

Joseph Spence/Fingerstyle Phenomenon

by John Stropes and Justin Segel

Joseph Spence is an artistic paradox. His music is powerful, captivating, and unique, yet he has never composed a song. He lives in the Bahamas, but describing him as a “Bahamian guitarist” is both inadequate and misleading. Spence has drawn upon the Bahamian musical tradition’s rich elements of nineteenth-century English music, rhyming spirituals, anthems, and calypso, yet he has added American styles of blues, boogie-woogie, jazz, country, and gospel, which he absorbed while working in the U.S. during the mid-1940s.

His repertoire is heavily religious, however, his performance of the material is almost irreverent. Spence has four solo albums in circulation and he figures prominently on three other LPs, yet he is almost totally unfamiliar with their content, let alone the particulars of their distribution and availability. He doesn’t own a copy of any of them (the records aren’t available in the Bahamas) and doesn’t even own a record player.

Spence has influenced such prominent American artists as Taj Mahal [Frets, 8/81], Peter Lang, and Ry Cooder, and while he has met Mahal and Cooder, he knows little of their work.

Taj Mahal says of Spence, “Musically you couldn’t find a better example of somebody who has assimilated their influences into a wonderful style. He’s got incredible strength in delivery; it’s just seldom heard anymore. His music is delightful, and it’s got so many wonderful twists in it.”

Spence has hardly gone out of his way to earn this kind of esteem, or to consciously develop his unique approach to fingerstyle guitar. He plays only for his own pleasure. He is uninfluenced by traditional teaching methods, career pressures, particular stylistic restrictions, audience orientation, managerial manipulation, or any of the elements that are ongoing concerns in most musicians’ lives. He plays what he wants to play when he wants to play it, answering only to his own ear.

Spence was born on Andros Island in 1910. He had one sister and four half-brothers. When he was nine, his uncle (who lived in the U.S.) brought him

a guitar. Andros had a rich musical environment, and it nurtured Joseph as he taught himself to play. Joseph’s great-uncle was regarded as one of the best musicians in the Bahamas, and they used to play for dances. “He was very good on the flute—I can’t tell the name of that flute, but it was a long flute, with lots of keys, you know, I and him used to keep dance,” Spence says in his Bahamas patois. “The two of us, and a man beating drum, and one hitting tambourine. All about we travel we keep dance. I plays quadrille, waltz, round dance—they call calypso round dance—and kapolka, heel and toe kapolka. I play everything.”



Joseph Spence at his home in Nassau in 1981

For the most part, Spence no longer plays dance tunes. When he was “keeping dance,” he would “scram” or “rake”, i.e., strum, the guitar. He looks back on that period as being not particularly relevant to his current fingerpicking style.

Joseph grew up during the heyday of sponge fishing in the Bahamas. Sponge fishermen typically might spend eight to ten weeks at a time in their boats, out in the “mud” of Andros. The men would work two to a skiff during the day, then sleep on the fishing boat at night. “I was a sponge hooker,” Spence recalls. “I used to hook sponge with a staff and pull ‘em up to the boat. I can’t remember right how long I was going, but I know I started sponging when I was a boy of around 16 years. And I used to carry my guitar sponging, you know. You see, when I was going off in the boat, I wrap it up in a cloth where the salty air can’t get at it to rust the string, I keep it in a good place below the boat.”

Late in 1938, a blight wiped out 90% of the Bahamas’ sponge population. “I stopped when the sponge them started to die out—about a year before it die out,” Spence says. “Then all the sponge gone. God destroy all the sponge. You see, when the spongers used to bring the boat to the merchant, sinking down loaded with sponge,

when they sell the sponge they still left in debt. They don't hardly get nothing. So I figure the Father say, 'Well, I see they're doing too much with this poor people having to kill these sponge. I better put them on something else.' When I stop sponging, I stop right here in Nassau. I been here from that to this."

After the U.S. entered World War II, there was a critical shortage of laborers in American factories and farms. The U.S. Government contracted with Bahamian workers to come to the States and fill the void, so in 1944 Spence and his wife Louise signed contracts to pick American crops. They spent two years here, traveling from Florida through Georgia, the Carolinas, and Tennessee, as far north as Delaware. The Spences have fond memories of this period, remembering their work with pride.



John Stropes with Joseph & Louise Spence

Spence took his guitar with him, and during his visit he came into possession of a hymnal entitled "Crown And Harmony". He learned many of the hymns, and to this day they represent the nucleus of his repertoire, including "There Will Be a Happy Meeting in Glory," "He Walks with Me," and "What a Happy Time Will Be."

Spence also became deeply involved in southern American music. "I played a lot," he recalls. "I played in Mountain City, Tennessee. Then I played in the church in Belle Glade, Florida. I had a lot of strength then. These hillbilly song, I can't remember them now 'cause I put that down so long ago. I used to play with them American folks, and them time all the new-fashioned song come around and I catch them and I play. But I throw those thing down so long now I forget all them."

Though Spence remembers hearing some

blues in Georgia, he claims he never practiced in the style. However, he plays an extraordinary version of "St. Louis Blues." Told that his performance of that tune is terrific, he replies, "Ya, but I don't know blues. I learned that song many years. That's old, that's a old song, the onliest blues I know. We had some old people in them old days, used to play blues. I used to listen. But never practice much blues."

