

Bob Culbertson Aug. 5 2002

It took a day to figure out the air conditioning at the Clonlara School in Ann Arbor Michigan. From Aug. 3-5 2002, 33 Stick players from across North America gathered at the Clonlara School for what may have been the largest gathering in the world for players of Emmett's instruments. There were many factors contributing to the overwhelming success in Ann Arbor: great organization, momentum carried over from past seminars, a general feeling that now is really exciting and special time to be playing The Chapman Stick. But many point to the combination of two great figures in the Stick community as the headline attraction and factor that made Ann Arbor 2002 such a resounding success. Of course I'm referring to Greg Howard and the victim of this Talking Sticks installation Bob Culbertson.

So by the end of the first full day of instruction, the Saturday, everyone was just baking. By Sunday, Steve Osburn had figured out how to control the AC in each room and things were nice and cool all around. My internal thermostat, set to its moderate Canadian climate, had adjusted and all was fine. Then, during the Sunday lunch break, I went outside with Bob to find a quiet place to do this interview.

And the heat!

It felt like I was walking into an oven. But an oven with some sort of strange moisturizing system that not only cooked things, quickly from the outside, but somehow managed to soak things to the core both simultaneously and instantaneously. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

We found a picnic table under some totally useless shade. I set up my mini-disc recorder expecting it to melt as I put it between us and tried to recall some of my prepared questions from my quickly dissolving brain. Then we began.

Bob has a way of telling a story. It's kind of like the way he performs. When he plays, his eyes tend close, his head drifts from side to side sending his long mane of curly, graying hair into motion. The music seems to drift through him, past his fingers, onto his Stick and out into the world. Bob tells a story the same way. He brings you in, making you feel like you were there with him in San Jose leading the Great Stick Orchestra or in a music store hearing this guy named Emmett Chapman play his newly discovered instrument. You can hear the tone of his latest baby, the Acoustic Stick, as he talks about it.

A little over a half hour later, totally oblivious to the gallon of sweat that I had lost, we went back inside. Sounds of Stick from 1976, Bob's tackling the classic music repertoire on Stick, new sounds from the Acoustic Stick and visions of 50 year-old housewives grooving to Bob's music fought for space in my head as we opened the door and felt the refreshing blast of cold air.

Jim Reilly: Let's start at the beginning. Tell me your story about seeing Emmett play in a music store in San Jose.

Bob Culbertson: I was teaching guitar at Guitar Showcase. Me and a bunch of friends walked into the store on a Saturday and we heard this noise coming from upstairs, like a rumble. The guys in the store said, "You've got to go upstairs and check out the clinic."

I was on my way to the beach and I said, "No, I really want to go to the beach." A couple of people said, "No you've really got to see this. It's kind of like a guitar, but it's cool." I thought it was a synthesizer and I wasn't much into that, so I said, "No, I'll check it out later."

Then a buddy of mine who I played in a band with said, "No. Just go up there and look for a minute then you guys can go and do whatever you need to do."

So I went up and I saw Emmett play, he had just started his clinic. I didn't leave. I told someone to go and get my friends to come up, fortunately they were into it. So we just sat and watched the whole thing. As soon as it was over I new I wanted to buy one.

At the time I was experimenting a bit with playing piano. And there was a guy out at the flea market in San Jose who played two guitars, but it was a very limited method that he did. I was experimenting a little bit but nowhere near the concept of what Emmett was doing.

JR: There's a picture on your Website from 1967 of you tapping on a classical guitar but using the old Jimmie Webster style holding your guitar in its traditional position.

BC: Yea, but as soon as I saw Emmett, the whole thing came together.

JR: How old were you then?

BC: Twenty or twenty-one. It took me about five months to get the money up to get a Stick. The guy who played in my band, Jim Bruno, bought one right away. He let me practice on it from time to time. One time he let me take it home for a weekend. I was all excited, I took it home and I got a 102 degree fever. But I was playing anyway!

That's how I found out about it and I just thought it was the greatest thing.

JR: What kind of music were you playing back then?

BC: A lot of bluegrass, some progressive rock and rock.

JR: And you brought The Stick right into a band situation?

