

JOHN BAKER BIOGRAPHY

by Richard Anthony Baker

John Baker was my hero. When I was a boy, he was the person I most wanted to be. He was clever, talented, witty, fashionable and greatly popular. John Baker was my brother.

We were born into an East End working class family, which, since 1780, had earned its living by making fireworks. Early in the twentieth century, the Bakers sold out to Brocks.

The next in line, William [Bill], found another way of entertaining people. He took the name, Will Keogh, and became a minor music hall comedian basing his act on the eccentric Billy Bennett, whom he greatly admired.

In 1936, he married a hairdresser's model, Violet [Vi], the daughter of a publican in the City of London. On the back of a truck they hired, they sat on two chairs and, with a few other belongings, were driven to their new home, a small terraced house in the former Essex fishing village of Leigh-on-Sea [122 Western Road].

On 12 October 1937, John was born. For the first eight years of his life, he was brought up by Vi as Bill, who was 35 on the outbreak of the Second World War, was called up to serve, first in North Africa and then in Italy.

John adored his mother, who probably over-indulged him. A stricter regime was established when Bill was invalided out of the armed forces near the end of the war as the result of the last of three nervous breakdowns he suffered.

By the time John reached his early teens, it was clear he was developing a prodigious musical talent. He played the piano with the skill of an adult, he could sight read, he had perfect pitch and he enjoyed the music of Bartok and Oscar Peterson in equal measure.

After attending local schools, he studied piano and composition at the Royal Academy of Music, from which he emerged as an LRAM

{Licentiate of the Royal Academy of Music} and a GRSM {Graduate of the Royal School of Music}.

During those years, music flowed through the house in Western Road like a river. Vi, while doing the housework, sang the songs she had learned as a girl, the work of Cole Porter, the Gershwins and many others. John was constantly at the piano, perfecting his interpretation of classical works, composing his own music and endlessly improvising.

When the music was not "live", 78 rpm gramophone records of such works as Grieg's Piano Concerto and Debussy's La Cathedrale Engloutie were being played. [Later on, I was part of all this too, practising the trombone, tuba and sousaphone. After I started collecting Victorian sheet music, John and I would learn the likes of Come Into the Garden, Maud and The Lost Chord, which we performed as party pieces].

I was nine years younger than my brother. So that, when I was twelve, he was 21. He was like a third parent to me. {When I was 21 and he was 30, the gap seemed smaller}.

John joined the BBC as a studio manager in 1960 and worked on a wide variety of radio programmes: playing foreign correspondents' despatches into Radio Newsreel, balancing the sound panel for the recording of a play and playing records requested by listeners to Housewives' Choice and Children's Favourites.

At Bush House, the headquarters of the World Service, he once played the Koran to the Arab world at the wrong speed. He expected to be sacked. It was characteristic of the BBC then that he was merely called in by a boss and told not to worry about it.

John threw himself into the social life of the BBC. He joined its amateur drama group, the Ariel Players, and wrote songs for its Christmas revues with Dick Clement and Ian le Frenais, who went on to create The Likely Lads. He also met many of his boyfriends at the BBC and brought some of them home to Leigh.

At the start of 1963, he joined the Radiophonic Workshop, which had been founded by Desmond Briscoe five years previously. In the early days of electronic music, its pioneering work of developing new and different sounds was greatly in demand by programme makers.

John invented many techniques. He recorded onto reel-to-reel tape the sound of everyday objects, such as the twanging of a ruler on a desk or a cork being pulled from a bottle. By changing the speed of the tape, he could alter the sounds' pitch and was then able to compose a melody from these sounds by, for instance, making a minim fill four inches of tape, a crotchet, two, a quaver, one, and so on. More cleverly, if he wanted to introduce a jazz feeling to the tune, he cut a note slightly short so that it anticipated the beat. The work was painstaking and demanded a steady nerve. But it was the job for John. He loved it and was never happier.

The social atmosphere of the Workshop suited him too. For a time, he shared a flat with David Cain. He knew Brian Hodgson from the Ariel Players. He liked the down-to-earth Dick Mills and the affable Paddy Kingsland. He was quietly amused by Desmond Briscoe's habit of presenting other people's ideas as his own and he did anything to avoid going to Desmond's annual narrow boat parties. He reached an accommodation with the ethereal Delia Derbyshire, although he privately criticised her academic background, believing she was more a mathematician than a musician.

John's work was noticed outside the BBC by firms that issued discs of mood music, but more importantly by Johnny Johnson, a former singer who, on the arrival of Independent Television, recognised the commercial importance of advertising jingles. John "realised" many sounds for him. It was highly lucrative work.

For years, John had played in jazz groups and at dinner dances with his own trio in Southend, the run-down seaside town a few miles from Leigh. He was also happy to accompany sing-songs at Southend's only gay pub, the Royal Hotel.

Now, there was a new outlet. Alexander Bridge, a talented fantasist, had taken over the Palace Theatre in Westcliff, midway between

Southend and Leigh, and was presenting weekly "rep" there with a 16-strong company. Along with straight plays and comedies, there were musical comedies and old-time music hall bills. John played in the pit and sometimes worked as musical director. When Bill and Vi went on holiday, the Palace Theatre company [and others] descended on Western Road for parties that seemed to continue morning, noon and night.

John was moving into a much higher income bracket. When he was earning a good BBC salary, say, £30,000 by today's standards, he made three times as much from outside interests. Western Road immediately enjoyed a greatly improved standard of living. The family had never been poor, but now there was no longer a need to watch the pennies.

