



Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist

Steve Lowenthal, David Fricke (Foreword)

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Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist Steve Lowenthal , David Fricke (Foreword) John Fahey is to the solo acoustic guitar what Jimi Hendrix was to the electric: the man whom all subsequent musicians had to listen to. Fahey made more than 40 albums between 1959 and his death in 2001, most of them featuring only his solo steel-string guitar. He fused elements of folk, blues, and experimental composition, taking familiar American sounds and recontextualizing them as something entirely new. Yet despite his stature as a groundbreaking visionary, Fahey's intentions—as a man and as an artist—remain largely unexamined. Journalist Steve Lowenthal has spent years researching Fahey's life and music, talking with his producers, his friends, his peers, his wives, his business partners, and many others. He describes Fahey's battles with stage fright, alcohol, and prescription pills; how he ended up homeless and mentally unbalanced; and how, despite his troubles, he managed to found a record label that won Grammys and remains critically revered. This portrait of a troubled and troubling man in a constant state of creative flux is not only a biography but also the compelling story of a great American outcast.

Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist Details

Date : Published June 1st 2014 by Chicago Review Press (first published January 1st 2014)

ISBN : 9781613745199

Author : Steve Lowenthal , David Fricke (Foreword)

Format : Hardcover 240 pages

Genre : Music, Nonfiction, Biography, History



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From Reader Review Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist for online ebook

Paul Secor says

I got what I expected from this book, but not what I had hoped for.

I expected a multitude of details on John Fahey's life and that was there in spades - his early life, his marriages, his abuse of alcohol, prescription drugs, and coke (the cola kind only), the deterioration of his life style over the years, and his personality.

What I hoped for was something that would give a sense of the magic in Fahey's music. Perhaps that was too much to expect from a biography. It would probably take a novel - and one written by a talented novelist - to give me that. Lacking that, I also hoped for some detailed discussion (not necessarily technical) of the man's recordings. There was some of that but, in general, it was fairly superficial.

When I listen to John Fahey's music, the first thing that grabs me is the *sound* of his guitar. I have the sense that guitar sound was important to John Fahey also. When I listen, I almost have the sense that, as he played, he took great pleasure in listening to the pure sound of his guitar. Even on the (I believe) last recordings he did, which were released as *Red Cross*,

when he had either lost or left behind most of his facility - I would guess that the former is true (an aside - I experience this recording in the same way that I experience Billie Holiday's *Lady in Satin*. Her voice was shot, but the emotion is still there.) - I can hear that the sound of his instrument is still important to him. I didn't find any mention of this in this bio. Or if it was there, I missed it.

There were two small mistakes that I caught.

On page 68: "Vanguard hired Sam Charters as a talent scout. Having just recorded Buddy Guy, Otis Rush, and Junior Wells for the Prestige label ..." Sam Charters recorded all three of those gentlemen for Vanguard. As far as I know, none of them ever recorded for Prestige.

And Mr. Lowenthal omits any mention (again, unless I missed it) - in the heart of the book or in the discography - of John Fahey's appearance (with Bill Barth) on the *Memphis Swamp Jam* album on the Blue Thumb label.

(It's since been reissued on producer Chris Strachwitz's own Arhoolie label.) Fahey and Barth are credited as assistant producers and they play on three cuts credited to R.L. Watson and Josiah Jones. Watson and Jones are described as mutes who were found playing on the streets of Memphis. And further, "Little is known of the backgrounds of the two performers, as Strachwitz was unable to conduct an interview with them and all attempts at communication were forestalled in the face of the pair's undisguised mistrust of, if not outright hostility towards, blue-eyed Silesians." Obviously, this was a product of Fahey's sense of humor. The music itself is fine.

My mention of both of these mistakes is nit picking - the product of a blues aficionado's twisted mind - and I don't consider them major faults.

I did appreciate some of the information about the inside jokes that Fahey included on his records and in their liner notes, and I appreciated the discography. John Fahey was a complex character and perhaps this was all that one person could do in one book.