BC: As soon as I got The Stick, in 1976, we formed a band called ‘Stick Band’ with two Stick players (Bob and Jim Bruno). It was the two of us and a drummer. We wrote our own music: progressive rock, jazz fusion.

JR: Were you doing solo stuff with The Stick as well right from the start?

BC: Not solo gigs but on my own I was having a lot of fun. Where the solo stuff would come in was while I was figuring stuff out. I was probably playing between eight and ten hours a day on this thing. I was out of college and I had the time and teaching didn’t take up too much time. So I was fortunate enough to have the time to work on it. The solo stuff would work itself into the band thing when I had a little more of a lead part.

JR: San Jose seems like an early hotbed for The Stick.

BC: Yea, then we started teaching Stick. We actually did a Stick seminar down there. Everybody asks, “What’s the most?” And I’ll just say for the record that I believe it was 30 people. I believe. I have a picture and I’ll check. Some people just heard about it and got a Stick so they could take part in the seminar so they weren’t actual Stick players yet but there were 30 people learning.

After that it diminished a little. That was like the big excitement at first, then it diminished a little. But I had about seven regular Stick students off and on for a good eighteen, nineteen years.

JR: How long have you been a ‘Professional Stick Player?’

BC: I’ve been playing the instrument for 25 years. Depending on how you define ‘professional,’ I started playing in the band about four months after I got the instrument. I played guitar so it was half guitar, half Stick. I played half guitar half Stick for many years but I played gigs and got paid. Most of my income came from teaching but aren’t we all teaching or doing a side job?

So, almost the whole time.

JR: Let’s talk about the ‘Romantica’ albums. What prompted you to approach the Classical repertoire on Stick?

BC: I’ve always really liked Classical. I’ve always listened to it but never really got into it. Some of the songs I wrote before had ‘Classical’ sounding stuff. So people would ask if I played Classical and I’d play this thing that was sort of Classical-esque.

Then finally, one day I thought, “I really need to learn how to play Classical.” I mean really Classical, not ‘Classical sort-of.’

So I started to put together a Classical album. I learned a couple of pieces and had about half of the CD done, then I did a gig in Mocanaqua, Pennsylvania. A guy walked up and

watched me play for about twenty minutes, left, and never talked to me. I never even knew he was there. But he took notes.

I got a phone call 2-3 months later, not the next day, 2-3 months later and he was from QVC, which is the home shopping channel (Quality, Value, Convenience). So he calls me up and says, "I want to get you on QVC." And I thought that would be a great opportunity to sell CDs. He said, "Do you do any Classical?" I wasn't doing much of it at the gigs, but I said, "Yea, I'm actually finishing a Classical album, let's do it." And he said, "Well you have to have two albums." So I said, "O.k., I'll do two albums." That's why there's a 'Romantica 1 and 2.'

Then I decided to make it a little more interesting, I'd split it into genres where with 1, I'll really try to stick with true Classical and try and make the transcriptions as close as I could or wanted to. There're a couple of songs, like on the Minuet, where I changed all the notes to a minor key.

JR: How difficult was it to transfer the Classical repertoire to The Stick?

BC: The difficulty was in just physically learning it. I would take piano music and just figure out where the notes go. I would say about 90% of the notes just fell pretty much where they were supposed to go.

You know, Classical guitar players really have to move those notes around a lot. I was fortunate enough with The Stick to get a little closer. There might be a thing here and there that I left out and there might be a thing that I added, like in Ave Maria where I added some low notes to fatten it up a little.

On the Spanish album ('Romantica Vol. 2'), I took more liberties to improvise. So the Classical-don't improvise, on the Spanish one-jam, play flamenco stuff, learn the heads and chord changes and then be a little more free with it. That was a lot easier because I come from that background.

JR: And each of the albums have two of your own tunes on it which fit into those genres and round things out very nicely.

BC: Yea, thanks. I will say one thing for the record. The stuff, when I recorded it was difficult. I had to practice just 16 measures and get it down then record it and practice the next part. So what ended up happening was that by the time I got the project done I went out to play live and people would go, "Play this song, play that song." That's when I was really starting to know them and play them.

