

Singer Joe Cocker: 1944-2014

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After a career that spanned almost six decades, iconic British-born rock singer Joe Cocker succumbed to lung cancer at his home in Crawford, a small town in western Colorado, on December 22. Despite sometimes being called a “psychedelic rock singer,” likely because of his skyrocketing to fame in the US at the 1969 Woodstock rock festival, Cocker described himself in interviews as a “white soul and blues singer.”

Joe Cocker’s voice is best described as soulful. His often gravelly baritone intonation immediately enchanted audiences with its warmth and depth. His performance of the Beatles’ “With a Little Help from my Friends” at Woodstock was seen by almost a half-million people in person and by millions more after the documentary film came out the following year. His uninhibited body movements, arching his back to project his voice and flailing his head and arms to the music, etched his persona on the collective memory.

Cocker’s first album, aptly entitled *With a Little Help from My Friends*, was released in April 1969. His raspy, soulful voice had by then become his hallmark. The title tune was a number one hit single in Britain for weeks before gaining recognition in the US. Judging by the session performers he attracted, the likes of Jimmy Page, who had helped form Led Zeppelin the year before, Steve Winwood of Traffic and Blind Faith and Albert Lee, Cocker’s vocal style was influential early on.

Cocker was born in 1944 as John Robert Cocker in Sheffield, in South Yorkshire, England. He was the youngest son of a civil servant and worked as a gas fitter in his youth. Like many young people in postwar England, he became obsessed with American popular music, from Frank Sinatra, Perry Como and Patti Page, to early rock and roll. The recordings of Buddy Holly and the Crickets and Elvis Presley were snapped up by British teenagers like hotcakes.

In 1952 in London, a young Tony Donegan, a product

of an earlier generation, performed as the opening act for his idol, Lonnie Johnson, the remarkable African American blues-jazz artist, and henceforth called himself Lonnie Donegan. His music would capture the imagination of many in Cocker’s generation, emerging as what became known as “skiffle.” This music based itself on American traditional music, including Woody Guthrie and Leadbelly.

“Skiffle breaks” became a common feature in club performances by jazz bands. Soon, thanks to the recordings of Donegan, skiffle exploded in popularity. In 1954, Donegan recorded a version of Leadbelly’s “Rock Island Line” that opened the eyes of young aspiring musicians. Originating in 1920s America, particularly among black musicians, often making use of handmade and improvised instruments such as washboards, jugs and washtub (tea chest, in Britain) bass fiddles.

Skiffle became a breeding ground for future British pop stars. Along with Cocker, musicians such as Page, Van Morrison, Pete Townsend, Mick Jagger, Graham Nash and the Beatles started out in skiffle bands. An estimated 30-50,000 skiffle groups were formed in England in the late 1950s.

Donegan himself was a contradiction. While obviously a talented performer, he retained much of the saccharine spirit of the century-old British music hall tradition, a tradition that the youth of postwar Britain were all too eager to reject. The most consequential element of Donegan and the skiffle craze was that it pointed the way to a new creative direction in music. So, in the 1960s, it disappeared from the scene almost as quickly as it emerged.

While the youth of Cocker’s generation were deeply affected by Donegan, they were also influenced directly by of all sorts of contemporary American popular musicians. Prominent among them was Ray Charles.

Cocker first appeared on stage to sing with his older

brother's skiffle band. As a schoolboy, he formed his first band, called the Cavaliers, which broke up after a year. Determined to have a career in music, he dropped out of school and became an apprentice gas fitter.

In 1961, when Cocker was 17, he performed under the name Vance Arnold with his band the Avengers, playing the pubs of Sheffield, doing covers of Charles and Chuck Berry. He developed a thirst for early American blues. In 1963, his band performed with the Rolling Stones at Sheffield City Hall and the following year Cocker signed a solo contract with Decca Records. After an unsuccessful recording debut, covering "I'll Cry Instead," by the Beatles, he left music to go to work.

After his return to music in 1966, Cocker achieved limited success with his recording, "Marjorine," but it wasn't until the release of "With a Little Help from My Friends" that his career took off. Cocker became primarily known for covering the hit tunes of other artists—not just the Beatles—and making them very much his own. His renditions often became more popular than the originals.

In 1969 and 1970, Cocker released two more albums. *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* was his third album and perhaps marked the pinnacle of his career. An ambitious, double-record collaboration with American Leon Russell, who himself was selling millions of recordings, the album included "Feelin' Alright," a cover of the tune by the band Traffic (live version from Woodstock); "The Letter," The Boxtops' 1967 hit; "She Came in Through the Bathroom Window," from the Beatles' *Abbey Road*; and Russell's "Delta Lady." One can legitimately claim that Cocker's versions of these tunes, as well as many others that he performed and recorded, were the most memorable.

Joe Cocker's voice and onstage presence were so distinct that they almost demanded either imitation or parody, or both. One of the most memorable imitations was done by the late comic John Belushi on Saturday Night Live. (Here is a brief snippet of the two performing together.) A performance by Billy Joel in Madison Square Garden this last September, when Cocker was "not very well right now" is another example of the sincerest form of flattery.

In 1982, Cocker teamed up with Jennifer Warnes to record "Up Where We Belong" for the soundtrack of *An Officer and a Gentleman*. The song had a life that

went far beyond the film. It is remarkably different from the original co-written by Buffy Sainte-Marie. In an interview, Cocker described his initial response to a producer asking him to record the tune: he felt it was not for him and "out of his depth."

"Unchain My Heart," the tune that Ray Charles made famous in a 1961 recording, was released in 1987 on an album of the same title by Cocker. He re-released the single in 1992 with some success, but a controversy emerged when the John Howard government in Australia used it as a television ad promoting the Goods and Service Tax. Cocker later regretted the licensing of the tune, saying if he had known it was going to be used for political purposes, he never would have given permission.

In the course of his career, Cocker released more than 20 albums. He struggled with substance abuse for a good part of his adult life and often fell away from musical endeavors. He was encouraged by his many musical friends and colleagues, always returning to performing. By all accounts, Cocker remained a humble and unpretentious human being.



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