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From Jack To King

For more than six decades, English folk guitar hero Wizz Jones has always been there, a source of inspiration, royalty. He celebrated his 80th birthday recently, still on fine form. We salute him by re-publishing this interview from 1980,

In Southern England, Autumn 1980, we wrote all the interviews we've published so far here with people from what could be termed the "second generation" of the folk revival - those who got interested in folk or as a result of the big folk boom of the mid-sixties and became major names during the seventies. The majority of folk clubs had formed. By the early seventies, no longer British traditional music sought for those devoted to (continental) and our interviewees have reflected that in their choice of music.

Cambridge folk festival's 1980 Souking of Rambling Jack Elliott and indeed Lonnie Donegan, Jimmy Sneyd and Ronnie McKewen and others have included what we in the earlier days of the revival, there are few people around the scene who have heartily stuck to the areas of music which were fashionable then and still inspired them. Wizz Jones is probably the best, one of the most influential young contemporaries. All sorts of people from those days who've gone on to fame and fortune like Bob Stewart, Eric Clapton, Keith Richards, Donovan, John Anderson, Ralph McTell, and of course countless other folk guitarists, have learned how as an influence or inspiration. Over two decades ago getting out as a musician, Wizz still does club bookings that are full of the joy of playing which marks an enthusiast, always a magical experience.

Like the British folk scene, which underwent an almost manic spouting of innovations and trends, it just as susceptible to fashions as any other music world. So, for a decade, Wizz has largely been making his live music for European tours, to our loss. With all the opportunities of the eighteen hours a return to more than was in the folk world. I hope that we'll be hearing a lot more of Wizz Jones in English clubs again.

Jim Anderson's interview with Wizz and occasionally Sandy Jones was conducted in July 1980 before they set out on yet another summer combination tour - radio and TV in Germany, Holland, and France.

How did you first get involved with the English folk scene in the late fifties?

I suppose first and foremost through the radio, but as much listening to folk music but listening to all these European stations like Minstrel, Europe No. 1, State Of America, which introduced me to music you didn't hear, with exceptions like Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee's Mountain Blues, which got in the charts and they could not play any family favourite in 1955 or something, I got into blues music like jazz and country & western - it was trendy to like these Orleans traditional jazz anyway and this led in a way to things like Lead Belly and country music. That's how it started.

I remember seeing an old photo on your wall of you, extremely young, playing in a group of some kind.

Yeah, as soon as I left school I got a job in a warehouse, and I was working with this guy who brought a guitar in one day. I thought let Paul teach me, but I never knew what a guitar looked like - I only knew the sound and I got me interested. He took me to jazz clubs where I met people like Alexis Korner and that's how I got to meet people like Jack Elliott and Donal Adams. I was 18 there, and I had this little soul group we called The Allengers, which was playing stuff I'd heard on the radio on the coffee programme.

How important was that style movement in getting people to play?

Oh, extremely important, it was such simple music, I'd go along to what were known in those days as little clubs - what we'd now call a folk club, places that were jazz clubs but one night of the week they'd showcase folkie - and you'd see these gobs, all they were doing was just strumming in an open tuning and having a good time. It did get everyone playing. All my friends played the guitar, and when Lonnie Donegan had that Rock Island line hit it was so obscure and offbeat - even if you didn't like it, it made you listen - it led you to investigate Leadbelly and that stuff.

I guess Rambling Jack Elliott came here just at the right time.

Yes, they'd been kicking around Europe and when they came to London, it was like the Messiah arriving.

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Was he that much better than anyone else?

Oh of course, you wouldn't know anywhere near him. After the fact of listening to do that that I got interested in do it - he did it in a very simple and practical all right, it was an absolute champion. We were all around from place to place, but he was the hands and say "look, the guitar is all right" but Jack was doing what, that the old people around - Alan and Cyril Davies were playing - lots of people.

Looking back through the British folk columns from those days, there would be two very different streams of music. On the one hand, plays like the Blue Bonnet House, the folk club and how were playing, and on the other hand Ewan MacColl's circle which eventually evolved into the Singing Club.