Now I'm coming out with a DVD where I'm playing some of the classical stuff live. Now I think I can really play them. It's hard to put in feeling when you've only played a song so much. I put in as much as I could but now I feel like I'm able to make the song waver more, and loud, quiet, play it, know it. The irony is that album comes first, then learn the songs. But it kind of had to follow that pattern.

And it was a lot of work. It took me a little over a year, and then I did the QVC thing.

JR: And now you make your living from playing and selling CDs. Tell me how you make a living playing The Stick.

BC: Basically it's CD sales. That's it. I'll play a show at a street fair, my agent tries to find a major street fair where they'll bring 100,000 people or whatever they bring. They'll find a corner, I'll set up a little stage area like a Peruvian group, that everybody has seen, might do. Then there's somebody out there selling the CDs and I'm out there just playing all day long. My gig will go eight to ten hours a day.

JR: And you sold over 80,000 CDs?

BC: I've gone over 100,000.

JR: Wow. Do you know if that's the highest selling Stick player CD without counting Tony Levin's stuff with some of his big name projects?

BC: I don't know. I would venture to guess. The other who has sold a lot that I know is Daniel Kane. He's doing the same sort of thing.

JR: Right, 'Street Busking Years.'

BC: Yea right. I haven't heard from him in years but people use to walk up to me and go, "Hey, I saw this guy on the wharf (in San Francisco) and he's playing the same thing you're playing."

JR: Me too. Up in Canada I've had people come up to me after I play and say the same thing!

BC: Right, so I bet he's sold a chunk. I'm sure he's up above 30 or 40.

I'm sure Greg's sold a lot. But doing it the way he's doing it, through concerts, you're not going to sell as many CDs because you're in an enclosed environment. Even if they really like it you're lucky if a third of the people buy them. It's weird. But, that said, with the type of gigs I do a lot of times I really want to do more of a concert thing.

One thing I will say, is that if people see me play and they're interested or they're a Stick player. Come up and say 'Hi' and introduce yourself because then I can take the time to shift gears a little. When you play for eight to ten hours in a row, I'm pretty mellow most of the time. Then I get to experiment a little.

JR: One thing I really like about your playing is that it's so musical, you almost forget that it's being played on The Stick. I know that's a conscience decision on your part but

is it to the point yet where people aren't noticing the instrument so much and focusing on the music?

BC: That's a great question. To me, the best compliment anybody could say is just to go, "You know that's really pretty music, I'd like the CD." Then the person next to them will go, "Yea but check out that thing he's playing." And they'll go, "What, the guitar?" And then they'll say, "No it's different, check out what he's doing, the technique." And they won't connect to the technique.

And then it's cool. The Stick and the *sound* of The Stick and of course the playing are selling the music and people are into just buying the music. People say they want it to relax with or this with it or that. 'The Touch' was written to just drive around country roads. I tried to paint feelings and such with it.

If people do catch on, to me, that's the best. It makes me feel so good to hear that they just like the music. And The Stick, as we all know accommodates it. A lot of it happens because of The Stick.

JR: Have you always sat down when you played? (Check out the photos, Bob has modified his Stick so that a wooden bar, the Stick-stick, replaces the belt hook and sits across his lap, hold The Stick in the proper playing position while sitting.)

BC: No, I've been doing that for the last six years.

JR: What prompted that?

BC: At home, when I practiced I sat down a lot and I didn't feel comfortable with the belt hook pushed against me. So then I just started setting it down on things, trying different things, then I put the bar on there, the Stick-stick. Then I started practicing that way.

I was playing a little guitar at the time but Stick gradually took more and more of my time. One reason I played a little guitar was that I'd walk in the door, I'd sit on the couch, my Stick would be against the wall, my acoustic would be against the wall, The Stick would have it's belt hook, my amp would be in the corner somewhere, I'd have to put the strap on, get the belt hook, plug in the amplifier... And my acoustic I'd just have to lean over, pick up and just relax.

Sometimes I'd plan to play it for five minutes and it would end up being an hour and I'd go, "I just played an hour of *guitar*, wait a minute here!?"

