

Nick Beggs December 8, 2001

When Robert Fripp recommends you to John Paul Jones, you take the gig. When John Paul Jones asks you to cover several dozen people's parts all at the same time, you say 'sure,' then look for the nearest therapist's couch.

Nick Beggs's musical career has been a wild ride. From a number one hit with Kajagoogoo while still a kid, to his current work touring with ex-Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones. In between, Nick formed a couple of his own bands, worked with countless musicians, taught at the Guitar Institute in London England, and even had a brief stint as an A & R manager with Phonogram Records.

You can check out his award winning web site: www.nickbeggs.co.uk It too is a wild ride.

I caught up with Nick during the last days of the most recent John Paul Jones tour and spoke with him from his hotel room in Boston.

Anyone who has seen "Nick on Stick" with JPJ will agree that watching him play is as much a treat as listening. A commanding stage presence and incredible musicianship merge to create the complete package.

Jim Reilly: All reports have the tour going really well. How are things from the stage?

Nick Beggs: It's going great, we're having a blast. It's great playing with John, as I'm sure you'll appreciate. Anyone who's been into music, since their teenage years has been very influenced by Led Zeppelin and the music that they created. The opportunity to play with such a musical giant is really an honour.

JR: How does it compare to the last tour? Last time you were the headliner, now your supporting King Crimson. How does it differ from the last time you were out with John?

NB: It's a bit like building blocks really. There's more people because we have the amalgamation of the two fans bases, which in many respects share a lot in common.

We're playing bigger auditoriums, and John has sold quite a lot of records of his first album so there's more awareness of what the project is about, that it actually exists. That John has embarked on a solo career outside of Zeppelin.

JR: You didn't play on John's first album, *Zooma*. Were you involved in the recording of the second one, *The Thunderthief*?

NB: Yes. I was approached about playing on the first record but I wasn't able to do it.

JR: It seems like John was looking for a Stick player specifically. Do you know what his thoughts were, why he gravitated towards The Stick? What role he was trying to fill?

NB: Well, John's a person who thinks outside the square. He's a very original minded musician. So he obviously was conceptualizing the way the project would work and he saw it as a power trio.

For that reason, I think he wanted an instrument that was unusual. All the instruments he plays on stage are custom instruments of very unusual designs. So I think he wanted an instrument that would cover lots of bases for him from synthesizers to bass guitar to lead guitar.

JR: Which is what you're doing.

NB: Um hum.

JR: You started out as a visual artist, a freelance designer. How did you switch over to music? How did that change happen?

NB: I think it was just listening to that still, small voice. Something that I think is very important for everybody in the world really. I think we all are faced with that opportunity at varying times in our lives, where we listen to what we think we should do or we do what we feel we are being pressured to do by opinion.

I think I was 15 when I decided that I wanted to be a professional musician. But it wasn't until I was 18 that I realized that I could make decisions that would effect that and make that a reality.

There was a whole bunch of stuff that happened. Ostensibly, I had no parents at that age, so I had the responsibilities of an adult but the mind of somebody who was trying make decisions about the rest of their life, in terms of their career.

JR: And so what happened at 18? What were the first steps in putting that together?

NB: I dropped out of art college.

JR: And then put together Kajagoogoo?

NB: I actually formed the band while I was at art college.

Then, I knew there was a process that had to be embarked on to avoid having my energy taken up by a career I didn't believe in. For me personally, the design world didn't seem very enticing. So I knew I had to leave art college, get a job doing something very menial so it would enable me to work on songs and musicianship and playing live.

JR: The visual aspect still comes across though. Did you bring some of that visual, artistic insight into the musical realm? Did some of that cross over?

NB: Yea. I think I see music in terms of visual aspects. I hear everything as shapes. When I'm actually creating my own particular music, I'm always thinking of ways to present that in a visual way.

JR: Does that translate to The Stick itself? To the geometrical balance of the instrument?

NB: Yes it really does. I think that's one of the reasons why I became a Stick player.

JR: When did that happen? When did The Stick enter the picture?

NB: Very early on actually.

I saw Tony Levin playing with Peter Gabriel in England, at the Knebworth Festival around 1977. And I said I was going to play that instrument one day, I didn't know when.

When we were in Kajagoogoo, it was 1983, I had still not played the instrument or even picked on up, or even touched one and the guys in the band said, "Look if you be the lead singer of the band, we'll buy you a Chapman Stick."

