

Steve Barton on his life and music

At nine years old, I remember making a choice between being an impressionist or a musician. In the playground at school I'd have the other kids in stitches with my song parodies. One of my big hits back then was my take on "She Loves You". It went something like: "She hates you, No, No, No - You think you've lost your love / well you know darn well you did / she says she hates you cause you're a crazy mixed up kid".

It was the pivotal year. The Beatles, Kinks, Stones, Who, The Supremes came into my young mind at that age. Altered my DNA. Hearing The Beatles for the first time was more powerful than taking acid. Better, and certainly more profound. For the debut Translator album in 1982, I wrote a song called "Necessary Spinning". There wasn't really a chorus, but the refrain was "Sometimes I wish that I was nine years old again".

My first band was called The Present Tense. I was the drummer. I had a red sparkle four-piece drum kit. Like an eleven year old Don Henley, I was a singing drummer. We were a good combo. A record company recorded a single with two songs that I co-wrote with the guitarist - "Lost" and "Illusions". These two titles together could easily make up the title of my autobiography.

As bands do, The Present Tense split up. The single never came out. I switched to piano and guitar, and for the next couple of years I started to seriously write songs. A friend of my parents gave a tape, a reel-to-reel tape, to someone at a publishing company. They signed me to a publishing deal at the age of fourteen. I got an advance of \$25 per week, a small fortune for a fourteen year old. All I had to do was write songs. The deal lasted for two years. I never told any of my friends about it at the time.

My other love was, and still is, speaking and reading French. I graduated from school with honors in French, and went to the university in Grenoble, France for a semester. But, like that boy in the school yard all those years before, I was torn. Should I become a translator at the UN, my goal at the time, or put a band together? One day I was walking down a street in Grenoble and stopped in front of a music store. There were guitars hanging in the window on display. It was like a scene in a film. Time stood still. I knew it had to be music.

When I got back to Los Angeles after that semester abroad, I wanted a band but I had zero idea how to do that. I'd play with people, but nothing really fucked with my mind like I wanted it to. I briefly took an office job in a life insurance company. They were training me to be an underwriter. Really, my job was to deny coverage to as many people as I could. I never really understood how that was a good strategy for the company. I pretty much hated every minute of it. I turned 21 when I was working there, which is also when I quit that job.

Several important things happened right after that. First, I saw David Bowie & the Spiders From Mars live. I was that kid pressed up against the stage, right in front of Mick Ronson. Soon afterwards, I went to see Bob Marley & The Wailers at a club in LA. I went out and got my Les Paul because both Ronson and Marley played one. I still use that guitar. Also, my friendship with Dave Scheff took off. He and I have been friends for many years. Dave is the most musical, intuitive, creative drummer I know. The fact that I have been able to play with him for decades now is the greatest gift that I could ask for. Finally, a relationship I was in blew apart. I suddenly lived alone and plunged head first into music. Dave and I played in a Beatle band that toured Japan in 1979. On the flight back we decided to start a new band - that band would be Translator. Dave knew a bass player, Larry Dekker. We were a trio in LA for around six months before we stole guitarist Robert Darlington from another band, and moved to San Francisco.

That is the line up that would eventually record four albums for Columbia Records between 1982 and 1986. Then we split up, and just like with The Present Tense, I found myself thinking “what in the fuck am I supposed to do now!?” We have done several reunions through the years and it’s always a blast.

Another couple of important events then happened. I saw Oasis at a small club in San Francisco. It was one of the loudest shows I’ve ever attended. I had to step outside to catch my breath before diving back in. It was glorious. Then Blur’s “Parklife” came into my life, and blew my brain away. But most crucial was discovering PJ Harvey. I saw her “To Bring You My Love” tour in San Francisco, and I think it altered my DNA in the same way that The Beatles had done when I was a boy. I can still see her crawling on the stage whispering “Little fish, big fish swimming in the water...” Stunning.

The “Boy Who Rode His Bike Around The World” album, my solo debut, came out in 1999, thirteen years after Translator broke up. Why did it take so long? Whatever the answer is, it is lost in the haze of time and memory. The album was produced by Marvin Etzioni (Lone Justice), a very close friend of mine. Dave Scheff played drums, of course. We borrowed Hugo Burnham’s (Gang Of Four) drum kit. Translator had toured with Gang Of Four back in ’83 or ’84. Larry Dekker played bass on most of the songs as well. Sort of a mini Translator reunion, but definitely a solo album. I called it “experimental pop” when asked. Really, it is a bunch of my latest songs at that time. My mom was very ill during the making of this album. I can hear that when I listen.

Solo album number two is “Charm Offensive” from 2003. I had put a band together to play shows around LA, where I was living at the time. Robbie Rist (Cousin Oliver in The Brady Bunch, and a super talented musician) played drums, Derrick Anderson is on bass and Casey Dolan on guitar. The album was produced by Ed Stasium, who had produced two of the Translator albums, as well as The Ramones and many others. To this day, a good friend. Some fast songs, some slow. My mom had died in November 2000, and several of the songs were written with her in mind, especially “Narcolepsy Baby”. The band would travel to the UK and play at The Cavern Club in Liverpool. It was totally fun and mind-blowing to see all the Beatles sites. The nine-year old in me was freaking out. But the familiar restless stirring was already bubbling up in my being. The band was great. But I was still looking for something.

Then we recorded a really groovy record called “Flicker Of Time”. These were all songs that the four of us had rehearsed like crazy. Getting them down in the studio was pretty easy - we knew them really well. I remember playing a gig at a club in LA where we debuted a few of those songs. One in particular, “Cartoon Safe”, got a huge response. That made me really happy. Out of the blue, the other guitar player quit. We soldiered on as a trio for a while - made a video for “Cartoon Safe” (it is really fun - check it out on YouTube!), and played a handful of gigs.

Then, my dad got sick. He died in December 2009. I wrote a whole bunch of songs after he died, played them for Marvin Etzioni and he said it sounded like an album. We decided to do the record with just me playing everything. That spelled the end of the solo band. That album is “Projector”, a record I am really proud of. During the first decade of the 2000s, I took a job at one of the major publishing companies. I learned a hell of a lot about that world. I’m glad that I did it, but the familiar sideways restless feeling came back, of course. I began recording an album right before I quit the job. My wife and I moved to Portland Oregon, where I’ve now finished four ‘Portland’ albums.

My solo album number eight is “Time Hard Won”, my fourth since I moved to Portland. The theme is yearning and time. Ten new songs. Three of the songs were produced by my good friend Ron Fair at his fabulous Nashville studio. The new record will be out in 2024...
