

# **When the Catfish Are In Bloom: Requiem For John Fahey**

**Ed Frankel**

Born in 1939 in Maryland, John Fahey pioneered the use of traditional country and blues finger picking to showcase the acoustic steel string guitar as a solo instrument that could play a mix of traditional and non-traditional musical genres. He collaged ideas associated with Bartok, Charles Ives, Indian and Gamelan music, Tibetan chanting and western hymns, into often eerie, unpredictable improvisations and meditations. A proficient self-taught guitarist by his teens, Fahey referred to himself and his musical style as “American primitive,” although he had a B.A. from American University and an M.A. in musicology from UCLA. He released his first album in 1958 under the pseudonym Blind Joe Death. During his trips collecting music and records in the south, he rediscovered Delta Blues legends Bukka White and Skip James whom he helped get recorded. Fahey released numerous albums and performed from the sixties until the early nineties. He was ranked thirty fifth in *Rolling Stone's* 2003 “One Hundred Greatest Guitarists,” but his eccentricities limited him to a cult following. Before he died in 2001 he had stopped many years of drinking, recovered from Epstein Barr disease and was playing and recording again. He turned away from his earlier styles, what he called “cosmic sentimentalism” and began exploring more experimental electronic music.

Where is what I started for, and why is it yet unfound?"  
--Walt Whitman

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sweet Spot	4
Song Of The Turtle	6
At The Ashgrove, 1965	7
The Sons Of Morning	10
The Second Age Of Mechanical Reproduction	11
John Doesn't Play The Blues Anymore	13
The Edge And The One Leg Up	15
Georgia Stomps, Atlanta Struts, And Other Contemporary Dance Favorites	16
Requiem I	18
Requiem II	20
Notes	22

### Sweet Spot

Once, in the winter of nineteen sixty four  
I met John Fahey at Mother Neptune's,  
The coffee house by Los Angeles City College.  
I was eighteen, growing out my hair,  
With a joint in my pack of Chesterfields,  
As I counted on my burning fingers  
All the trespasses that would raise the lamp  
That would cauterize the needle,  
To dip in ink from a broken ballpoint pen.  
Blue stigmata carnations that someday  
Would bloom as music inside my head,  
Or later, now, as words on this page.

John came in wearing a blue work shirt,  
Jeans, and a sport coat, which I thought  
Was very cool in those days.  
He was holding his hand on his head  
"So it wouldn't fall off," someone joked.  
It was only later that I came to recognize  
The resolve of the posture,  
Having been certain at times, that if my voice  
Receded any farther into the corner of the room  
It would turn itself inside out  
And I would start talking in tongues and disappear  
Like smoke from a signal fire,  
Out the top of my head.

He was dangling a soda bottle by the neck  
Jack Daniels mixed with Coca Cola.  
He borrowed my Gibson with the faded, redish top  
And played Christmas songs, in open tunings  
One after another, until figures in white robes appeared  
Up to their waists in a familiar river  
In the smoked-up windows of the coffee house,  
Singing "Low How A Rose 'Ere Blooming,"  
And he smiled once or twice, like the Cheshire Cat.  
"We three Kings," transfigured  
Under the Mixolydian colors of a modal star.

Sometimes he seemed to move through himself  
Like the current in that river,  
Talking easy to me, every once in a while,  
As if we were friends, a slow, droll voice,  
German philosophy that I didn't understand.  
Of rivers and religion, how he used to go fishing  
For days at time with Bukka White  
When the catfish were in bloom,  
Bukka White, who told him,  
*Be careful what you ask for John,*  
*The past is really in front of you, before your eyes,*  
*The future is out behind.*  
*Maybe you need to learn to walk backward*  
*In your own footprints,*  
*Like a Seminole Indian.*

“Joy To The World,” finger-picked and syncopated  
With a blues turn around and an old-timey riff.  
A reverence for the mood, not the holiday,  
Whatever brooded over that river  
That we have given so many names.  
He finished with “Silent Night,” which he played  
Like a Hawaiian lullaby with the back of a kitchen knife,  
Sliding it up and down the neck of the guitar  
That he held tilted on his lap like a baby.

*Nice little instrument with some decent sustain,*  
*He drawled, You don't see many red guitars.*  
*You got a real sweet spot*  
*Up around the tenth fret, on the B string.”*  
*It doesn't need much tremolo.*  
*You can feel it can't you,*  
*In your hands and chest*  
*Right through the sound box and fret board?*  
And I nodded my head,  
Even though I didn't feel a thing.

