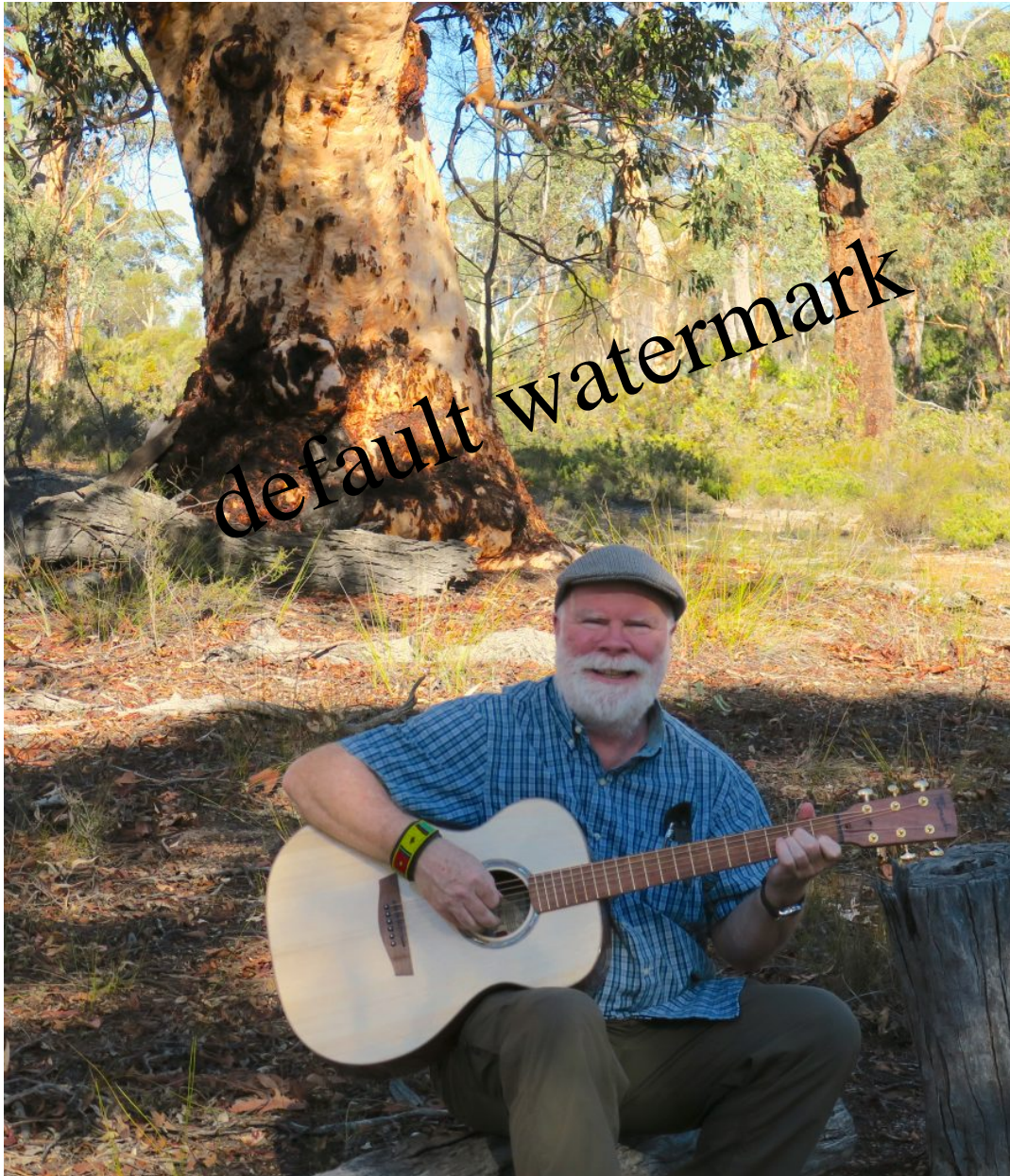


About

Description



Finding music in the trees: playing a Fenech Regent with wandoo back and sides and a wandoo tree in the background

Hi! I'm Richard Hobbs. I'm a recently retired Ecology Professor who's from Scotland originally but have lived in Western Australia for the past few decades. I'm an ecologist by training, and I've spent most of my professional career trying to understand how ecosystems work and to figure out how to manage, conserve and restore natural systems and the species they contain.

I've also recently turned into a bit of a guitar nut. Here's the story of how that happened.

A crappy guitar and rock-star aspirations

I don't think my story is particularly unusual. I first took up guitar when I was at high school and received a guitar as a Christmas present. It was a truly crappy guitar, looking back on it – it had a very narrow fretboard and an absurdly high action, making it very difficult to play. It also probably sounded terrible as I struggled to learn some chords but ended up with buzzes and fluffed notes. But there were 3 or 4 of us learning at about the same time, and we self-taught some basics and even learned a couple of tunes.

I kept going with it for a while but didn't progress far once I went to university, where coursework and the lure of the university union bar, snooker tables, concerts and girls all reduced time to practice. I was studying ecology, which had only recently become a mainstream thing in the early 70s as people became aware of the environment. I'd found something I felt inspired about and driven to pursue. But at the same time, I and some of my classmates would spend time in smoky bars dreaming of becoming rock stars instead of struggling with chemistry assignments. Four of us would form a band and head for stardom, all on the basis of one crappy guitar and almost zero collective talent. That wasn't ever going to happen, but it kept us amused.

