

Life in a Band – Fred Howett

Early Days

In the autumn of 1964 after finishing at Exeter University, I joined the STC Radio Division at New Southgate. In the 60s there was a lot of live music in the pubs, clubs, theatres and cinemas in the local area. With some of my friends we enjoyed visiting them at weekends and I particularly enjoyed pubs with live music and went to them frequently.

On moving to Barnet in 1965 I found the area well served with jazz clubs and folk clubs, and started visiting them regularly, particularly The Barnet & Whetstone Folk Club which I visited weekly. It was there that I began to appreciate the singers, particularly those that also played the acoustic guitar. It was about this time that I bought my first guitar, a classical model, and began to teach myself to play.

During the fifties and early sixties the STC Sports and Social Club boasted its own dance band which used to play at Dinner Dances held at the site and at nearby local events. Throughout the sixties the number of employees at the site slowly dwindled; peoples leisure activities also changed, and by the mid seventies the Music Section was no longer active.

The Beginning of a band

In 1979 a colleague at STC New Southgate also bought a guitar and a few of us decided to get together after work for a couple of hours a week to jam together. We were soon joined by other musicians who worked at the site including: Terry Layzell - trumpet; Roy Core - guitar; Ted Brading - piano. Later we were joined by Jerry Deans - clarinet and harmonica; and then Nigel Beasley - guitar. The type of music played by the members evolved around this time from the more dance-band jazz numbers from the likes of Fats Waller and Louis Jordan such as *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Sweet Georgia Brown*, and *Sunny Side of The Street*, towards a more blues/rock'n'roll oriented mixture.

This gathering gradually evolved into a little group of people who worked in the Audio Division and enjoyed playing the same styles of music. We used to practice at various locations within the New Southgate site such as the Acoustic Lab, basements of buildings 4 and 8, the Tennis Cub pavilion, and the Rifle Range. The latter we originally shared with the rifle club but after the Hungerford shootings in 1987, Nortel, who then owned the site, banished the Rifle Club from the site so we had the Rifle Club premises to ourselves. It was excellent for band practice, being on the sports field we could play as loud as we liked without disturbing anybody, and there was plenty of space to store all our equipment, P.A., mic stands, lights etc. Because it had been built as a secure place to store guns it was a very safe place to store our gear. We also used to record demo tracks there. We practised there regularly most weeks until the site was closed by Nortel in August 2002.

We fortunately found a convenient rehearsal studio in New Southgate where we had a regular Friday evening booking. Sadly Station Studios closed in 2013, so we transferred to a similar facility, Satellite Studios in Ponders End, where we still get together most Friday evenings on a semi-regular basis.

The Gigs

Our first gig was in November 1982 to celebrate the move of the Audio Division Laboratory from the old wooden building to a much-improved space on the top floor of Building 4.



The band comprised Jerry Deans - lead vocal and harmonica, Fred Howett - guitar and vocals, Roy Core – guitar, and Nigel Beasley – guitar (and a cardboard cut-out of Division Manager David Free on the drum machine).

This was followed in December when we played at the Audio Division Christmas Party in the function room of a local pub.

At this time the band was called “Nigel Beasley’s Men From The Hills”. The reasons for this name are lost in the mists of time but it may have been an ironic decision because Nigel was then the most unassuming and reserved member of the group.

After a few years we decided a change of name was needed. This was decided in a most democratic way. Each band member supplied four suggestions and the total list was voted on by means of a single transferrable vote, with “Rich T and The Biscuits” coming out top. This was similar to many popular groups of our youth such as “Freddy & The Dreamers”, “Cliff Richard & The Shadows” etc. The members of the band have all adopted biscuit nicknames, and the band’s website makes extensive use of the ‘biscuit’ theme.

Our first big gig to a larger audience was in August 1983 when we performed to an audience of about 200 friends and work colleagues. This included a barbecue and took place in the garden of the Griffin pub in Whetstone. After this we returned to the newly opened New Southgate Pavilion.

This was so successful it became (almost) an annual event for the next few years, each with a different theme, the last one taking place in 1995. This photo is from the Scouts Campfire Jamboree in 1988.



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In 1984 we secured a residency playing alternate Friday evenings in the STC New Southgate Social Club pavilion. This ended when the pavilion was demolished to make way for a new brick built facility on the north field.

Over the years we have played for many different types of events such as Conservative and Labour dinner-dances, Charity events, Wedding receptions, birthday parties, even a Burns Night celebration, in a variety of locations including church halls, school halls, village halls, village greens, private gardens, even people's living rooms.

These photos show us playing at a School fete in Hampden Way, New Southgate in 1992 and in the impressive surroundings of Moor Park, Rickmansworth.



Recordings

Our first recordings, produced as demonstration cassettes, were recorded at our practice area in the rifle range at New Southgate. Our original recordings were made using high quality cassette recorders, later superseded by minidisk. Nowadays we use portable digital recorders, which can record at higher than CD quality.

Eventually we decided to go to a professional recording studio. We recorded our 1st CD in 2003 followed by our 2nd in 2005 – these were our versions of some of our favourite numbers – usually by relatively unknown bands.



Over the years I had written a number of songs for the band, which we gradually added to our repertoire. In 2012 I received an unexpected tax return and decided to spend it on a weekend in a recording studio with the band to record some of my songs.

This time we used a different recording studio as our drummer wanted to try and capture a more 'live' sound. We are hoping to record our 4th CD later this year.

Website

I also run the band website: Interestingly the bulk of this website is not visible to the public but is a resource for the band members and includes recordings of practice sessions, song lyrics and chord charts for the band numbers etc.

 www.richtandthebiscuits.com

Conclusion

Although we now don't perform as many gigs as we used to, we still derive enormous pleasure from playing together whether it is learning new numbers or reviving old numbers from our large repertoire, which now stands at over 250 songs. Our repertoire includes a wide variety of styles, fast or slow, blues, rock and roll, country, rhythm 'n' blues, comedy so we are able to tailor our performance to match virtually any occasion.

There have been some personnel changes over the years (mostly with bass players) but we have retained the same core of people. Originally we all worked at STC New Southgate so all lived in close proximity to the site.

Over the intervening years we are now more widely dispersed, members living as far afield as Redhill, Luton and Bishops Stortford, but we still enjoy playing together most Friday evenings even after 35 years. Our current line-up includes four members from New Southgate days including three from our first ever gig. Even our newest member has now clocked up 16 years.

One of our more recent gigs was Rich T and The Biscuits playing at my 70th Birthday Party in 2014. We also had a special cake made for the occasion!



PLEASE FEEL FREE TO LISTEN TO SOME OF OUR RECORDINGS ON THE FACILITY BELOW.