After returning to Nassau in 1946, Spence worked as a mason while perfecting his guitar style on the side. During these years he "played out"—performed for hire. "I used to play to the hotel, that is a good long while now," he says, "and out in yacht boats and things, but I don't bother with that now. The town gets so wicked, you know, and when I coming back home, them fellows know I have been to those boats and they figure I make money, they try to knock me down."

Spence's "playing out" ultimately earned him enough of a reputation to bring him back to the U.S. His travels included a visit to California in the late '60s, where he was Taj Mahal's houseguest while performing at the Ash Grove in Los Angeles. In 1972, he played in Boston (where he met Ry Cooder), New York, and Newport. He enjoyed the tours tremendously, but several years ago Spence suffered a heart attack that forced him to change his lifestyle, giving up his masonry work for a job as a night watchman at an elementary school. He also had to give up one of his favorite pastimes, drinking rum (today he sips a mixture of Coca-cola and beer—on the rocks). His doctor even warned him to limit his singing and guitar playing.

Though Spence isn't as strong as he once was, his playing remains remarkably powerful and individualistic. "When I was living in Andros I used to play my guitar in C and G," he says. "I throw those chords down for many a year, now, forty or fifty odd years. I prefer playing in D major. I plays D major 'cause I get to love that chord, so that's the chord I plays in."

Like many of the older players, he rests the little finger of his right hand on the face of the guitar. "Ya, I keep pressing down," he says. He has always used a thumbpick but never fingerpicks. The fingernails of his right hand are long enough to provide clear articulation. "Ya, all those fingernails they catch the string," he says, "make the string sound clean and clear."

His favorite type of guitar is a large dreadnought flat-top, although he doesn't own one

today. "I still love those big one I played in the States," he says. "Ya, they put some D-8 [probably a Martin D-18] in my hand, they used to let me keep them 'til I was ready to go home. Now that box could sound. A large box sound very well."

Currently Spence plays a Yamaha acoustic that was left for him by a European fan, and also owns a National resonophonic guitar that was presented to him by Taj Mahal.



Listening to Spence's recordings is a unique experience. His style is wonderfully strange and complex, and he usually accompanies his playing with unintelligible guttural vocalizations, a sort of primitive scat-singing. But the recordings can't convey Spence's magnetic presence in live performance. It is almost as though he were in an altered state of consciousness. Ry Cooder recalls the phenomenon: "There was a tremendous force being exerted to get these little delicate tunes to come out so weird and so heavy. His face twitched; his eyes went every which way, and blinked. In doing that, in screwing himself up that tight, this thing starts to happen. He took a guitar of mine, a Martin 000-18, and just wrung it out. That guitar wasn't the same for about two years after that. It felt tired and weak, like maybe it had been in a

steam bath or something. The guy had a profound effect on that instrument."

Spence's playing does not incorporate the regular alternating bass line that characterizes the styles of many fingerpickers—a feature that can be disconcerting to other players trying to learn his music. But his background in religious music has given him a keen sense of voicing, and voice relationships, and he says that the bass line is his favorite part of a piece of music. "You give me a melody," he has said, "and I can give you seven different bass lines for it." That aspect of his technique has won the admiration of Cooder and other guitarists.

Many fingerstyle guitarists play with essentially two voices, the bass and the melody. Spence, on the other hand, introduces multiple voices between the two, and harmonically his playing is unusually rich. Spence's job as a school night watchman gave him access to a piano, and in the space of two weeks he had learned to play the new instrument, transferring his guitar style to the keyboard, note for note. He later lost interest, although he says, "Now and again I'll play a few songs, but if I'd of keep on, I'd of been a pefesser on that."

Perhaps Ry Cooder has best summed up Spence's place in modern-day guitar music. "I think of Spence as one of a very few people who come along once in a while from some area," Cooder says, "someone who breaks through whatever the dominant style or conventional approach might be, and makes a new statement. Having spent a lot of years playing guitar and listening to guitar players and all kinds of music, I would say that he is among a handful of guitarists I have heard who represent the triumph of somebody's genius over whatever it is they're trying to do. You know, the guitar is really a weird, primitive instrument, and once in a while somebody will just transcend what had seemed to be the limitations of the thing."

A Selected Joseph Spence Discography

Solo albums:

- *Living on the Hallelujah Side*, Rounder (26 Otis St., Cambridge, MA 02134), 2021
- *Joseph Spence*, Arhoolie (10341 San Pablo Avenue., El Cerrito, CA 94530), 1061
- *Happy All the Time*, Elektra, EKL-273 (out of print)

With others:

- *Music of the Bahamas, Vol. I*, Folkways (43 W. 61st St., New York, NY 10023)
- *Joseph Spence—Folk Guitar/John Roberts & Frederick McQueen—Bahaman Ballads and Rhyming Spirituals*, Folkways, FS 3847
- *The Real Bahamas, in Music and Song*, Nonesuch (dist. by Elektra), H-72013
- *The Real Bahamas, Vol. II*, Nonesuch, H-72078