### The Song of the Turtle

“Days Gone By,” when those cool fingers  
Whispered over skin and flesh.  
His Mother’s hands fluttered and cooed like birds,  
Nesting, conjuring the murmurs,  
A light in the palm of the heart, touching,  
A rocking softness, before he had words to speak,  
A face that he entered,  
Bigger than the sun, painted and rouged.  
The perfume, the smell of liquor, coffee and cigarettes,  
Augured the moistness of lips that parted  
And closed, on his neck and chest.  
She would cool the kiss with a puff of breath,  
Then touch the spot with her forefinger  
As if to seal it like Solomon’s Pentagram,  
Drawn on his body in invisible ink  
That women seemed to notice  
When he closed his eyes and curved his long neck  
Back and to the side when he played,  
As if listening for a voice, the cradled humming,  
When the shades were drawn in the darkened living room.

His father worked for the government across the line,  
A.J., who sang and played the upright piano,  
Laid on those heavy ancestral hands at night,  
Who drank and doled out the fruit when his mother left.  
John, his hair slicked back with Brillcream.  
“Just a little dab will do you,” John Aloysius Fahey.

He raised turtles in a concrete pit behind the house.  
When he was little and the night noise had subsided  
The turtles used to sing to him of days gone by,  
When the Catfish were in bloom.

At The Ash Grove, 1965

“Ever I get my new house done  
Sail away, ladies, sail away.  
I’ll give the old one to my son.  
Sail away ladies, sail away.”

His hands shook, so he played the first piece fast,  
Just to burn off the adrenalin,  
Guitar low on his hip,  
His head tilted back and to the side,  
Long neck curved, eyes closed.  
*Transcendental Water Fall,*  
*Requiem for the Last Steam Engine Train.*  
*The Maiden Voyage of the Yellow Princess.*  
*Dance of the Inhabitants of the Invisible Bladensburg Castle.*  
Imagine Bartok in syncopation, Stravinsky and Ravel  
Finger-picked on a steel string guitar.

He slid a tarnished lipstick tube  
On his little finger up and down the strings,  
While his thumb played the alternating bass,  
And his fingers picked melody and harmony,  
Left hand hammering down, pulling off  
The pleasures from the slack and sympathetic strings.

Open tunings gave him perfect chords  
In odd and unfamiliar inversions,  
The spaciousness of Open C for example,  
The top two strings both tuned in unison  
Without the third interval became a drone of bees.  
The same note, played on different strings  
Is not the same note, if every object  
Posits its own universe.  
The regress of overtones reassured us  
Of some kind of order  
To whatever it is we are crossing.

He followed the chromatic descent to the dark  
Root of the tonic, the turnaround and hesitation.  
Don't look back John.  
Whatever's there might be gaining on you.  
The anticipation of another twelve bars  
As the steamboat comes around the bend,  
The whistle piercing the mist  
Before the smokestacks emerge above the willows.  
The calliope pipes "The Tennessee Waltz."  
A Day of the Dead skeleton in the pilot house,  
Grins and holds the wheel steady.  
A deck hand that looks just like you, John  
Checks the fathoms, and marks the twine.

Then a hymn, simple and four square  
When the hour is fulfilled,  
*Jesus Is A Dying Bed Maker* and all  
Who navigate that river squeezed into a tune.  
*A Raga For Mississippi John Hurt.*  
*The Camptown Races, A Bicycle Built For Two.*  
Variations on Saint Saens' *The Yellow Princess.*  
He stabilized the fantasies on the harmonic armature  
Until it had a life of its own,  
Decks of teak and mahogany,  
A jade prow and an ivory hull.

Not much banter in between songs  
Except for one quiet monologue  
About seeing Jimmy Reed perform  
Seated in a straight back chair.  
His wife stood behind him,  
Her hands on his shoulders,  
Whispering lyrics in his ear:  
"I got a bird that whistles  
I got a bird that sings,  
But without my Corina  
Life isn't worth a thing."

John fiddled with the tuning pegs  
Squinting out at the audience.

In the middle of the second set  
He toppled backwards off the stool  
Knocking over his doctored bottle of Coke,  
Clutching his guitar to his chest.

*Gravity may be one of God's clearer manifestations,*  
*Along with pressure and coincidence,* he mumbled,  
Slowly, deliberately, as he set himself up again.  
People laughed nervously  
But I suppose we encouraged his oddities,  
In exchange for a peek around the bend in that river  
That we have given so many names.  
Marking on the twine is nine fathoms.  
Sail away, Johnny, sail away.

