

Faith in Music

An interview with Bill Fowler by Hannah Maximova

July 2005

H: So what did you study in school?

BF: I didn't have much of a college career. I lasted about two and a half quarters at UC Santa Barbara.

H: Are you from LA?

BF: Originally, Long Beach, yeah. But my brother, sister and I went overseas with our parents in the late 50's because my dad was in the oil business working for the French oil company Total. When I was nine or ten we went to North Africa and stayed there for five years. I went to a French school in Tripoli in Libya. I have a good accent, but my vocabulary isn't very good. The percussionist in the trio I have is French, so we talk.

Later I ended up following my brother and sister to school in Geneva, Switzerland, where I stayed for two years. Later I graduated from high school in Tehran, Iran. It was an amazing background. You got to see Americans as others see them—it was very enlightening.

H: Wow. What are these pictures? [I pointed to a framed group of three faded pictures that was hanging on the wall. They showed small faded figures in camouflage standing against a dusty beige landscape. In the upper picture a helicopter is seen from below hovering against the sky.]

BF: Rewind to 1968 in Vietnam. That's a close shave I had there. I was on three- and four-man team reconnaissance missions, what's called Long Range Patrol. I did that when I quit college and got drafted. It was the height of the Vietnam War.

H: Was it the thing where you watched the lottery to see if you were drafted?

BF: No, the lottery was later. This was the full-on draft. I thought I had a medical deferment for a kidney condition, and I'd been told it would exclude me from active duty. I also had a deferment because I was a student. Then I quit school in May '67 and was in the Army by October. The following April I was in Vietnam.

Before all that happened I had decided that I would refuse to go. There was a point at which a sergeant had a group of us in a room and asked if anyone there was planning to refuse to go. A couple guys raised their hands, but I didn't have the nerve. I thought I'd get a lawyer and refuse later. I'd heard that people who'd refused their orders for Nam were getting five year sentences in prison and serving two. I was thinking: *Well geez, I'd have a lot of time to practice guitar in prison, and I'd be really good when I got out.* (laughs) I went to a bookstore and got the information for the draft resisters but when it came down to it, I went with the program and got lucky—I got home.

I'd quit school against my parents' wishes, but all I wanted to do was play guitar. I'd started playing rhythm guitar in a band.

H: Have you been playing music ever since you got back from the war? Has that been your major means of income?

BF: Yes, it has. Up and down. My parents had a house in Santa Monica, and when I got back I stayed with them briefly. When I applied for a job at St. John's hospital, it turned out that the head of the hiring department was a Vietnam vet. I remember showing up in my '58 VW in thongs and a T-shirt. I wasn't taking it very seriously, but the guy was only too happy to hire me. They were starting a patient transport department, and I got hired as a guy with a blue smock. Later, I became an EKG technician there.

H: So how do you feel about the current war, having been drafted into that one?

BF: That's a big question. I don't trust the government. My main reason for joining Orange Grove is to have our kids raised Quaker so they have a legitimate religious out in case something happens. I want them to serve in some way, like alternate service. It had never occurred to me that there were conscientious objectors during WWII. I've since met some, having become associated with Quakers.

H: Did you see the movie *The Fog of War*?

BF: No, but I read McNamara's book [former US Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara]. He's a pretty big piece of work. I think he's an automaton. He was an exec, a numbers cruncher for Ford. He's a corporate guy who got a job managing something, and he managed it. But he did so knowing it was unmanageable the way it was going. That's the biggest crime right there.

H: Have you talked to Joe Franko about your military experience?

BF: Yeah, we talked briefly. It's funny, I rarely run into anyone connected with it. I ran into one guy I was over there with, and we just didn't want to talk about it. It's like it was yesterday. That picture up there was my third mission. We got chased out of an area by two or three platoons and ended up being hauled out by those McGuire rigs (hanging by a rope from a helicopter). We literally got pulled off the top of a mountain while being shot at. By a miracle we got out.

H: How has it been to be a musician in LA?

BF: I've gotten into the not-going-on-the-road thing. I've done some recording work here and there over the years and still do for friends and friends of friends. I'm really concentrating on being a jazz player now, and a teacher. I'm the administrative head of the Guitar Department at the LA Music Academy. It's kind of a drag from a musical standpoint because now I've got to do all this junk I don't really want to do. I really get off on the teaching, showing enthusiasm for music, playing and passing on what I know. I really enjoy teaching when the students are into it.

There didn't used to be a lot of good music education, but now it's this huge industry. There's the International Association of Jazz Educators. There's a convention every year; it's amazing. It's still true that you really have to go out and make your own way, and the music is its own reward. Hopefully you can make ends meet in some way related to it. Luckily, that's what I've been able to do.
