

Spark #1.09 - New Stuff

- Henry Warwick

- 08/15/2000

Doing things in a new way. Like it or not.

Last weekend I did something really stupid. Not just merely dumb, or inattentive, or clueless, but genuinely stupid. And, like any great act of brainlessness, it was something that was a long while in coming. This great folly had begun about a month ago.

My wife, Beth, and my three-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, and I were out on the town on a fine Saturday afternoon in early July. Or, to be more precise, fine for San Francisco - any other part of the contry would have found it to be cold, damp, and foggy with intermittent sunshine struggling against the wave of Alaskan air conditioning we call the Pacific Ocean. Wending our way through the yuppie sharks and the teenage remorae that clutter the weekend sidewalks of Haight Ashbury, we stopped by one of our favorite local Music Center. As usual it was filled to the gunnels with fine instruments of every shape, size, and color. This Music Center always had a fair stock of left handed instruments, and being sinistral, this feature makes it one of my favourite Music Centers.

Elizabeth ran into the bass guitar section, and hiding in a corner was a beautiful dark blue lefty Fender Jazz Bass guitar. I picked it up, and started running through all the old creaky, forgotten, utterly wonderful Progressive rock bass lines I could remember. It played beautifully. As I was grinding through "Close to the Edge" by Yes, someone from the back of the store said, "hey I recognize that!" I looked over there, and saw a brief twinkle in his eyes, that seemed to say "Thank the Gods someone remembers that stuff..."

That small validation of my feeble rusty efforts left me feeling great. I looked at my wife, Beth, and half joking, said, "well, you know, my birthday is in a few weeks. . ."

She looked at me and said, "Cool! No problem! Happy birthday, sweetie!"



We put some money down and the bass was on layaway. A few weeks later, we paid the rest of the money, and it was mine Mine MINE! I immediately began practicing day and night, day after day. In the few minutes before I went to work, as I waited for Beth to finish dressing andas Elizabeth would watch Sailor Moon, I would be practicing on my bass guitar. A few days later, a box arrived from a friend in Seattle. He sold me his Tech 21 bass driver DI, for just a few dollars. He had no use for it, and wanted to see it in a good home. With that stomp box, I am able to emulate a number of fine amplifiers

and playing styles. One of my favorites is a sound very much akin to that developed and perfected by John Wetton in the early 1970's. The bass driver was brilliant for all this - it gave my bass a good growl.

I spent days going over all the old riffs I knew by King Crimson. After I tired of that, I embarked on learning songs by Cocteau Twins. It was too much fun. I'd even practice while watching TV - I'd play along to the commercials, the TV show theme songs, anything.

Over the next few weeks, I wrote some spark columns, and did a lot of typing at work. On Saturday, we had a party for my wife's birthday. It was a big a wonderful cookout. Huge slabs of salmon slathered with lemon juice, and baked over coals. Delicious. I drank a lot of red wine. A lot of red wine.

An interesting fact of red wine, is that it makes your joints swell. Painlessly. That night I fell into a deep wine soaked sleep, with my right wrist tucked beneath me in a very bad position....

My right forearm has been in a splint ever since. The doctor says its a minor sprain complicated with tendonitis.

I am not typing this column today. I am using IBM's program ViaVoice. I speak, it writes. And this is where we get to the crux of this particular edition of Spark.

Normally, I just type the column as quickly as possible and then let it sit for a week or two while I let its content resonate in my rickety thicket of memory. I can type quickly - faster than I can speak - actually, much faster than I can speak. The ideas just come tumbling out, and everything flows in an organic stream of semi-organized consciousness. Later, I come back to the column, and edit it into something vaguely readable and hopefully worthwhile.

But now I can't type like that. I can hardly type at all. My wrist is swollen and pained.

ViaVoice is, or lease the version I have, a decidedly inferior way to work. I can't speak too quickly, because it will get confused. I can't speak too slowly, because it will get confused. I have spent many hours training the program to understand my voice, and it only seems to get the right word about 4 times out of 5.

But what I find most fascinating about this particular juncture is how having to speak slowly and clearly into a microphone is affecting my ability to compose this column. I feel like I am talking to an idiot. Not you, gentle reader, but the witless computer and this dictation software -they are the morons. I feel I must speak in small simple sentences.

Perhaps this temporary disability is an actual gift from the fates to remind me of my fragile life. It reminds me of how I first started playing keyboards back in the 1980's.

I decided that I really needed to make every key on the keyboard a special, unique, and experiential event. Think of it as an alchemical approach to the keyboard. I started with c sharp. I only played the note c sharp in the middle octave of the keyboard. Over and over and over and over. I programmed the

keyboard, a Korg DSS1 sampler, with a variety of unique ambient and atmospheric tones. Each C sharp would be a different texture, but still C sharp.

After several weeks of this, I started playing C sharp in different octaves, sometimes all at once - in harmony, other times in sequence - in melody. With various textures, different harmonics came to the fore, and with oscillators slightly detuned, the effects were sometimes most striking and affecting.

Soon, I progressed to D sharp. This made for some amazing dissonances. With the proper sounds from the sampler, the effects were even more startling. After several months of this effort, I was playing in a full pentatonic scale, with the usual precious and quasi-asian effect that this scale provides. It took a few years to work my way into a fully chromatic scale.

This doesn't mean that I am least bit competent as a keyboard player. That was never the intention of the practice. The point was to fully understand each note for what it is, and appreciate it as a part of a complete and integral whole. Also, an important part of the practice was to learn the value of simplification and making the most from the least. It is **from** the tiny details of our experience that the structure of the whole of our experience is woven, and it is **in** the tiny details of our experience that the structure of the whole of our experience is reflected.

This approach was an analogue approach, an alchemical approach, one tailored and specific to myself. Things were dealt with as immediate experiences, not as representations or streams of data. No abstraction involved. "This keyboard" with "this sound" does "this special thing" when a "this specific note", and only that note, is played. Hence, the physical instrument itself was paramount to this approach. Much of this aesthetic process can be heard in my music to this day.

HOWEVER - that was not the approach I took when I re-acquainted myself with the Bass Guitar. No no no. I just downed a few beers, and charged ahead in full blazing glory with memories of grand slamming basslines running through my head to my rusty 42 year old fingers that feverishly fumbled to keep up with 25 year old music played by 23 year musicians. Even so gung ho, so smitten with the power of my Bass, I still find there is something unique and special in the quiet of holding my dark blue Fender Jazz Bass guitar, unplugged, plucking its silver strings with my finger tips or plectrum, pressing the roundwound strings to its dark neck, putting my chin against its cool smooth curving body and hearing its growling sound resonate and reverberate inside my head.

And today there's something unique and special about speaking slowly, carefully, into a cheap microphone attached to my computer. When my wrist heals, I will play my bass guitar, and I will play C sharp on a keyboard. When I do, I will remember this column, where I had to do things differently. Slowly. Simply. I'm not thinking any more accurately or clearly, and I'm not speaking with more sophisticated insight, and I'm not writing more thoughtful and organised prose. But the words now come deliberately and with conviction. I have to force them to be there.