So I added the bar and now I can just grab The Stick and play it. Then it became more practical because of gigs. Sitting for eight or nine hours is easier than standing.

JR: So you've got your Stick set up now so you really can't stand. You've taken the belt hook right off and attached that 'Stick-stick.'

BC: Right. I put it on a stand for a while and was doing a little bit where I would play that Stick then put it down, stand up and play another Stick. I'm going to get another Stick and have one for standing up, I'm going to go back to that a little bit just to break it up.

There's certain things when you're standing that you can't do when you're sitting. You can just get up and move around. So I'll add that in.

JR: Let's talk about the Acoustic Stick. What prompted that?

BC: I've always liked acoustic music. One of my favorite musicians was Michael Hedges. I want that sound. I tried to get it on 'The Touch' and I thought I came a little bit close but at the same time I thought that I really wanted acoustic. And I thought again that it would be neat to have something to practice that you don't have to plug in.

I called up Emmett and talked to him, we discussed it. I was very happy that he seemed to be for it. He said, "O.k. let's try it." I said I'd take all the responsibilities financially and all that, and let's give it a go. Emmett had some ideas. Everybody and some ideas. It was really and truly a collaborative thing.

JR: Who did the luthiering?

BC: Craig Anderson, up in Vermont. He was introduced to me by a friend on mine. He was small enough and high enough quality. He did really good work, he's building another one and we'll just go from there.

JR: From an acoustic standpoint, I'm thinking the top would have to be a little more flexible than an acoustic guitar to transfer the energy from the tapping.

BC: We thought that and he put light bracing in it that's why I've been having problems. Not sound problems but the fragility. He's now building another one with heavier bracing.

You know, that's the same theory we all had. Emmett thought it almost had to be like a banjo membrane or something. But I didn't want that tone. I wanted to go into the Hedges camp. I can take an acoustic guitar and really whack on it and it sounds fine.

JR: So are we going to see more Acoustic Sticks?

BC: Well he's making one more. If a few people want it and request it I don't see why we couldn't make more, there's no reason why not. They're probably not going to be cheap. I don't know how to get the price down. It's tough. Craig has a certain fee he needs and then Emmett for the Stick parts. But if people really want it are willing to pay for it I don't see why it won't happen. I'd like to see more made.

JR: So what's going on these days? What's upcoming?

BC: The new project which I've been working on is the DVD. It's almost done. It still may take a couple of months but I've already announced it on my Website.

The DVD is pretty much taking some of those classical songs and playing them in front of a camera, live. A few originals, Funeral for a Friend is on there, a couple of things like that.

I did all the performances in front of a green screen. Then I took a computer program and rendered all these different worlds that I'm playing in. Then I animated it. The performance is all live, everything is right there but then all the backgrounds are added. The focus is truly on The Stick but I just added a little twist and some originality and something I was into. It adds a fun element. If you're just looking for The Stick only, great because it's all there.

JR: Any plans to tackle more of the classical repertoire?

BC: Yea, I'll do a little more of that. I'm really debating what to do. I want to do an all Acoustic Stick CD. I think I'll add some musicians, I've talked to some people about that.

JR: And teach at some more seminars?

BC: Yea, this seminar has been a lot of fun and I've enjoyed it. For me it's a scheduling issue and how do I figure out how to make it all fit.

As far as my future plans, I've got about four CDs that I want to do.

Part of my goal and what I like to do is just bring The Stick out to the common non-Stick people. I love that. I love that I've got 50 year-old housewives sitting there playing Stick music in their kitchen. That is something really feel good about. It's nice to get The Stick into the public in a way that it's just another instrument. It's not strange, it's just different. Is it better than guitar? No. Is it different? Yea. Is it this or that? It's better in some ways. It's better to us! We like what The Stick does. It depends on what you're trying to do.

That is something that I'm proud of, that I'm able to play the instrument in a fashion that the common folk like and then still be able to do this other stuff. Playing for you guys though is the most fun. I get to open it up a little.

Update:

Just a few hours after the interview, Bob was part of what may go down as the greatest Stick performance of all time. Check out Glenn Poorman's full account of the 2002 Mid-West Seminar for the full story.