

The Hymns of John Fahey

Today I'd like to introduce the music of John Fahey, an American fingerstyle guitarist, to you. John Fahey was a genius, one of the greatest steel-string acoustic guitarists and composers for the guitar ever, a musical innovator who inspired and inspires many other guitarists, and recorded many hymns and other kinds of religious music. In 2003, he was ranked 35th in the *Rolling Stone* "The 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time" list.

He was born in 1939 in Maryland, brought up in the Episcopal church, and at a very young age became interested in folk and blues music. Fahey discovered his love of early blues upon hearing Blind Willie Johnson's "Praise God I'm Satisfied" on a record-collecting trip to Baltimore with his friend and mentor, the musicologist Richard K. Spottswood. Much later, Fahey compared the experience to a religious conversion and remained a devout blues disciple until his death.

Fahey collected records and founded his own label, Takoma Records, on which he released both his own albums and blues and guitar albums by other musicians. After graduating from American University, a Methodist university in Washington, D.C., with a degree in philosophy and religion, Fahey moved to California in 1963 to study philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley. The following year, Fahey moved south to Los Angeles to join the folklore master's program at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) at the invitation of department head D.K. Wilgus. Fahey's UCLA master's thesis on the music of the blues musician Charley Patton was later published. He completed it with the musicological assistance of his friend Alan Wilson, who shortly after became a member of the rock group Canned Heat.

Fahey later moved to Oregon and spent his last days there. He used classical, Portuguese, Brazilian, and Indian styles of music in his own work. He wrote an autobiography. He spent many of his latter years in poverty and poor health, but also enjoyed renewed popularity in his last years and began writing and playing avant-garde music. He died in 2001 due to complications from heart surgery.

This is the bare bones of his life. The story of his life is fascinating, funny and heartbreaking at the same time, and I hope that, if you like the music by Fahey you hear today, you will try to find out more about him, his life and his music. His music is now known and available all over the world, and you can see some of his live performances on youtube. I was lucky enough to see him play live, for free, at San Francisco State University in 1976. I have regretted ever since that I didn't try to talk with him after the concert.

John Fahey did all kinds of music, and here are my four personal favorites of his many albums: *The Transfiguration of Blind Joe Death*, *Days Have Gone By*, *Old-Fashioned Love*, and *God, Time and Causality*. I'd like to spend a few hours playing his music for you, but I have to confine myself to a very few—three—of his religious pieces today.

Two of John Fahey's most well-known albums of religious music are *Yes! Jesus Loves Me* and *The New Possibility: John Fahey's Guitar Soli Christmas Album*. John Fahey said, "Christ is not CUTE": The virtuosity and beauty of Fahey's playing conveys this image of Christ: not "cute", but serious, powerful, and sometimes even frightening. But also hopeful and inspiring; Fahey's title *The New Possibility* comes from theologian Paul Tillich.

I am going to play you short versions John Fahey did of two hymns. The first, "We Would Be Building", is number 298 in the hymn book used in this chapel and is

based on a theme from *Finlandia* by Sibelius. John Fahey often ended his albums with a short hymn, and this hymn ends the album *Days Have Gone By*. The second hymn I'll play you is "O Come, O Come Emanuel", which is number 4 in our red hymn book and number 94 in the Japanese hymn book. Finally, I will play you one of John Fahey's original religious compositions, "My Station Will Be Changed After While". Now, I would REALLY like to play you John Fahey's religious composition "My Shepherd Will Supply My Needs"—a great piece of music, majestic and moving—but it's over 8 minutes long, so we don't have time. That's really too bad. But "My Station Will Be Changed After While" is good too, and only about two minutes long.

Okay, here's "We Would Be Building". According to Fahey's own notes, the "harmonics are played in open C tuning, while the tune is played in standard tuning, key of C."

WE WOULD BE BUILDING

Next, here's "Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel."

OH COME, OH COME EMMANUEL

Finally, we come to "My Station Will Be Changed After While". You may have been familiar with the two hymns I played, but not, I think with this John Fahey original. So let me just point out that the titles of John Fahey's compositions are important. A "station" can indicate one's social position in life; but I think that Fahey is talking about the change from the station of human existence to the one that exists after death.

Second, here are some technical notes on this piece by the pianist and guitarist George Winston, who often worked with and was a personal friend of Fahey's: "This improvised composition is in D modal tuning (D-A-D-G-A-D)...It features a Fahey

invention: backwards picking where the *third* string is played on the first and third beats and the lower pitched fifth string, which is normally played on the first and third beats, is instead played on the second and fourth beats.” If you play guitar you will be able to understand more of this than I do.

But it is important also to FEEL this music. One can feel the contemplation of what it means to change one’s station, the change from life to death and to life again, in this great piece of music. So, here is “My Station Will Be Changed After While.”

MY STATION WILL BE CHANGED AFTER WHILE