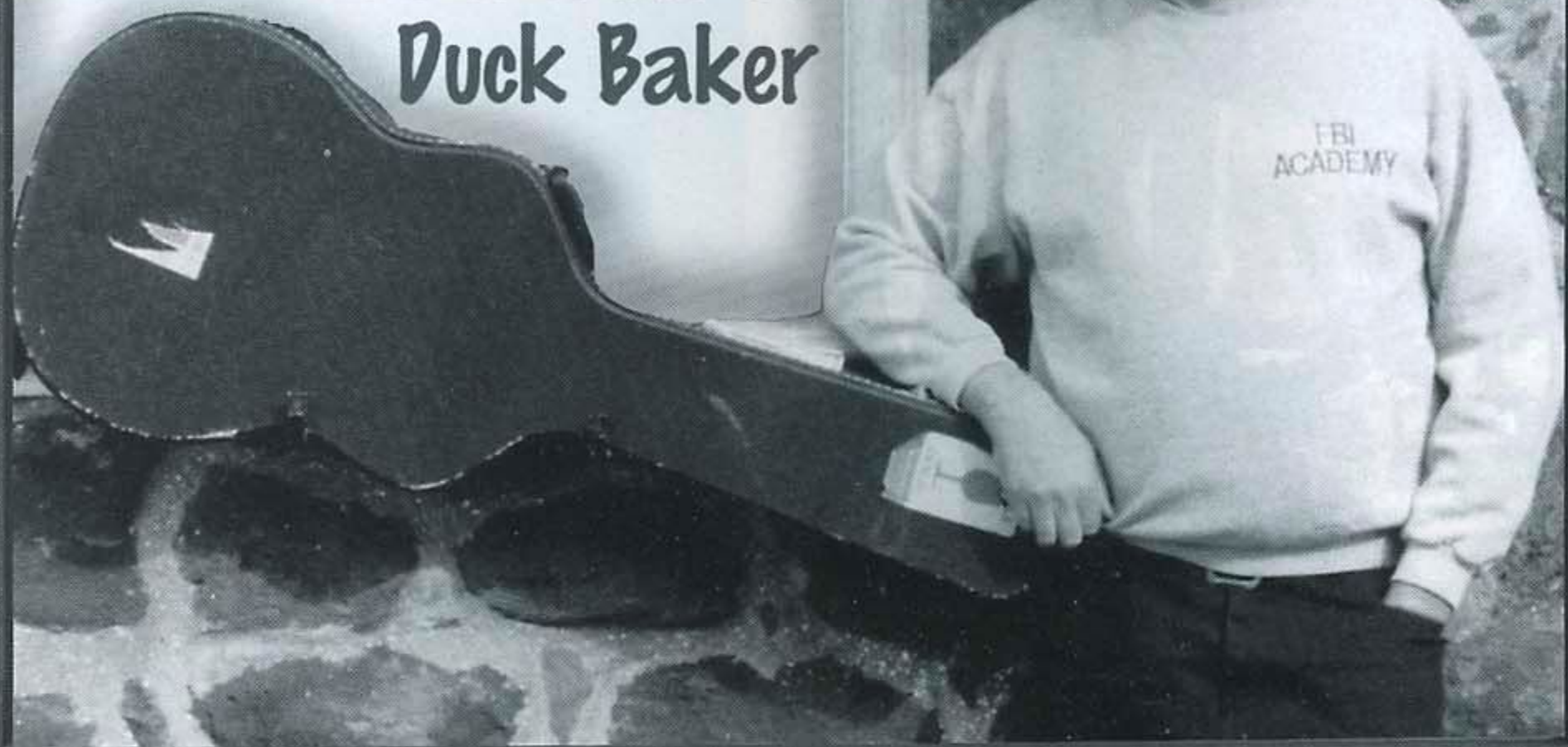


Duck Soup

A Portrait of Duck Baker



by Opal Louis Nations

Lynn Abbott

Duck Baker would be the last finger-picking guitar stylist ever to admit that he aspired to virtuosity. To be “hot” and to always generate excitement supersede excellence, asserts Baker. “Best of all,” he says, “my central focus is to be a credible ‘old-timey’ musician and to function as such in every discipline, whether it be traditional Irish music, bluegrass, country swing, blues, and modern or free-form jazz.” Along the way he felt it a privilege to have worked with so many fine musicians — people like Jamie Findley, Kieran Fahy, and Stefan Grossman — who have inspired and carried him across the chasms of today’s commercial music emptiness. He adamantly believes that 90 percent of today’s acoustic music is meaningless and without real value. “Great music,” says Baker, “is written by players who project a specific identity and a sense that their art comes from a personal space.” He also affirms that the growth of an ever-sprawling suburban environment put an end to the preservation and cultivation of honest, traditional musical forms.

One of Baker’s teachers was Rosswell Rudd, who taught him that it mattered little to make mistakes in performance, that what was

most important was to “go-for-broke,” play as if your life depended on it. One certainly gets a glimpse of this fury in concert, where Baker, his forehead furrowed, eyes tightly shut and upper lip twisted in contortion, strikes his strings with such percussive zeal one thinks one can hear the belly of his instrument cry out for mercy. To counter this, Baker would continue along in restraint and play simply and nimbly, perhaps add complex chords and create an intimate atmosphere. The next moment he transports you to a smooth, comfortable place.

Baker’s sometimes neo-classical style is confected with a variety of moods, sudden changes in tempo, haunting “aftersounds,” stanzas from songs of other genres, all ingeniously written into the overall fabric. Over the course of the last 30 years, Baker has developed an artistry all his own. He was born Richard Royal Baker IV in Washington, D.C., in 1949 and grew up in Richmond County, Virginia. His father pastored an Episcopal church in neighboring Warsaw. At school, Baker’s fellow classmates tagged him “Duck” as they thought he looked much like the aquatic bird. Baker did not much mind. In fact, he liked it and stuck with it.

In 1953, Baker and his family moved to Gainesville, Florida, where they stayed for three years before returning to Richmond County. Baker was first inspired to play music in 1961 when he was taken by the skills of a young woman who played commercial Gypsy tunes. He pestered his parents to buy him a fiddle, but somehow or other he ended up with a violin. Baker spent four or five years under the tutelage of various violin instructors. One day his parents took him to see a Brahms recital. “Watching the female fiddle soloist and listening to her trying to interpret the music put me right off fiddle playing for good.”

