than us (in his thirties - a bit of a Father figure in our eyes) and to me seemed to be quite a serious character. He could also be quite critical about our playing. But somehow Stan ended up becoming our manager! From that point on, things started to get quite busy.

Our amplification equipment was not very suitable for playing larger venues, so it was decided that we would upgrade it. We opted for a Selmer amplifier with two twin speaker cabinets for a PA system and Shure mics, Vox amps for the guitars and a new set of drums for Derek. It was 1964 and the Beatles were very popular. There was a flood of Mersey music in the charts and suddenly live music became

even livelier. We collected our new equipment one Saturday morning and played a gig with it the same afternoon in Maidstone.

Derek's parents' front room became the hub. All the equipment was left there, set up, when we were not playing elsewhere. Fortunately, Royal Military Avenue was a very wide tree lined avenue. The house was also an end house and the younger members of the neighbours the other side usually ended up in the front room with us when we were rehearsing. The amazing thing was, Derek's parents did not seem to mind. Occasionally, his dad would pop his head round the door and say "Do you think you can turn it down a bit lads?", smile and close the door. There were coming and goings and Stan would usually be there giving his opinion and ideas. He did find us work, which was necessary now to pay for our equipment and he also got us some local press in the Folkestone Herald. The operation became more like a business. The Disco had not arrived yet. Playing a gig meant that the band was the entertainment for the night, which could mean playing from 7.30pm to midnight virtually non stop. Many of the local villages used to hold dances on Friday or Saturday nights, so this provided some of the work we now needed. We also played the local towns such as Folkestone, Dover, Deal, Ashford, Canterbury and Maidstone. We also managed get some regular bookings. The Post Office used to run regular social dances on a Saturday evening every couple of months. These were held at the Folkestone East Cliff Pavilion and sometimes the Town Hall in Dover. They would have a dance band playing for the evening and we would have two half hour sessions. Much easier than village gigs such as 'The Young Farmers', at Elham village hall. Nicholls lories were another company that used to hire us for their socials. These were usually held above the Empress Ballroom in what became known as The Hillside.

The Sundowners were a popular band in Folkestone, in the early sixties, who had a large local following. They got a recording contract with Piccadilly records and turned professional in about 1963. Their line up was Neville Takes on bass, Roger Ames on Drums, Martin Jones on guitar and Boz Leggett on guitar and vocals. The band used an old converted ambulance to transport themselves and their equipment around the country. Their first single was Baby, Baby/House of the Rising Sun. Soon after its release, the Animals released a more commercial version of 'House of the Rising Sun' and had a huge hit, which rather overshadowed The Sundowners version. The Sundowners also released two more singles: 'Come on in' in 1964 and 'Where Am I' in 1965 and had TV and Radio plays. Despite all the publicity, they still played local Kent gigs. On one such occasion, The Checkers were the support band for The Sundowners when they played at Sellinge village hall. The Checkers also played at the Sundowners club in Dymchurch.

Noel Redding left The Burnettes and returned to Folkestone and formed The Lonely Ones (Take Two). The new Line up was Noel Redding on guitar, John Andrews on bass, Trevor Sutton on Drums and Derek Knight vocals. Trevor Sutton had previously played in The Vostoks with Dave Caswell, who was now our rhythm guitarist. Trevor Sutton had a full time job and left The Lonely Ones for career study. He was replaced by Lawrence Whiting. It was 1964 and a Folkestone Local Bands dance was hosted at the Leas Cliff Hall. The evening featured The Lonely Ones and The Checkers. Stan's wife Jean made us all special glittery jackets for the

occasion. Bright red for the band and white for Jack. We were well received at the gig and went on to play at the Empress Ballroom where Noel Redding had set up his own club on Sunday nights.

We played several more times at the Leas Cliff Hall, another occasion being the support band for The Bo Street Runners. In 1964 they had entered the Ready Steady Win TV competition with their performance of (yes you've guessed it) 'I'm a Bo Street Runner', a competition to find the next big group. They won it and got a £1000 prize and a recording contract with Decca Records. During their time the band went through many personnel changes, as members did not like the changes in musical direction the band was heading. Mick Fleetwood joined the band on drums in 1965.

One day at school a new member joined my class. His name was Ian Taylor. Ian came from the Grammar school, which was next door to my school (Morehall). At the Grammar school, he had played truant and eventually ran away. Finally, he was told to leave and therefore ended up at Morehall School. He said he played the guitar and I think he had run away to try and join a band. He was a very capable person, quite tall and looked older than his years. He lived just around the corner from Morehall School. I remember visiting his house and playing guitar. He had an old guitar that he had bought secondhand and a small Watkins amplifier. I do not recollect a maker's name on the guitar, but when he played the guitar through his Watkins amplifier it sounded really good. I never did find out the make of the guitar! Ian eventually joined a local band called The Trespassers and played many of the local venues. He eventually left the Trespassers and went on to play with The Lonely Ones (Take Three), when Noel Redding rejoined Neil Landon and The Burnettes. After Ian left The Trespassers, I was asked to join them, but I stayed loyal to my band and refused. Later (1965), Noel Redding went on to form another band called The Loving Kind, featuring Peter Kircher on drums, Derek Knight vocals and Jim Leverton on bass. Jim Leverton previously played for a Dover band called The Big Beats. Noel left The Loving Kind in mid 1966 and returned to Folkestone. In September 1966, he answered an advert in the Melody Maker for musicians. He auditioned in London for the Jimi Hendrix band and the rest is well documented! Peter Kircher went on to play drums for several bands, his claim to fame being Honeybus in 1968 and Status Quo in 1982 - 1985.

'Opportunity Knocks' was a popular ITV network talent show, in 1964/1965, hosted by the ever smiling Hughie Green. The Checkers were entered (possibly by Stan, but I am not certain) to audition for the show, in London. The audition was my first bad experience of show business. There were queues of hopefuls, waiting to be auditioned like lambs to the slaughter. Every 2 minutes the word "Next" could be heard. Hughie Green was miserable and nothing like he appeared to be on TV. His entourage were even worse, just plain nasty! Needless to say we did not get on the show.

I was always interested in music composition. My first composition that we played, as a band, was a Rock/Boogie instrumental called 'Collettii'. The title was suggested by Ian Milton and was based on the maker's name plate on my guitar, Martin Coletti. I more recently included the number on an album called 'Crying in

my Sleep' that I recorded. It is available on many of the streaming platforms such as Spotify and Apple music. Another time, Derek came up with some words for a song, which we called 'Lonely Heart' and I provided the melody. There was a local place called Hayton Manor, Stanford, that groups could record demos. We decided to record two songs: 'Lonely Heart' and a cover version of 'Long Tall Sally'. When we played at the Deal Astor Theatre, a reporter from the Kentish Express came and took our photo and gave us good press about the song and the band.

Throughout 1965 we continued to play many of the venues in Folkestone and the surrounding areas of Kent. We worked as a team and everyone knew their place. However, towards the end of 1965 band members seemed to develop other interests and rehearsing and playing gigs every week seemed to be a chore rather than a pleasure. Finally, a majority decision was reached to stop playing. I was disappointed in some ways, because the equipment was all paid for and we could now make some money. In addition, we had become a good tight band and were able to provide a reasonable evening's entertainment. The band stopped taking bookings and the gig diary was run down. The Checkers played their final gig at the Grand Hotel, Littlestone sometime in early 1966. I was just seventeen and a few weeks from taking exams, so I decided to work for those and go on to complete my education. In September 1968 I left Folkestone for University and a total different career path!

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