### The Sons of Morning

I tethered my desires to him  
To retrieve news from a distant star,  
Finding repose in a quality of light, pale and thin,  
that lengthened into green shadows at day's end.  
A voice would say, "Of course I would love you green,"  
He would understand immediately what that meant,  
How talking in tongues both thrilled  
And frightened me back then,  
When I woke up in a room an unnamed part of town  
Staring at my hands, my face in the mirror,  
The strangeness of my clothes,  
Watching the walls close in,  
Another man who fell to earth,  
Like so many other sons of morning.

His music loosened the ties that bound  
What I thought was permanent in the world  
To reveal the contingency of things,  
Easy to talk about now, but in those days  
Everything was still more or less glued down.

How far could a melody stretch  
And still be the same song?  
When does it stop being music at all.  
The glue that holds that song together  
Holds together the ten thousand things  
That make up this temporary and perishable world.

Sometimes everything melted and hummed in my ear,  
Compressed into one well tempered note,  
And all the instruments I heard were trying  
To imitate the human voice  
Calling out in all the faraway places  
It has marked with its song.

## The Second Age of Mechanical Reproduction

Gather round boys, here we are,  
In the second age of mechanical reproduction,  
And still so many things that money can't buy.  
I've played enough to know  
That it isn't about how fast you move your fingers.  
Pure technique is seductive,  
Like some love potion sold off the back of a truck  
At the end of the minstrel show,  
But finally slowing you down.  
Lots of folks these days with three thousand dollar Martins  
And electric tuning machines can play all of John's music  
At twice the speed that he could, and then some.  
But they can't find the revenant voicings,  
The timing and the touch.

John had big hands.  
Sometimes he used metal finger picks  
On high gauge strings.  
There are more nerves in the hand  
Than in any other part of the body  
He used to say.

I spent hours experimenting with the angles,  
The intensity of the attack, all the variations,  
How to file my nails, the degrees of pressure,  
What part of the finger presses down on the board  
And how close to the fret?  
How to get that thick, fat sound  
With the fleshy tips of the finger?  
How to tamp and muffle the bass strings  
With my palm at the same time.  
How to tune down a half tone  
To soften the action, or take it back up  
To find the shuffle and the bounce?

How much space to leave between the notes and the phrases?  
Whether to bend the note up or down?  
Whether to play a chord as you inhale, or exhale,  
Or hold your breath, while you barely remember  
From another lifetime, before you had the words,  
The face of the woman emerging as big as a sun,

The perfumed and powdered hands.  
Perhaps these are not the right questions  
To ask a dead musician,  
Not the right questions at all.

The heart may not be a ship in a bottle,  
Or a mirror to be polished,  
But it is crisscrossed with nerve fibers,  
Sympathetic, strung and open tuned  
To any number of moods, all running  
From the heart to the brain and back again.  
When he got the jitters before going on stage,  
John would remember what Bukka White told him,  
How everyone is strung like a musical instrument.

John doesn't Play The Blues Anymore

"All those middle class white boys  
Out to have their fun."

--Mose Allison

Elvis took "Hound dog" from Big Mamma Thorton  
Koerner, Ray and Glover were hanging out  
With Big Joe Williams and copying every grunt  
And sigh off the old seventy eight's, those days.  
Tom Rush copped "The Panama Limited,"  
Talking dialogue and all, off of Bukka White.  
In the early years, John made himself as mysterious  
As St Elmo's fire and swamp gas, but in the end  
We were all stealing other folks' music,  
Plain and simple, not out of disrespect,  
But blind ignorance, admiring,  
Coveting other people's lived experience.  
What else would you have people do,  
Who wake up living in Boomtown in the fifties,  
Like that man who fell to earth,  
Trying to get his bearings  
When the anesthesia wears off,  
Struggling for air and trying to plug up the holes?  
*I don't listen to my old stuff*, John said,  
Not long before he died,  
*Too much like a minstrel show,*  
*And I haven't played the blues in years.*

*Believe me, John, Bukka White told him,*  
*After all these years, my hands*  
*Still as hard as the soles of your shoes.*  
*I was there—and there ain't no romance*  
*About road gang work, doing time on the County Farm,*  
*Or cutting sugar cane along the Brazos*  
*With some cracker in sun glasses sitting his horse,*  
*With a pump shotgun over the saddle*  
*Telling you whether you can get a drink of water—*  
*Yes sir, boss,*  
*Or take a pee,*  
*No, sir boss.*

*No romance in a nine pound hammer—*

*No, sir boss.*

*Water'em down.*

*Yes, sir boss.*

*No romance in dragging a hundred pound bale of cotton.*

*When Muddy Waters got some real money*

*He bought himself a new Buick and a house in the suburbs.*

*Yes siree Bob—Boss.*

### The Edge And The One Leg Up

No trees to notch or Polestar to follow  
Here on the river when the fog is in, John.  
You'll need a trick to find your way back,  
A placeholder in time,  
If you don't want to lose your bearings,  
And I'm not talking about breadcrumbs  
Or a ball of twine.  
And you need to hold a few back for yourself.  
Skip James had secret tunings only he could use.  
Charley Patton used to hunch way over his instrument  
So the guitarists who came to watch his hands  
Couldn't copy his chords.  
When Blind Lemon Jefferson used to wrestle,  
He had his one secret move.  
You need something in your medicine bag  
To get the edge and the one leg up.