In 1963 — on his 14th birthday — Baker’s father gave him a ukulele. Mastering the instrument led him to want to try the guitar. Armed with a Jerry Silverman instruction book, Baker labored at mastering a few basic chords on the instrument. After going electric, Baker joined a teenage rock band called The Soothe Sayers, who played a lot of fashionable English pop record covers. Baker also doubled on keyboards and faked a few sustained chunky chordings. He remembers his rudimentary grasp of organ parts to ? and the Mysterians’

"96 Tears" and Sam the Sham and the Paraohs' "Woolly Bully."

Alan Gay was Baker's best friend in the band. Gay's older sister often played Dylan records, and the music caught Baker's attention. Gay's father, an artist, would take Baker down to the Coffee House in Richmond, a venue for touring folk musicians; this was an eye-opening experience. Baker did not do too well in high school because all of his thoughts were channeled into becoming a troubadouring musician. He soon mastered the Travis finger-picking style and wanted to do better.

Baker attended Peter, Paul & Mary concerts, which, as it turned out, had a profound influence on him. At the Coffee House, Baker met and befriended a number of folk-blues guitarists, notably Lynn Abbott and Larry McCullough. Baker has vivid memories of a store on Broad Street called Adams Camera Shop, which sold a wide variety of blues albums by black artists.

Overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of blues stylists, Baker began picking up the work of blues masters like Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and Lonnie Johnson and started finding his way around their music. With the addition of Larry McCullough to The Soothe Sayers, the group began to sound a little less like a rock group and more like a clone of the Butterfield Blues Band. By now, Baker had adopted a "fuzztone." Through the treasures of Adams

Camera Store, Baker was experiencing the revelations of country and city blues. He got with Buck Evans, who was scornful of rock bands. Buck, a ragtime stride pianist, turned Baker onto all kinds of roots-based blues music, including the work of Scott Joplin, who impressed Baker a great deal. Buck also put direction into Baker's guitar playing. Buck was able to crystallize Baker's influences so that he might focus on those of greater significance. More and more, Baker felt drawn to the importance of playing lead lines as opposed to dwelling on the interpretation of melody.