I doubt that I'll ever reread this - the recordings are what are important to me - so I'll probably pass it on to a good friend who is also a Fahey fan.

Paul Bryant says

I wrote to John Fahey in 1990, it was just some kind of fan letter, and in return I got a package containing two cassettes and a huge photocopied manuscript. That was unexpected. The cassettes turned out to be his next two albums, *Old Girlfriends and other Horrible Memories* and *Azalea City and Other Toxic Memorabilia*. The second one still hasn't been released. It's pretty good too.

But the manuscript was a barely-readable thing called *Admiral Kelvinator's Clockwork Factory*, and the reason why Fahey sent it to me, a nobody British fan, was that he couldn't get it published in the US and thought I might try for him in the UK. Which having tried to read it, I didn't.

About ten years later, by email this time, he randomly offered me the job of sorting through his entire archive of unreleased music to see what was releasable. But, you know, he flailed around like that all the time. You couldn't tell if he was serious. He liked to pull people's legs. He liked to curse his audience and tell them they were sentimental hippies living in the past. He liked to help turtles to cross the highway. He was a great cantankerous bull. The world was his chinashop.

I have here on my tiny little desk a beautiful document of 43 pages, I wish I could show it to you. An Australian guy Chris Downes put it together, A4 pages, bejeweled with small photos of Fahey at all stages of his turtley life, from beanpole student to fat old bad-Santa derelict. The text is every message put on the old original Fahey Forum in February and March 2001, from a few days before his death until his funeral. It's an outpouring. A geyser of pain and love. I remember how these messages of sadness and shock mixed with love of the music and affection for the man just kept appearing hour after hour.

Fahey's posthumous career has been surprisingly steady, not that he would have had a kind word to say about it. We have had five (!) tribute albums, a nice documentary, a pathologically obsessive discographical nightmare, a great big fat previously-unreleased box set (on which I get a name check!!), and now a slender but eloquent biography. Naturally I would have liked a Lewisohnesque 800 pager, but this will do for now. I did many times groan aloud as another tasty hilarious anecdote I knew should be coming up was omitted or another tendril in the rich vegetation surrounding Fahey was left furled; but hell, I lapped up all the dishing that Fahey's ex-wives and close friends did, and it was well that they did too – this is no rosy Fahey-as-national-treasure father-of-Americana hagiography. This is Fahey as the world's biggest baby, squalling with terrifying appetites all the livelong day, awake at inappropriate times, asleep at worse times; greeting house visitors draped in a Nazi flag and nothing else; living in his car because he got chucked out of the Salvation Army hostel, again; shoveling prescription drugs down his throat (he was an Elvis style dope fiend, anything on scrip), asking waitresses to marry him, asking random Japanese women to marry him, asking members of the audience to marry him – one of the best tales has John mimeographing a letter beseeching a girl from the audience that evening to marry him because he's so lonely, then putting copies on every table and seat in the place.

He was more of a guitar playing coelacanth than a fully fledged human, in some respects.

After living in flophouses and hostels for some years, he got lucky, his hated dad died and left him a lot of dough. So he paid off his bills and what did he do with the rest of the money? Started a new record label to reissue Dock Boggs, The No Neck Blues Band, Jenks Carman, Charlie Feathers, Albert Ayler, and other household names.

Genius.

This biography does not put a foot wrong. My eagle eye was poised to swoop over every word, waiting for the inept research, the misattributed quote, the crassly wrong date. There weren't any swoops. No swoops. This book passes the Severe Fahey Fan test.

Steve Lowenthal writes to get the job done, but at times he produces beautifully illuminating phrases, such as :

Fahey's improvements from therapy with Jan were shortlived and mostly cosmetic. Rather than see himself as a person who had problems that needed to be solved, he became enthralled by his own fascinating tapestry of dysfunction.

And

Fahey remained at odds with a universe that didn't consider him a priority.