So John tried titles as deception.  
Titles as place holders in time.  
    "Revolt of the Dike Brigade,"  
Dragged across the melody like a red herring,  
    "Highway 101 Is A Hard Road to Travel,"  
To throw the hunters and watchers off the trail,  
    "Time, God and Causality,"  
    "The Dasein River Blues,"  
    "Give Me Corn Flakes When I'm Hungry,"  
    "Love Song Of The Man In The Iron Mask."

“Georgia Stomps, Atlanta Struts,  
And Other Contemporary Dance Favorites”

I

One of John’s last albums.  
The past was really in front of him now,  
The future out behind.  
He was walking backward in his own footprints.  
It promised live acoustic shuffles, tone poems  
Stealing back to those syncopated  
Same old used to be’s.  
But he was finger-picking a Telecaster.  
A twenty minute electric rendition,  
“The House of the Rising Sun,”  
With the voice of the revenant barely  
Sequestered in overtones of reverb.  
Afterwards he drawled to the audience,  
*I can’t leave my sunglasses off for too long,  
The world might explode and my head might fall off,  
I don’t want that to happen tonight.*

Then he moved into “Stella By Starlight. ”  
From a radiant countenance in a bone-white cage,  
A bird that whistles and a bird that sings.  
Now the sun and the moon are face to face.  
We cannot know what passes between them  
At this moment, in the eclipse of their embrace.  
We can’t stare directly but must look  
Through darkened glasses,  
A tiny hole in a box.

II

On the cover of one of his last albums  
A morality play in a Medieval landscape of pale sepia  
Against white space, a tableau of the known world.  
If this were a Tarot card it might be named  
The man without a heart.  
Or the death of Saint Elmo  
The Patron Saint of players of stringed instruments.

We’re on the outskirts of town.  
Two thieves have waylaid a traveler  
In a ditch by the side of the road.  
One of the men chokes the victim

With a length of rope  
While the other cuts out his heart.  
Where will they go and what will they do  
With the stolen heart?

If this were a fairy tale, they might  
Bring the heart to the wicked witch,  
But these are not messengers and deliverymen.  
They are going nowhere.  
All that really matters is the reverent commerce,  
Still for now in the eye of the storm,  
That blood red heart in the middle of it all.

The four winds are depicted in their cardinal circle  
Blowing the seasons around the years,  
While a benign sun looks down  
At the profile of a frowning ambivalent, moon.  
Why is the moon frowning you might ask?

On the back of the album a church sits on a cliff,  
Fire, treacle, and brimstone burn below.  
John liked to play in empty churches  
And he liked to close his albums with a hymn.  
Always a hymn to close.

Inside the album is a dark photo,  
A grizzly bearded man in sunglasses  
Sitting behind the wheel of a station wagon  
Piled high with stuff, a guitar on top of it all.

Things were looking up, until one morning  
his fingers started to burn.  
A current shot down his left arm  
From his heart and back to his brain.  
P'pop, p'pop.  
He felt something snapping in his chest.  
His body warped and he dropped to his knee.

## Requiem I

The radio told me about the death of John Fahey,  
A live commercial for buttermilk biscuits  
Was all that was missing,  
Followed by a scratchy, fiddle version  
Of “The Sunny Side Of The Ocean.”  
Sail away Johnny, sail away.  
But John never sailed away on some golden boat  
Or into the trade currents on *the Yellow Princess*

When the Diabetes and Epstein Barr ran him down,  
He drank “to get the energy to go on stage,”  
But his fingers thickened and stumbled.  
No longer the swan-necked boy  
With the second sight and an ear for chords  
That could make your heart drop open  
Like that old kit bag and smile, smile, smile.  
All the watchers and listeners made their way home.  
*I wish I was a tree,*  
*I wish I was a mole in the ground.*

He lived off a smattering of royalties  
In the welfare motel outside of Salem, Oregon,  
Then the Gospel Mission when the money ran out.  
The smell of Lysol, off key hymns, the hard backed chairs,  
What he calls “a humbling experience” and all  
The soul-cleansing chores that go with it.  
When that becomes intolerable, he lives in his car.  
He pawns his instruments—not unlike  
Selling one child to save the life of the other.  
His extended stomach protrudes over his baggy jeans,  
White beard, white halo around his bald head.  
Dark glasses because the light hurts his eyes.  
What are we going to do with Sleepy John Aloysius  
Now that he doesn’t drink anymore.  
He searches the Salvation Army music bins,  
Goes door to door buying people’s old records  
To sell back to collectors and music stores,  
Exactly what he did in the south forty years ago  
When he was eighteen years old.