And I said "Yea, o.k."

JR: Were you working with it off the bat?

NB: Well actually, they called Emmett and said, "Look we're a band from England, and we're doing an album. We'd like you to make a Stick and we need it in a certain time frame. Just send us a standard instrument."

But he put something together really good for me.

It came over, came straight out of the crate, I put it on and started playing it there. It was rudimentary but I was using it right off because there seemed to be some kind of understanding about what was going on. I can't really understand that myself. I think it was just taking the experience learned being a bassist and percussionist and then applying it to a new instrument.

JR: How soon did it become your main instrument?

NB: Well, it wasn't my main instrument in Kajagoogoo and it wasn't my main instrument in the next band I had. I had a band called Ellis, Beggs and Howard. We were writing the material and I keep on getting The Stick out.

They said, "Put that away, stay down in the low end."

And I said "look, if you want me to find a voice, I'm going to have to use this instrument."

Finally, I came up with this riff and this progression which was the middle eight of a single that hadn't been such a big hit for Kajagoogoo. We worked it up into a song and it was a hit for Ellis, Beggs and Howard. It was a hit in Europe. So from then on they said, "No don't pick up the bass guitar, pick up The Chapman Stick."

JR: What was that tune?

NB: It was called "Big Bubbles, No troubles."

From then on it still wasn't my main instrument but it certainly expanded my playing. I used it in another project called IONA. But I used bass guitar still.

It was really John where everything shifted to, well, this is all I need, this one instrument.

JR: What kind of gear are you running through?

NB: I'm running four synthesizers through the MIDI side of the Chapman Stick, the top five melody strings. I'm using a Korg O5 RW, a Korg Expander Rack TR Synth. The MIDI converter is the Roland GR 30. I'm also running in parallel to that a VG 8, one of the early ones. I find by using standard guitar sounds, the lead parts blended with the Marshall distortion channels which are running live. You get a nice blend between the two.

I've got a small TAO four-channel mixer, just to blend the synths together. I'm running three back lines. I'm running a stack of SWR Goliaths, that the bass side of the instrument goes through. And a new triple Marshall head, valve amp with a four by twelve cab. For the synths I use a Roland KC 500 four channel combo with an 18 inch speaker and a tweeter; a full range cab for the synths because there are a lot of variables in them.

JR: How did you go about coming up with the parts? Were you coming up with something new or playing written music? How did you approach covering all those bases with one instrument?

NB: John was very specific. He said, "I'm going to give you a pad of written music. Some of it will be very dense and some of it will be kind of simple. There'll be freedom for expression in solos."

He told me that he wanted me to play bass when he was playing lead, lead when he was playing bass, cover the synth sounds and play the full score to the London Symphony Orchestra on one instrument. Also, he said I would have to play brass sections, Hammond organ solos and some of Jimmy Page's solos. I need counseling afterwards.

JR: But yet it's come off? You've pulled it off, yes?

NB: Yea, I lost a lot of sleep though.

JR: Emmett calls your playing the "triple threat" that's what he's referring to, the combination of all those things?

NB: Yea, that's right.

JR: Tell me about *Stick Insects*. Is it available yet, can we get that over on this side of the Atlantic?

NB: Emmett's going to release it for me on his label. I have been burning a few myself at home and selling them through my website and at the shows. But I've been having problems with the quality of CDs. People have been saying to me that a few of the tracks don't play properly and I feel really bad. But I suppose that's what you get with home burns. So I said to Emmett, is there any way we could do this properly because I would like to have the record out there and he seems to be thrilled with it.

JR: Tell me about it. What's it all about?

NB: It is a Stick record but it's not a Stick record in the purest sense. Someone like Bob Culbertson would turn on a recorder, play one performance and that would be it. It's not that sort of record.

I've tried to approach the instrument from my understanding of it. And so I've overdubbed. Although they're all one pass pieces, there are other sounds in there, samples and stuff. There're no drums in terms of real drums, its programmed. Somebody played some bazouki on it for me and somebody played some piano and keys on one track, but other than that it's all Stick.

JR: And it's currently available?

NB: It is available. If you go to my website you can make an order from there or you will be able to get it through Stick Enterprises come the new year.

JR: What was the impetus behind a solo Stick album?