(me too, Steve, as far as that goes)

What came through to me in strong shudders as I turned these few pages was how mentally unwell and how much of a mean-minded egomaniac Fahey was. His character is thoroughly trashed here. He wasn't a nice man. He hated so many things. I don't mind all this badmouthing though, and Fahey, having lived the gospel of telling it like it is through his whole life with no concessions made for anyone's feelings, would have applauded this. There is a biography of Skip James by Stephen Calt which is as vicious as it's possible to be about Fahey (who rediscovered and sort-of managed Skip James in 1964/5) and his treatment of and attitude towards James, it's a very remarkable chapter; what was Fahey's reaction? He said Calt's book was the best blues book ever written.

The Faheyological material I collected over the years contains many amusing items, and indicates to me the great anecdotes that must be left out of most biographies, I suppose, because they're just too long or too outrageous or too uncomfortable to include. But it would have been great to find in these pages Fahey's own detailed account of the Great Antonioni Fiasco (background – in 1969 the great director invited Fahey to do soundtrack for his new movie set in the US)

He started telling me how he hated the USA and why and started preaching Marxist nonsense. I said "Sir, you should not speak of my country in this manner. It is RUDE and you do not understand the USA. Perhaps you have had too much to drink. Why not order some coffee?" He replied "Go fuck yourself with a fileophile!" The dinner degenerated into name calling. At one point – "What the hell's wrong with you, Fahey? Everyone else knows about the Revolution. You work for the CIA or something?" By this he meant to insult me. ... His stupid film [Zabriskie Point] is in the book The 100 Worst Films Ever Made and deserves

inclusion.

Or the whole Glenn Jones Cul de Sac record psychodrama. Yes, you may have read the sleeve notes of that album by Glenn, and great they are, but even more lascerating and revealing are the REVISED notes fleshed out into a wonderful essay by Glenn which has never seen the light of day – I have it right here.

Or... well. Enough. Fahey was a monster who has given me more pleasure than any other monster. And when I met him, in September 1999, about 15 months before he died, on one of the worst-run tours anyone has ever done, having just played a gig where about two thirds of the audience walked out, he was gregarious, charming, affable, and excellent company.

Postscript. In case you were wondering

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Cu4F...>

Tuck says

cuts through some of the bunk that fahey spread about himself in his autobio/fiction and on-stage rambles (though lots of times he would not even look at audience, much less talk) How Bluegrass Music Destroyed My Life

this book goes through his childhood, his absent dad, his music collecting in deep south, his success with some albums and running a record label in LA, his slow disappearance from the world (living in burbs in nw oregon) his continual substance abuse and misanthropy, and his harrowing end of life simultaneous 2nd spring touring with alt rockers.

wonderful music and art/artist, strange and kinda disturbing man.

has pictures, source notes, bibliography, super discography, index.

paul here has a wonderful book review and very interesting back stories and links to some music and pics
<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Eric says

So, I've read two magnificent musician memoirs in the last week. I've picked up bits and pieces of John Fahey's story since I started listening to him in the early-2000's. Most of them centered around Fahey's almost singular level of eccentricism - pressing 100 copies of his first record, attributing a side to the fictional Blind Joe Death, and then selling them at the gas station he worked at; re-recording his first two albums

years after releasing them because he felt they were too sloppy; antagonizing his audiences to the point of alienation; giving in to addiction (drugs, alcohol, and later, food); becoming homeless; and then, the bizarre rediscovery (mirroring his rediscovery of Bukka White, Skip James, and others in the 60's) and celebration of his work in the 90's. Sadly, all of this information came to me after he died. At any rate, Lowenthal does an excellent job of clarifying the tales and filling in the blanks. I wish that Joe Bussard had a greater presence in the book, but maybe he didn't want to participate? What was confirmed is that Fahey could be an asshole, but an artist asshole - someone who provoked in order to educate. As ridiculous as that sounds, it fits. He was a genius. He could have cashed in heavily when his legend was resurrected towards the end of his life, but he still made the music that he wanted to make, regardless of whether it would sell or not. Maybe another book will come out that will detail his recording sessions in greater detail, but for now, this book was more than enough, a page-turner if ever there was one.