Well, the Blue Bonnet House was an offshoot from the jazz scene, where the MacColl thing was an offshoot from Joan Littlewood Theatre group which was kind of Art Council angle - more artistic, academic side. The two were not connected, when you're going you have a managerial feeling, don't you get it? It's simple and trendy, it's got to be MacColl to see people like Jack and Donal, they play there, and you'd be faced with the academic approach, it was an alternative way of, a more relaxed thing.

But it has to be said that I met Ewan MacColl who actually led me back to my house because of the Bronzoni's staying there. I was always met him on a train, I was in my way to Creydon up to South to go to a club and I met Ewan on the train, I was in the club and it emerged that he was into all the blues thing as well, that the Radio Ballads were a real thing, but whole worse. They're still about the same, I used to have all those who were real no need repeat records, with me never played traditional music much because I figured I didn't have a good enough voice to sing it, so I went in the direction of the style and you think



Top: Wizz at Bradford Folk Festival 1979 (photo: Brian Rowland); left: Pete Stonby & Wizz Jones, 1966; right: Donal Adams, Rambling Jack Elliott & Wizz Jones, 1955.



Photo © A. & S. / The New York Times

John & Alex Campbell with Alex Campbell, Aug. 1962 (1962)

How much of it was that Jack and I went over there larger than the monkey figure? Did that have as much effect as the music?

Of course I did, and my friend I'll always remember the day Jack said to me why June that he wanted to go and buy a new sweater, and we all went down - there were fifteen of us - had to go with him down to Durrin's in Piccadilly Circus. It was the whole image of it. There were three other guys going around around us - I didn't understand the music that well. Come to it an image first. I heard Jack play San Francisco Bay Blues and the next day had to get a guitar just to learn to play that song. The same way that year later I'd would knock on my door and see 'er guitar boxes and say, "I really want to learn one, I can't play any chords or anything, all I want to do is be able to play Ange." That was my attitude to wanting to learn from Bay Blues. I think everybody has that one song that kind inspires them, and you say "I've got to be able to do that."

One is always hearing lots of references back to that about the most music scene in Paris, which seemed to be quite important to the people who later became the contemporary singer's movement.

I was with a bunch of kids that were just following, really. As far as I know, that was more inspired up by people like Pete Watson and the Bennett brothers - those of them - and they were all on that little scene. I remember we had this big scene at the dance on one of those bars and seeing all these other groups. There was Adam Faith in the East Side Skiffle Group. Two following of that, it was all glamorous for me. It was inevitable that I'd just go to Paris in the steps of everybody else. Alex Campbell used to come back and go down the Euro & Durrin, not that I knew him that well.

But it was just a way of getting away from your background. I had this chemistry job that wouldn't take any more. I'd got the job-up papers for the RAF so I got my first leave to Cyprus to a girlfriend - and two days later I was back because they cancelled the job. And there I was without a job, so I thought I'd go to Cornwall and

then I went to France. It was a way to be away from your youth. You could arrive in Paris with no money, back from the ferry, get a small money backpack home, give them your passport as security and just get out and back. It was better than what I was doing - young musicians making interesting music on the streets in those days. People like the Bennett brothers were infamous, they used to go to this marathon show on the banks of the Seine every Sunday afternoon and they'd make fortunes. So it was a short-cut, a way out.

There was a night club that was being run by this guy, an American who was managing it for his health, and he was a bit of a big fish. Among all the cabaret artists that he'd employ, he'd never towards folk people. When Jack and I went to his Paris, they got a good thing, and that led to my folk club that were in town playing there. Alex Campbell had a regular thing there. The Continental was one of those places where you'd wind up about three in the morning watching people play. I did a floor set, so you'd call it into some of them, but never actually get an engagement there.

There was a great quote in the Monthly Music list column at that time, I think from Shirley Horn who'd just come back from Paris, saying "The place is full of intellectual Jack Elliotts, there are fifty of these on the streets, all trying to be like him." Would you have been one of these?

Well, I wasn't trying to look like Jack Elliott. There was a guy called Lou Winkler, and he looked a bit like Jack so he put a hole in his guitar to play and make it look like a Gretsch and wore all the same clothes. I wasn't into that, after I'd learned San Francisco Bay. I discovered this real wealth of material and I was soon doing my own thing. There was one American guy came to Paris, the first day he was there with his Stratton and Levin, guys were coming up in the streets and saying "Hello Alex", "How're you doing Alex?" because Alex Campbell was the big hero of the Left Bank. I remember Shirley Hart being in Paris, she was betting for Clive Palmer -

they came and there he'd been there for an hour or two and then he'd go on for hours and then he'd come back as an early start.