NB: When John approached me to do the tour, three years ago, I had to make a big investment of finances, time and ideas. And then during that tour I was approached by somebody from Finland who worked for the cultural office.

She said, "Would you be interested in making an exhibition of your paintings in Finland at the public library?"

And I said, "Yea, great."

She said, "Well if you do that, we could make an installation of your work for a week or so and you could come over and make a solo performance of your music."

And I said, "What music?"

"Your Chapman Stick music," she said.

And I said, "Well, I've got bits and pieces but I haven't got two hours of music."

And she said, "Well, why don't you put something together?"

So I did.

After the performance, she said, "You should record this."

So I started to record it at home over the next 18 months. And that's really the whole story with that.

JR: Any plans for future stuff? Is that an avenue you are going to explore?

NB: I recorded 32 tracks for the record and there's 13 on the final cut. Some of the pieces will get used, some of them won't. I've also got a lot of other material which I never recorded that I had written since I started playing Stick.

I also really, really want to get into soundtrack material for commercials, television and films. I know a lot of the pieces will work for that ilk. I'm just trying to find the opportunities, the avenues. I'm talking to the BBC about something. They've got me on hold for some projects.

I really want to move into that area. I suppose all things in their time.

JR: What about the NS Stick? I saw the review you did for *Guitarist* magazine. Do you have an NS Stick? Is that something you are going to add to your arsenal?

NB: No, I feel very completed by The Stick.

People keep saying to me, "I could make you this instrument," or "You could hybridize The Stick," or "you could use an NS Stick or you could use a Warr Guitar" or "What else do you need, how can we help you?"

And I just say, "I've really got everything I need with The Chapman Stick."

I think all these other instruments are really great and I see there's a market for them and it's for each person to find their own voice on whatever instrument they think is right. But I don't even find it necessary to pick up a bass guitar anymore.

The Chapman Stick, for me, is a universe which needs to be explored and I don't want to detract from my quest of finding life out there by noodling around on other instruments that I feel would limit my search in some way.

JR: You've said that The Chapman Stick will change your life if you let it. What do mean by that? Is that what you are getting at there?

NB: Well The Chapman Stick has changed my life.

JR: How has it changed your life?

NB: It made me part of a very exclusive club firstly. It also made me very focused and very detail oriented. But I suppose I always was like that. I think if you are going to be a Stick player you have to be one of those types of people. You have to be somebody who thinks outside of the square, as I said before.

You need a method by which to facilitate that and The Stick does it. The Stick will give you ideas and then make you run with them as far as your capable of taking it. I suppose the things I do on Stick, only a Stick player could do.

In terms of commerce and the industry it makes you a little bit more desirable. I've got people calling me up asking me to come and play on their records or "can you do this" or "what's your availability." You wouldn't get that so much if you were a bass player because there're a lot of bass players out there.

JR: The tour is wrapping up quickly. Any immediate future plans?

NB: When I get back, I have one day off then I'm going to Holland for an orchestral tour. I get back on Christmas day. I've had no rehearsals. I've been sent the music and CD so I've been writing charts on my days off for the last four and a half weeks. When I get back, I'm going straight to Holland to do that.

Also in the new year, John wants to tour to promote the release of *Thunderthief* so that will kick in.

JR: Any plans for a live album with John?

NB: Well we have been recording all the shows. I guess John will listen to the material when he gets home.

I have said to him, "You could use this stuff if any of it's half decent." And I think he realizes that.

JR: Your spiritual beliefs have played a big role in you music. How do you approach merging your spiritual side with the music?

NB: Well I suppose the closest amalgamation of the two was in IONA. It was a very spiritually based five piece. In Kajagoogoo I had written a few songs with that kind of undercurrent to it. I haven't really made many songs or pieces along those lines since. On my album *Stick Insect* the music has a spiritual side to it, but I don't think its specific. I suppose I felt that I hadn't anything to say at that particular time.

JR: Can that come across without words? Without lyrics?

NB: Yea, I think so. You can emote a lot. Somebody sent me an e-mail the other day that said, "I was listening to your album and it made me cry."

I thought, "Bloody, I must be really bad," and said, "I'm sorry that I did that to you."

No, there's little footnotes for each of the pieces, as an explanation as to the title and what's behind it and I think, hopefully, the actual pieces speak in their tonality.

I hope.