I went on to complete my degree in ecology and then ended up in a career in ecological research. Just recently I came across a video from a British TV talent program in 1957, in which a 14 year old James Page was performing in a skiffle band. When asked by the compere in the 1957 clip what he was going to do when he left school, young James said "biological research". Of course, James morphed into rock legend Jimmy Page and lead guitarist with Led Zeppelin. Somewhere my aspirations crossed with young James's – I got the biological research career and he became the rock star.

I never really gave up on the fantasy of becoming a rock star though, and my photo archive is replete with photos of me and mates on hamming it up on air guitar, tennis rackets and even the occasional real guitar (still not a particularly good one). I even took lessons for a while when I lived just round the corner from Gryphon Stringed Instruments in California in the early 1980s.



Cool dudes, UCSB 1976



Landscape ecology air guitar, Darwin 2003



Course instructors showing students how it's done

But I think after that I joined a relatively large fraternity of lapsed guitar players, as career, family and just life in general consumed all available time and energy.

Picking up a guitar again later in life

In 2018, I had the pleasure of visiting George Gruhn in Nashville, Tennessee. George will feature elsewhere on this site, but for now it's enough to say that George is a recognised expert on guitars, runs an amazing store, [Gruhn Guitars Inc](#), and has written several seminal books on vintage guitars, as well as retaining a continuing love of reptiles from his initial training as a zoologist. George has observed that baby boomers often had a bi-modal relationship with guitars – buying and playing them between puberty and about 25 years old, and then again as part of a midlife crisis. Males, in particular, suddenly have the urge to possess large motorcycles, sleek sportscars and/or nice guitars as they get older. And generally, they are better able to afford these things than when they were younger.



Visiting George Gruhn in his amazing store in Nashville

I pretty much fit George's stereotypical baby boomer mould, although my rekindled love affair with guitars came closer to retirement than to mid-life. And much to my wife Gillian's relief, guitars scratched the itch without the need to also think about motorbikes and fast cars.

I loved my career, family and life, but guitar kept resurfacing as something I'd like to do again. I had another not very good guitar that spent most of its time up in the attic. I played around with tin whistle for a while – quite a nice portable instrument that is quite easy to learn but hard to play well – and my mother-in-law gave me a chanter for my birthday one year. A chanter is the bottom end of a set of bagpipes – the bit with holes that pipers cover in varying combinations with their fingers to play the notes. Chanters are portable too but hard to play in even a rudimentary way without a lot of pain for all concerned. You can get electronic bagpipes that are better to practice on because you can put earphones on and not destroy other people's hearing and sanity.

At one stage when the kids were little, a student called Jim Miller who was on a year's exchange from

Colorado persuaded me to visit the local pawn shop and buy an electric guitar, instead of buying a barbeque, which had been the original goal of the outing. Jim had been a professional musician before turning to biology later in life, and we were nearly twins, having been born within days of each other. So I ended up with a blue Peavey guitar that had been strung left-handed and had a non-functional tone control.

In the year I turned 60 I decided to buy myself a decent guitar and actually commit to spending time learning and playing. I was well established in my career, my two lovely children had grown up and flown away and my dear wife was spending as much time on the water in kayaks as she could manage.

So, not giving up on the rock star fantasy, I bought myself a cherry red Fender Stratocaster, just like Mark Knopfler's. I found this a whole lot easier to play than any guitar I'd ever owned before. I'd also fulfilled a long-held ambition to own a full set of Highland bagpipes. I enjoyed the electronic bagpipe but this was still a pale imitation of the full pipes. If the chanter is difficult to master, then the full pipes add multiple layers of challenges that bedevil the beginner. Simply holding the thing so that the drones (the things sticking up from the bag) don't knock you out is the first challenge. Then you have to do at least 3 things at once to make any sort of noise from the instrument. And when you do, it sounds pretty terrible – and VERY LOUD. I really admire people who play the bagpipes. I have to confess that I set the pipes aside and went back to concentrating on the guitar.



Learning two instruments at the same time is hard work

The basic chords and shapes were still etched somewhere deep in the spinal chord, and I slowly made some progress. I discovered, though, that teaching yourself with a bunch of mates at high school embeds a surprising number of bad habits that don't matter much when you're crap anyway, but matter a whole lot if you're trying to improve. So, I basically had to go back pretty much to square one and re-

train. And I'm still making slow progress – the key to getting better, it appears, is practice. So I try to have at least 30 minutes a day – although I've realised that this is just enough to maintain a holding pattern, and that real progress requires a bigger commitment, which is achievable during vacation time but hasn't been possible during the normal working week. Giving up the day job is obviously what's required!

Fast forward to now, and I've been on a fascinating journey of learning about guitars, moving from electric to mostly acoustic, meeting an incredible bunch of people involved in guitars in one way or another – oh, yes, and acquiring a few guitars along the way. I'll be writing posts about the people, the guitars, and the ecological and conservation aspects of the materials used.

Date Created

February 2020

Author

richard-hobbsuwa-edu-au

default watermark