William Dury says

I've been listening to Glenn Gould lately. He actually looks a little like Fahey to me. And I read the biography of David Foster Wallace a couple of weeks ago. He doesn't look like either one of them. At all. Anyway, Mr. Fahey comes out the minor artist in this company, but he did good work and left his mark. He really was a good composer but will be more widely remembered for his Christmas records than anything else. John was a productive artist and has no reason to hang his head in any company.

Does he come out the loser in the Mental Health Issues Club? Tough call. Wallace suicided but he fought depression and was generally more coherent than John. I would argue that his cultural peak is higher than John's but that's a matter of taste.

I do think that Glenn is the highest peak amongst the three. He was eccentric but not diseased. Is mental health an occupational hazard for the artist? A necessary evil? The result of an undisciplined life style? I would bravely argue (hold your applause, please) that mental health issues interfere with the ability to be productive, as it clearly does in any other line of work.

Was there a writer around the time of George Eliot that compared artistic creation to making shoes? Trollope? I never read anything by him, big surprise. According to Wikipedia, the main criticism of Trollope is that he is pedestrian, i. e., "uninspired." But I'm with AT. It's just work. If you're making chairs in your basement you don't wait around for inspiration to strike. And I really don't see the advantage of being mentally ill.

Alistair says

John Fahey was an American solo acoustic guitarist who supposedly invented American primitive guitar and was active from circa 1960 until his death in 2001 .

He was at his best during the folk revival and hippie era and his style based on 1920's and early 30's black and white country music gave him a considerable following especially when he moved to the West Coast from Takoma near Washington DC . His also incorporated classical themes and also Indian .He originally set up his own record company and issued his early limited edition charmingly home made records on that label before being taken up by professional labels .

He was a complete original and using a finger picking style created songs sometimes of great length such as The Great Bernadino Birthday Party clocking in at around 20 minutes and this was in 1965 or Sail away Ladies based on a Dave Macon hillbilly song from the 1920's . He also created an alter ego Blind Joe Death who he pretended was a long lost rural blues singer . His early records often included a sort of booklet expanding on this mythological figure and developing a personal story about ex girlfriends too and other friends and enemies and a lot of theological side tracks . Death was a big topic , one of his records being titled Requia , as was rural America . And turtles too . Requia contained a B side of one very long track which meshed his guitar playing with a sound track which included Hitler speeches , Charles Ives , Sibelius , Mamas and Papas , railway noises to name a few . He usually ended his albums with a hymn . His most successful album was The New Possibility of christmas carols . A lot of his many later albums were not very good .He later experimented with an electric guitar and grunge

As you might have guessed he was not quite your usual bog standard folkie . He was difficult and played up to his extreme iconoclastic personality just for a bit of fun . Somehow he managed to get married several times . He was an alcoholic and great pill popper and lived on a diet of coca cola and hamburgers and but delighted in offending hippies and in fact almost everybody . He performed drunk most of the time and was when I met him once and as time went on this affected this live playing and his career careered downhill after a flirtation with popularity on major labels . He ended up broke and in poor health towards the end but somehow managed with some help and an inheritance from his father who he claimed had sexually abused him ,to start a new record label and get a huge Charlie Patton box set published with extensive notes , photos , reproductions of old record labels and 7 cd's and Fahey's book about Patton updated from an earlier edition . It won several Emmys . It was issued after Fahey died on the operating table during surgery for heart problems .

This book tells his story pretty comprehensively maybe a bit short on detail but I think gives a well balanced view .

Jay Hinman says

Fahey's been ripe for a book-length deconstruction even long before his 2001 death, but it's truly the swelling cult of worship around his dazzling four decades of guitar work that's propelled enough interest to warrant it. Steve Lowenthal, a writer and record label head, does an admirable job at relaying the complexities and alternately misanthropic and large-hearted character of the man, keeping his biography rooted more in name/date/order facts, and in quotes from Fahey's ex-associates and –wives, than in conjecture or analysis. One comes away with even more appreciation for just how creatively out of step Fahey was with his times, and how he was deeply sub-underground & “alternative” well before the terms had even been used in relation to music, or humanity.