Vi's mangle was sold, its place taken by a new washing machine. Previously, a decanter of sherry had stood on the sideboard from one Christmas to the next. John, who had been virtually teetotal, now developed a taste for fine French wines. Champagne had never been bought, not even for celebrations. Now, it accompanied the main family meal of the week, Saturday lunch. Sunday dinners had long been abandoned as both John and I were out playing in jazz bands.

He and I grew closer and closer. We had music in common and shared a sexuality that was then still illegal. We went to concerts and shows together, we ate out often and we took foreign holidays together. The third parent became my best friend.

John was never physically strong and he was now working very hard indeed. Like so many, he started to use alcohol as a provider of false energy. From wine, John moved to whisky and gin and from them to brandy and vodka. His intake of alcohol and the intense pace of his work fuelled bouts of severe depression and in August 1970 he suffered his first breakdown.

Two unwelcome genes in this branch of the Baker family are depression and addiction to alcohol. John and I copped both. John spent five weeks in a nursing home and returned to work, but in

February 1971 he suffered one of the worst tragedies of his life, the death of Vi. He was devastated.

Suddenly, Bill, John and I were no longer a family. We were like three bachelors living under the same roof. John tried to help. Once, he cooked the Saturday lunch. His choice was boeuf Bourguignon. It tasted good and Bill asked him how he had done it. He had followed the recipe as though it were a chemistry experiment. Only one thing had worried him: the onions in the conservatory. Bill immediately stopped eating. There were no onions in the conservatory. John had used hyacinth bulbs. None of us thankfully suffered any ill effects.

John's grief over Vi's comparatively sudden death caused him to start drinking again and there developed a spiral: drink, depression, nursing home and drink again. He became an alcoholic, drinking secretly and at any time of the day or night. His character changed. The easy-going John became difficult. He no longer wanted to go out and he did not want to see me so often.

He played in public less and on Sunday evenings, as he prepared to start a new week at the Workshop, he wept uncontrollably. A flat he bought near the Workshop was painted in deep dark colours and he became semi-reclusive. He worked only at night. There was no Desmond around then, he explained. The phone never rang and he could work in peace. The truth was probably that the new routine allowed him to drink all night.

For some years, the BBC did all it could to help, but, as his health deteriorated, his music became weirder and less popular.

One of the younger composers at the Workshop was put "in charge" of him, something he found deeply humiliating. In 1974, the BBC sacked him and he never recovered from the shock. From the day he left Maida Vale, he never wrote another note of music nor played in public again.

As a composer, he was unemployable. In Britain, the Workshop was the sole employer of people versed in his skills. As a pianist, he could have succeeded as a jazz or a session musician or as the provider of unobtrusive music in a cocktail bar. But his nerves were

shot to pieces and he did not need to work. In his most productive years, he had earned handsome royalties. All the same, he was at his lowest point ever.

At this point, Daphne Walker entered his life. In one way, she had always been there. She lived across the road from 122. The daughter of an East End property developer, she and her brother, Ellis, ran a garage and caravan business. By the time John reached his nadir, her father had died and, in his place, she began taking care of John. She cooked for him and reintroduced some normality into his life, but she was far from normal herself. Although clean and presentable, she lived in extreme squalor.

During the years she was with John, she bought successively three houses, one on the Isle of Man, another back at Leigh and the last on the Isle of Wight. Each home was allowed to become filthy. They all smelt foul. The kitchens were unhygienic and the lavatories disgusting. In addition, Daphne had no interest in music. She is tone deaf, John explained.

Daphne knew, of course, that John was gay, but, given her background, she had a refreshingly liberal view of homosexuality, perplexed over why anyone would want to discriminate against gay men. Their relationship was platonic, but she came to love John deeply. I do not believe he loved her, but he became dependant on her.

After leaving the Workshop, John spent the next few years in an alcoholic stupor. On the Isle of Man, he contracted cirrhosis of the liver. Daphne dreaded anything to do with doctors and hospitals and failed to seek medical help until the last moment. When the medics finally arrived, he was so weak he had to be carried to the ambulance. It is amazing that he survived.

He said that, once he was discharged, he never drank again and he may well have been right. He told Daphne that he was ashamed of that part of his life, but he need not have been. Although alcoholism imposes enormous strains on those close to the sufferers, it is an illness.

By the time he returned to Leigh, John and I were, to my great sorrow, almost completely estranged.

The purpose of the move to Briar Well, a large 1960s house at Freshwater on the Isle of Wight, was to find the total silence that John craved. For a time, he was fairly happy again, walking his dogs in the almost deserted hills high above the house.

Unfortunately, the serenity was interrupted one morning when fire broke out. John could do nothing other than sit on the lawn and watch the firemen deal with it. The cause of the fire was never established, but its seat was a mysterious circle of flames that sprang from the floor of a utility room. For some months, Briar Well was uninhabitable. John and Daphne moved to Farringford Hall, a comfortable, old-fashioned hotel less than a mile away. They hated it. John told me: "You can only eat so much Black Forest cherry gateau."

In 1996, he fell ill again with what appeared to be jaundice. He was admitted to St Mary's Hospital on the Isle of Wight and then transferred to a hospital in south London. On a visit one evening, in a busy corridor, I was hurriedly told by a junior doctor that John had cancer of the liver and had less than a year to live.

He died at Briar Well on 7 February 1997 and his ashes were scattered in the hills where he walked his dogs. Nobody from the Workshop attended his funeral, although Delia Derbyshire visited Daphne after his death and became obsessed about the fire.

Daphne survived John by six years. To avoid being seen by a doctor or getting admitted to hospital, she told no-one about her final illness, although there were clues. In her will, she left £100,000 to the Royal Academy of Music to set up a fund to benefit jazz students. The story of my brother, John Baker, is one of promise and achievement, but ultimately tragedy. His misfortune was to be born into a world for which he was too tender.

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