After then, I think the first time you appeared to appear in print was in The Music Club?

Well, before I went away to France, I was in the folk scene, but I wasn't singing - being long haired and wearing a beard and a hat and a coat. I couldn't get in anywhere. I was called Norm Rock who was wearing a hat and a coat and a hat and a coat. They didn't get in there, so I went to Paris in Bradford - my first gig. I was really on the scene. When I came back, I was playing at parties, and I came back and I was asked to play at the Leatherhead and the Church of St. Martin where Malcolm Price and his group of residents, that led to visiting them at other places. The first music that I did was around '62 - Alex was much more into it. Malcolm and myself were a bit wanted somewhere to play.

[Gently Amos, before that, you were not playing in clubs was that the first time that did exist wouldn't allow you to play long hair?]

Which club?

Oh, I don't want to get into all that's so irrelevant now. One was going to the complete instead, but that was for being shy - I was a young adolescent guy being shy. I don't blame the manager, it was in control. But on the other hand, my wife and I were at the Blue & Red House. I was 2/6 to get in, I was there one night of the year and the next year I was there. I don't know why - I think because I had long hair and shaggy and colour to the place, this crazy guy like Muddy Waters and Otis Spann there. Alex Campbell and Alex's first session. That's all that did audience are famous people like

Where did Gary Graham come in?

Well, he was around before he came playing on the street, he was at the school, playing with Long John Barry about '57. But there wasn't folk clubs then, just intervals in jazz clubs.

That topic of Davey and Alex's with Ange on came out around 1962 and he got quite a devastating effect all over the place. How did that effect you, having started out learning Jack Elliott and Bennett style?

I met Davey when he'd come through his "broody period" and was getting in a more free form style of playing, it's a simple thing, I was so knocked out I started trying to play guitar style. I learned a lot from watching Davey. He showed me quite a few things.

When did it become obvious that there was this whole school of guitar players coming up?

Well until Bert Jansch and John Renbourn came on the scene. I first saw him at Adlestone, doing a floor set with another guy, doing all of Davey's repertoire for me, brilliantly. He used to come to a lot of my gigs around South London

and they'd have me know each other, he got to know me about about the same time as Bert, he gave me a plug because he did that. Another lesson was he got from me. By that time you were very well established as the duo with Pete Dinklage.

When I look back on that period, we were very popular. If there were a couple of three in ten, managers and agents - when I believe he told me, he did this support me here, so I went to Paris in Bradford - my first gig. I was really on the scene. When I came back, I was playing at parties, and I came back and I was asked to play at the Leatherhead and the Church of St. Martin where Malcolm Price and his group of residents, that led to visiting them at other places. The first music that I did was around '62 - Alex was much more into it. Malcolm and myself were a bit wanted somewhere to play.

You'd have been one of the regular guests at most clubs in those days - you and the Stanley and Malibu Pops.

Yes, we did 50,000 miles in one year in that and 1958.

How did your first records come about?

That was being on that Clive Palmer who, in a way, was somebody you'd look up to because he was famous along with Woody Guthrie, and all those people. I don't particularly think they were brilliant musicians, but there's nothing that inspires more than having - you couldn't help but be excited if Clive Palmer came to your gig, he was getting into independent production and had an "in" at EMI. We did a single of Dylan's Hello Stranger, or perhaps the album first, I can't remember which. We did it in a couple of months in a 12 inch format studio.

Was there any connection with the folk festival circuit around the same time?

Yes, though I never thought myself was one of our starring groups, Maddy Prior used to sing in a club with Mick Hurley and another guy - a place called the Spinning Wheel. Mick used to play in a club there as well, and Doreen was at a hotel and used to come and see Mick in the evenings and through Mick's girl to know me. When he got well known, he got Mick the deal on whatever label he was on.

How big labels were interested in folk then, so there was a lot happening?

Especially when Bert and John came along, that was it.

Later on again, you were one of the first people who really sprung up what has become the major part of many folk musicians' means of income, the European touring circuit. There had been a lapse after the old Paris thing. How did that start up?