Lowenthal takes the biography chronologically, starting with childhood life in Takoma Park, Maryland and ending with Fahey's late-in-life existential conversion to the course of free noise & radical experimentation (much of which, it's made clear, was quite likely the burden of age and declining health, and not being able to pluck & play acoustically any longer). We get some good detail on Fahey's discovery of Charley Patton and the blues; his record-collecting and canvassing in the Deep South with Dick Spotswood, Joe Bussard and other collecting luminaries; and how he sort of fell in to being a guitar virtuoso and a creator of some of the most incredible, symphonic and detailed guitar ever created. In between we see how Fahey's pranksterism, introversion, abuse of alcohol and pills, and his abundant willingness to talk down to his audience both built his mystique and throttled many aspects of his career.

Though I've never liked even a smidgeon of the post-rebirth, late 90s noise/improv Fahey (it's clear that Lowenthal thinks it's crap as well), the last few chapters detailing his belated connections to the American indie underground are outstanding. His hatred of the hippies and of the 70s shorthand that connected his instrumental guitar playing with "new age" music comes full circle, in which he finally finds a group of weirdos on the margins of music who are very like him. Yet his sloth, unpredictability and many flights of bizarre fancy are even too much for many of them, and there are some great (if a bit tragic) anecdotes from folks in his later-years orbit about just how uniquely bullheaded this guy was. Fahey was the late-20th century manifestation of the absinthe-guzzling creative iconoclasts of previous centuries, and his outsized contributions to the arts exist on a timeline that stretches back still further. Lowenthal did a fine job at documenting it, and leaves room for a more critical and contextual examination of Fahey's work for someone else to tackle.

Gregory says

Around 2001 I started playing more acoustic guitar--detuning the instrument, fiddling around with weird ways of picking, and creating strange improvisations with my friend Eamon playing tenor banjo--as a way of growing beyond the electric guitar I was playing in a band. On one visit he mentioned that he had heard from his dad of this guy called John Fahey and that he played this really unique acoustic style.

The next time I visited Eamon to play, he opened the door and said I had to sit down and listen to something. He put on an album and a song started. I couldn't put the song into any context...it seemed both primitive and futuristic, the playing was both complex and easy to listen to, it seemed kind of like blues, folk and classical music. It seemed like music from another world or time, like nothing I'd ever heard.

That was my first exposure to John Fahey (specifically Sunflower River Blues on this second album, Death Chants, Breakdowns, and Military Waltzes). From that point I was totally hooked on his music and devoured everything I could get a hold of. I also spent years practicing in my apartment along with many of his songs to learn how to play finger-style guitar.

All that being said, I never really knew a lot about Fahey as a person. As anyone familiar with his work knows, his liner notes are strange works of art themselves and biographical information (at the time) was pretty scarce (being pre-Wikipedia).

This book offered tremendous insight into his life, especially the years before and after his creative peak. John Fahey seemed like a truly creative person (= difficult) but one that released a lot of good into the world, between his own music and his early work as a collector/researcher into (at the time) very obscure blues and folk musicians.

Brent says

I have loved the music of John Fahey since hearing his guitar arrangements as something familiar yet challenging, checking LPs out of the library, then the used record stores. Similarly, Fahey is one of the generation who collected blues and roots 78s and went out in search of blues musicians like Skip James. I am so grateful this biography exists. Once begun, I could not put it down, reading most of it in a day, while

listening to a mix of Fahey recordings, at the same time.

Here's a sample from YouTube.

This fine book could have used an additional edit, for instance, for a misleading reference to the mandolinist David Grisman and the snarky tone when referring to Windham Hill records. Yet Fahey was full of snark. Fahey went through relationships, prescribing doctors, and substances at a rapid rate. There are some mysteries of personality here.