John returns to Maryland only after his father dies.  
He tells an old friend who just bought the family house,

*You should have it exorcised*  
*Many nefarious and blasphemous things happened here.*  
*The house may contain evil spirits.*  
He seemed painfully shy the neighbors said.  
When they invited him in to visit.  
It was hot and they offered him a beer  
But he asked for ice water instead.

He rents an apartment with the money from his father's house.  
The man who fell to earth  
Eats sausages on a stick and deep fried mushrooms  
Washed down with Snapple from the convenience store.  
He gets his instruments out of hock.  
He water paints and makes collages.  
He cuts his final albums on his own label,  
*Revenent Company, Texarkana.*  
Things are looking up.  
*Hitomi.*  
*Georgia Stomps, Atlanta Struts*  
*And Other Contemporary Dance Favorites.*  
*Indian Summer.*

## Requiem II

I want this poem to turn like a sunflower  
Toward a face bigger than the sun,  
To listen to talking bridges and singing turtles,  
To bend its long swan neck and close its eyes,  
To become that kiss and that sweet spot,  
The cradled humming,  
“In Christ There Is No East or West.”  
To sing “Uncloudy Day”  
In sacred harp voices, foursquare and loud,  
To cool you with a puff of breath.  
I want to lay these words in your lap  
Like your slide guitar or a sleepy child.

There is a ring around the moon tonight,  
John Aloysius Fahey,  
Sometimes considered propitious  
But not always the best of signs.  
The night noise has subsided  
And the singing turtles have commenced to dream.

The sun, embraced in the moon’s eclipse,  
Has once again begun to move.  
The wind is up and blowing through the unfurled sails  
And rigging of *The Yellow Princess*.  
She is out of the doldrums and headed for the open sea  
Under the Southern Cross.  
The constellations have renewed their drift.  
What remains is what passes between us at this moment.  
The past stretches out in front of us,  
The future, and all that is gaining on us  
Are beyond words, beyond our remonstrance.  
The man in the moon can only reflect  
The countenance of a distant love.

The people who worship by staring  
Raw at the sun quickly go blind.  
The last thing they see is the radiance  
Of that solitary and distant love.

*“Long John, is long gone.  
Long gone with his long johns on.  
he’s got a heel in front and a heel behind  
And they never will tell which way he’s gone.”*

The melody has faded from the grooves  
Of those thick, old seventy eights.  
They’ve been played over and over  
Until they just wore out,  
Like the valves and chambers of the heart.

Beyond the sun that you can’t stare at for long  
Face to face, a fragrance you can’t name.  
A cool finger touches your chest.  
A kiss on the sweet spot with just a little tremolo.  
A slide up to that high A on the tenth fret,  
Enough to make your heart drop open  
“Pack up your troubles” the song says  
“In that old kit bag, and smile.”

## NOTES

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Of Rivers And Religions: Fahey album title

Bukka White: traditional blues musician

When the catfish were in bloom: Fahey song title

The Man Who Fell to Earth: film title

"Of course I would love you green." Garcia Lorca

"The ten thousand things that make up this temporary and perishable world": Tao Te Ching and Rilke

"Every object posits its own universe." : Husserl

"Don't look back [John] ; whatever's there might be gaining on you": Satchel Paige

"A ship with golden sails, an ivory hull/  
a jade prow and a jeweled mast head": Fahey

"Sail Away Ladies, Sail Away": Traditional American Folk Song

"All those middle class white boys/ out to have some fun.": Mose Allison

Age of mechanical reproduction: Walter Benjamin

"[stealing back to those]same old used to be's." : Gus Cannon.

I wish I was a tree,  
I wish I was a mole in the ground: Traditional song

It's not haunted...contain evil spirits: Fahey, *How Bluegrass Music Ruined My Life*

"[a beauty] beyond all remonstrance": William Carlos Williams

"Long John is...which way he's gone: Traditional Blues

"The Radio told me about the death": Jack Spicer

"Pack Up Your Troubles In that Old Kit Bag And Smile": George and Felix Powell, 1915

