

THE SPELLBINDING AND COMFORTABLE JOHN B. SEBASTIAN

John B. Sebastian, who will make a rare hometown appearance at the Joyous Lake this Saturday night at 10, is arguably Woodstock's most world-famous citizen. His tie-dyed joy onstage at the 1969 Woodstock Festival is a celluloid image instantly recognizable



photo by Johanna Hall

all around the globe. His four decades of consistently great songwriting, performing and recording more than earned his place in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He has topped the charts with his songs on his own records ("Do You Believe in Magic," "Daydream," "Summer in the City," "Nashville Cats"), as TV themes (Welcome Back Kotter), and in movies from Woody Allen and Coppola to Disney. Closer to home, he is known as a genial man who does good wherever

he can, often in the guise of dog-lover guru; as an easy-going Dad; and of course, as a mesmerizing performer and raconteur: your all-around talented and stand-up guy.

I called John to talk about his Joyous Lake gig, just before he flew out to film a PBS special on folk-rock (sequel to the one on Doo Wop). He said he will be playing a cross section of his work at the Lake. "Everything from pre-Spoonful Village days to Spoonful to Jugbandy stuff. I've been doing mostly JBand over the last few years, so this is a return. Partly of necessity- (JBand mates) Paul Richel and Annie Raines got a Handy Award...and with Geoff Muldaur's renaissance. There have been a considerable number of requests for 'John solo'."

His spellbinding charm onstage comes partly from being so comfortable there. I asked about that ease. He said it comes from so much time logged onstage. "And I used to watch my father, from three or four-years-old, be incredibly more spellbinding- selling classical harmonica to a very conventional classical audience. Playing Bach flute sonatas, some violin concertos on harmonica, engaging his audience to accept that.

"On my mother's side, I had an 'aunt' Vivian Vance (Ethel on 'I Love Lucy'). I was backstage at five, watching her do a show my Mom had written. She came offstage to a standing ovation and said, 'Come take a bow with me.' The curtain was down, she took my hand and whispered, 'When this curtain goes up, everybody will yell because they're happy.' That was the best way to explain it to a little person and from then on, I was comfortable onstage.

“Lots of family friends were in that vein. I had a magic trunk from Paul Hartmann (‘Petticoat Junction’) at age nine, with things professional musicians used, like a feather duster that turned into a bouquet...not things you could buy in a magic store.”

When his Dad, Ben Sebastian, began to have acceptance in Europe, he moved the family to Italy for stretches while he toured. “The US wanted him to be a cabaret act, but he was a serious musician. (Brazilian composer) Villa Lobos wrote a concerto for him, which I’m getting released with the help of MusicMasters. His Bach is coming out soon. And then, some Tcherupnin.”

Sebastian senior’s blossoming career resulted in John’s becoming comfortable in Italian, among a coterie of wild characters. “We were undetectable as American... but my Italian is still twelve-years-old. I don’t know the words for any grown-up stuff.”

But even more important to his career, John was completely comfortable on the streets of Greenwich Village. “I was born on Bank Street and as time went on, lived on 11th Street and Washington Square West. The Night Owl was right up the street. I’d say, ‘Mom I’m going down just past where we buy the bread.’ It was a tremendous advantage.”

He learned to play guitar by ear, having “no aptitude for written music.” He said that he “touched the guitar at nine. At twelve, my Dad took me down to the pawnshop just on the way to school and bought me a \$12 Royalist guitar. After a few years, I graduated to a \$30 guitar, a Crusader. By prep school, I had filed the frets down so it played better than the rich kid’s \$300 guitars.....and eventually I had a New York Martin from trading.”

I wondered if his proficiency in the musical language of Italian had any bearing on his lyrical fluidity, and he concurred. “Learning to translate to the mother tongue gives an awareness of speech, the vernacular, the lingua franca. Not the grammatically correct. When you learn a second language, something else comes with it, not just the second language.”

Another part of his job training was being a camp counselor/music and drama teacher for five summers, keeping kids enthralled for 45 minutes with “volume, volume, volume” of songs. Burl Ives was a family friend and he brought Woody Guthrie, who “slept on our floor for a week.” Another family friend Beatrice Landek compiled “Songs To Grow On”, a book in virtually every piano bench in America.

Villa Lobos was an early influence on his guitar playing. John remembers

being in his Central Park West apartment. "He was an intense, compact man; built like Dad only taller and older. He had a beautiful black-haired wife. They would talk about particulars of music, my Dad would explain parts of harmonica....One day the phone rings and Villa Lobos says, 'Hold on... Yeah? Yeah? Whatya mean it's unplayable?' He puts the phone down and picks up the guitar and just rips this passage off. It was an astonishing thing! Something I'd never seen. Then he picks the phone back up and says, 'See Andres?' It was Segovia on the other end!"

These days John's life is "not exclusively about music. There are other things. Enjoying the simple process of being a father....the chance to visit relatives. Lucky that life has permitted me this luxury." Son Charlie is in school in Colorado and his older son, Ben is making his own records. John beams when he speaks of them. Clearly the chain of artistic talent continues through the generations.

And we are lucky that life has permitted us the luxury, the incredible pleasure of John B. Sebastian onstage in his hometown.