The Georgia Tech radio station WREK-FM would use Fahey's arrangement of "In Christ There Is No East or West" as a station ID, and still does. I never heard Fahey in person, and apparently, that grew hit or miss, and he played electric more and acoustic hardly at all. I never get tired of his guitar from 1960s and 1970s. The run through his discography makes me curious about all the records I haven't heard, including his increasingly eccentric late work.

Yet, starting with his own Takoma records, I want to keep listening.

Here's the John Fahey Files website, <http://johnfahey.com/>

Thanks to the Atlanta-Fulton Public Library for the book.

Highly recommended.

Ma Turner says

No bullshit take on life and times of Fahey.

Michael Roeder says

A good companion to the 2013 Biopic

I was reading this around the same time I caught the 2013 film *In Search of Blind Joe Death* which is currently available on Amazon Prime. The book shines light in some of the dark corners of Fahey's life in a way the film couldn't feasibly. A sad complicated existence of a man who seemed to shine brighter on record. Recommended if you're a fan of Fahey or curious about the man who influenced so many musicians.

Steve Hart says

This is pretty short, coming in at 188 pages. I certainly could have handled something twice its length on the subject, especially if it went a little deeper into the music. But at least someone bothered to write a biography of Fahey, and it is an enjoyable read, so I'm happy for that.

5 Track says

On the one hand, I feel like this book could have been a bit longer, gone into greater depth. & I suspect that the author's approach to Fahey's semi-autobiographical writings is a bit more credulous than mine, tho I'm open to what I think is the unlikely idea that the author is attempting to play off the myth or off the subject's compulsively pranksterish relations with "truth" & personal history. If there's nothing much of interest to be said about the recording or content of each of his many albums (there are so many...) then I would love to

hear that lack explained, discussed, or at least announced.

(This book is fairly short, so I feel OK insisting that there should have been more to it...)

On the other hand, this book was inspiring & evocative. That's probably more important.

& it was nice to be spared that thing you run into with big definitive biographical nightmare tomes, where you have to read about what they ate for breakfast every day as a kid & every time they said something weird to a wife or family member & that 3rd grade paper on anything at all... Cos I really don't want to know all that. It was sweet of this author not to include it.

Steve Bennett says

Extremely thoroughly researched biography of John Fahey. I absolutely love John Fahey and he was probably the biggest factor in my taking up the guitar. I still remember one day when in high school telling my brother one day I hoped to play guitar as well as John Fahey. While I may have failed in that quest (I'm still practicing and the future is always unknown), at least my life so far has been light year's better than Fahey. I love the man and I always knew he had a difficult life but after reading this book, all I can say is "Wow." He had serious strange problems with women and indeed with almost all social situations. And with his health. And his finances. My hero comes off as an extremely pathetic individual.

But so what? He wasn't really mean and horrible to people. Just strange. And he was one of the best collectors/authorities on old pre-war blues and country music. And he wrote and played beautiful guitar instrumentals. And he loved all animals, particularly his beloved turtles. So I will still proudly listen to his music and continue on my path to imitate him with my guitar playing. Long live the ideals of John Fahey.

Jason says

In his new book, *Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist*, author Steve Lowenthal cites a review of John Fahey's performance at Hunter College in New York by the *Village Voice*'s Paul Nelson in 1975:

"His guitar-playing is a deliberate mixture of psychology, order, mythology, poetry, and genre—all very exact, with the meaning entirely between the lines. Part of our fine national school of minimal acting, glints of feeling shining through the stoic, awesome professionalism that is characteristic of the American hero, John Fahey seems to me to be the Clint Eastwood/Steve McQueen of the guitar. I'd hate to meet him in a dark alley. He didn't even say goodbye."

Like those hardboiled actors, Fahey was a distinctly American artist, one whose work was born from violence – mental, spiritual, and often physical — a divided nature, religious pondering, and angst. The passage fails to capture the whole sum of the man, but it gets close. Glenn Jones, solo guitarist, founder of experimental outfit Cul de Sac, a friend and collaborator of Fahey's, says that *Dance of Death* functions in a similar fashion.

Read the rest of my review/interview with Glenn Jones at [Aquarium Drunkard](#).