In my case, there'd been quite an interest in folk music in Germany for a couple of years, but in 1963 I was contacted by a guy with a small agency and record company who brought me over for his festival if that had never happened, I probably wouldn't be playing now. Although I went on for another four or five years on the English scene after I left Paris, I never did as well again. We were very interesting, bringing music, but when I went into it, it was really because a lot more interesting as it is about you play guitar and sing on your own - unless you're a jazz fellow, which I'm not. There had ten years, you can blame Germany for me still being playing!

In a way I've liked myself that I've made a real living from playing all these years, but whenever you have a crisis and



Clive Palmer & Maddy Prior, Bert Jansch, Bob Dylan in St Germain des Pres, Paris, circa 1960

How "I'm going to have to stop doing this", there's almost something around the corner and that's always something in Germany? Right now I'm doing another folk double album, which is actually interesting and financially very good - with TV and radio. We're doing a thing in Germany in August with Larry Foner, which is in this case will be the family - two of the boys playing with Sandy and the

You came out working in England so much on the fact that you, say, weren't as "entertaining" as with Paris, but also the English folk scene seemed strongly away from guitar players, blues and mandolin songs after the big boom of the sixties. In a way you were a victim of fashion. But don't you find things are beginning to open up again now?

I can't say really. When I do a good gig these days, there are some very young people who come up and say, "We really like the sort of stuff you're doing," which admittedly wasn't happening a few years ago - it was unfashionable. There's a lot of interest in blues again now, of course, a real interest in rhythm and blues and I think it's coming off again into interest in acoustic blues and things.

In Germany, I think they like to see me as a sort of folk star, like Alexis Korner for me. I had more success in Germany because they didn't know anything about what happened before, they'd give you a fair bit and are not as influenced by trends. In Denmark, say, there's no way they'd listen

unless they think they're supposed to, unless they've read something to inspire them and they're their own famous.

In Germany you're playing in a little bar and they'll walk in and say "What's in, what's in, never heard of her" - there they'll sit down for a good five or ten minutes and give you their undivided attention, then if they like it, you're in. Of course, if they don't like it, you're out. But the point is, they'll listen first - in a lot of countries they won't even do that.

So do you think people have a genuine respect for you in England?

Well, that might be in respect, it might influence the way I behave in England. In Germany I can go in as a stranger and feel confident - maybe it's typical, but the people. After all, I've been doing the same thing here for twenty years...

But every time you come to a local club, it's amazing how many different songs you do. I think of you as one of the classic people with a big repertoire. How many songs do you think you could pull out?

I hate to think - I couldn't put a figure to it, I've got books at home - every time I learned a song I write it down, and I've got volumes and volumes of them - must be thousands and thousands of songs.

How good is your memory if you have to dredge something up?

It's not bad, actually, for singing a song that I haven't sung for a long time. I tend to forget chord sequences if I haven't

played a song for about four years, if it's complicated I have to go back and learn it again. I find that abroad people often ask for a song I haven't done for years and I jump straight in and do it. The first time round I'll make a couple of mistakes but then I'll do it again and it'll be perfect.

What attracts you to learn a song these days?

I find it a lot harder these days to get new songs, because for years I was quite happy to listen to other artists and groups and every time I heard a song that impressed me, sitting down and learning it quite close to the way they were doing it, then after a year my own angle developed. But I find that more difficult to do now because I feel it's no longer as valid as it used to be—in a way I was championing the kind of music before, turning people on to different music, wanting to tell people about all this material. Now it's no longer valid to me. I had this kind of crisis that I should write more. But what attracts me to songs? Just that they're good songs!

Words or music though?—because people think of you as a guitar player...

I can never understand that. Whenever I go, people always introduce me saying "Here he is, one of the best guitarists you'll ever hear," and I can't understand that. It's amazing how much you impress people with a little bit of technique. I really get scared sometimes, there must be guys in the audience who can play the axe off me, what will they think? But I'm a lyric man, definitely. When Clive James wrote all those lyrics for Peter Dink, it really blew me off my feet. I'm probably more interested in that than good melody, that's why Dylan really impressed me, when he started, though I'm way out of touch with him now.

Would it be true to say that you're more interested in a contemporary lyric, something with modern relevance? You do some traditional ballads and so on, but they don't form a very large part of your repertoire.