By 1965, Baker, forever exploring new territory, was turning his attention to jazz. Not finding too many masters in the modern jazz guitar idiom, he focused mainly on modern jazz pianists like Thelonious Monk, although a few key sax-playing figures drew his attention, like Sonny Criss and John Coltrane. His appreciation of Charlie Parker came later on, when he sought a greater understanding of the complexities of his music. Through Monk, who Baker considered odd and challenging, he came upon Archie Shepp and the free-form jazz movement.

In 1969, after unsuccessfully trying to convince the draft board that he was a conscientious objector, and with encouragement from his girl friend, Baker fled to Vancouver, Canada. He became a cook and started writing reviews for *Coda* magazine. Months later, he was back in Richmond, where, through working his way up from day laborer, he was able to pick up a few skills in construction as well as teach himself carpentry. At this time he hitched up with Lynn Abbott, who found a place for Baker as a member of his jug band. This heightened Baker's interest in bluegrass music.

Switching easily to swing jazz, Baker befriended Thom Keats and his band. This was an exciting time for Baker, who played the San Francisco café circuit and especially enjoyed the flavor of the music when the occasional horn player sat in. Through a friend, Bruce Ackley, Baker focused in on the free jazz scene and the single-note



Baker with Molly Andrews, Richmond, Virginia, 1992

style of Eric Dolphy. But nothing really much caught fire for Baker, so he moved back to Richmond for a few months and joined up with a no-name bluegrass street-band.

Back in the San Francisco Bay area, Baker's career took a turn for the better when he signed a recording contract with Ed Danson of Kicking Mule Records. Before the initial release of *King of Bongo Bong*, his first outing, Baker spent some time in Boulder kicking around with various string band people. He toured Europe on a schedule set up by friend and admirer Stefan Grossman before moving to London and staying at Sandy Denny's apartment in Fulham. In England, he was almost consumed by the draw of Irish music. He fled London for Italy in 1981, then returned to the U.S. in 1986.

After a dozen albums, covering various aspects of his always evolving music, two videos (one of which features his interpretations of Thelonious Monk compositions), almost a dozen guest appearances on his friends' collections, at least five titles in Mel Bay's instruction book series, tours to the far corners of the planet, plus a host of music articles in various magazines, Baker feels a need to return to Italy, where he has found a number of musicians all striving, like himself, to reach that perfect place with their music.



Greg Roberts and Baker - bluegrass on the streets, 1975

DUCK BAKER

Introduction to Fingerstyle Swing Guitar

Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop GW 313 (2001)

Introduction to Gospel Fingerstyle Guitar

Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop GW 312 (2001)

Duck Baker's mastery of fingerstyle guitar and his clarity and precision as a teacher are very much in evidence on these two new instructional videos, designed primarily to allow intermediate finger-pickers to expand their horizons. In the swing video, Baker takes a leisurely pace, teaching only four tunes on the 90-minute tape. This gives the guitarist a chance to not only show the fingering on both hands in detail, but to offer insights into the cultural and artistic contexts from which this style originated. For the gospel video, Baker chose some straight hymns ("Abide With Me," "There is a Happy Land," and

"What a Friend We Have in Jesus"), two Southern hymns that have become country standards ("Farther Along" and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken"), and everyone's favorite Dixieland tune ("When the Saints Go Marching In").

On both videos, the production values are of the usual high standards found on the Stefan Grossman Guitar Workshop tapes, and the use of split screen allows the student to focus intently on the actions of either the playing or the picking hand at will. Baker has chosen songs that are fun to play, but with enough chordal complexity (at least in his arrangements) to open up new horizons for even the most advanced guitarists.

— Michael Parrish (Downers Grove, IL)

Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop P.O. Box 802/ Sparta, NJ 07871;
www.guitarvideos.com