No, I'm not interested in trying to do something like, say, Peter Bellamy does, even if I could. I'm not interested in re-creating old themes. I get very excited if I hear a good new song. People say, "Oh, come on now, you play blues and all that stuff," but for one thing I was never able to duplicate, like Sammy Mitchell, an old Robert Johnson record—I never tried to, I wouldn't want to. That's why Bert Jansch was such a genius, he came up with all those songs he wrote using that technique and that style. I used to get annoyed with Robin Williamson from the Incredible String Band—all that stuff about fairy princesses and castles...

Why don't you feel that there's still a role for somebody to go about turning people on to music they wouldn't otherwise hear?

Well, my kids are into all these bands in South London, I go and listen to them—mostly young people, some of them are brilliant musicians. And I think, "if they can hear this in the pub, there's nothing I can turn people on to any more." All I can do is pick the songs I like and enjoy doing them, make a nice job of a song and there's something actually happening. The danger with me is that I play for my own



Wizz 1980

Photo: Steve Anderson

enjoyment too much on stage, that's a problem with working abroad a lot, for someone like me who's so into lyrics. I work to an English audience now less than to any other nationality.

Would you like to work in England more?

Of course, I mean, it's fun to travel and everything, but you don't want to do it for twenty-odd years. I'd love to work more in England.

[Sandy Jones: The comparison between what was happening on the folk scene here in the early sixties and what was happening in the charts—the music on the folk scene was far superior, it was an underground thing and much different. But now, what's happening in the charts is often a lot better than what you can hear in a folk club!]

Too right! That's what's so different. The general mass music scene is such a good mixture now, with everything that's gone into it over the last twenty years. We've found ourselves with a family of musicians, inevitably, like all musicians who have kids—and they've discovered all that blues stuff quite independent of me, they didn't know I had all those tapes and records. When they were very small and I was playing them, they didn't know. They bring all these records back from the library, and go up to Dobell's.

What do you envisage your musical future being, then? Because you've been doing it for so long, it's your way of life. Can you conceive of not being on the road being a folk guitar player?

I was afraid you were going to ask that! Well this is the age-old crisis problem you talk about, year in, year out. A lot of my contemporaries found the answer to that was commercial success, it gives you a bit of security and perhaps the chance to do something else—for example Ralph [McTell] is thinking about producing albums, he's probably in the position to do that. I've always, all my life, derived far more pleasure from listening to other musicians than playing myself, without doubt. Watching Red Beans & Rice down the Half Moon is really exciting, and though obviously I really enjoy playing

and it's great fun, I really enjoy listening to other people better—but that's a complacent, luxury thing to say, being lucky to afford to produce other people. Without the commercial success, one can only just continue the same way, hoping that there are people to come up and say it was good, and they're younger people, perhaps asking where they can buy your albums. As long as that's still happening, that's the only reason you need to continue—and that enjoying it of course.

But then you've got to balance that against the reality of life. I've been a musician and a family man. All the real great, genius, creative musicians—I don't think they've been very successful at keeping any other part of their life together, their family or anything like that. I wanted the family thing.

[Sandy Jones: The boys really joke about it—Danny goes around saying "I'm just a poor boy, I wouldn't be able to play the blues if Wizz had been successful!"]

It's all a question of quality of lifestyle really; you go up and down about it. One minute you think, "Isn't this great, driving along the Riviera with the kids and soaking up the sun, cooking on the side of the road—we couldn't do this unless we lived like this," but then the car breaks down and you can't afford to fix it, and it's a different story.

[Sandy Jones: The worst thing is that you don't have the time to devote to your music. It would be nice to come off the road and have a month to just stay at home and work on new material. But it's impossible to keep a family, there's no way one guy can support all those people—it affects everyone else in the family.]

People used to say to me, years ago, "Oh I really like you, Wizz, you're not like all these other people like Ralph McTell with No. 1 hits, you won't do that sort of thing." I'd say to them now, "Look, if I had the chance, I'd have it tomorrow!" I remember Jimmy McGregor saying to me, "I'll get you on Tonight with Cliff Michellmore, just smarten up, wear a tie, cut your hair, get a suit." No way was I going to do that. Of course, I would now!

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