

NRBQ'S Steve Ferguson

Steve Ferguson (1948-2009)

By Michael Lipton

It's sad yet ironic that some of the most beautiful music is created by musicians who have struggled to achieve some sort of peace in their lives. John Martyn and Tim Buckley are two examples, both incredibly original - and troubled - artists whose music remains unmatched. In that same league is guitarist/singer/songwriter Steve Ferguson.

Ferguson, 60, passed away on October 7 at his home in Louisville, KY, after a year-long fight with cancer. Ferguson played music until the last days of his life. When he was no longer physically able to play guitar, he focused on recording a project on dulcimer, an instrument he approached with as much originality as he did guitar.

The fact sheet on Ferguson is all too brief: He's best known as the co-founder of *NRBQ* with high school friend Terry Adams. His output was relatively sparse - a pair of LPs with *NRBQ*, a handful of solo releases, some guest spots (notably pianist Johnnie Johnson's 1991 *Elektra* release "Johnnie B. Bad"), and a final recording with Adams ("Louisville Sluggers") in 2006. But quantity doesn't tell Ferguson's tale.



Ferguson was a guitarist's guitarist. When *NRBQ* had a residency in NYC in the late '60s, Jimi Hendrix regularly took a seat in front of him to study his playing. More recently, his fans include Los Lobos' David Hidalgo, *the Kentucky Headhunters'* Greg Martin, his successor in *NRBQ*, Al Anderson and Duke Robillard.

As a singer, songwriter, rhythm and lead guitarist, Ferguson was unparalleled - perhaps the most original rock 'n' roll musician in the U.S. Nearly all of his recordings are timeless examples of dead-on rock 'n' roll, blues and R&B - with his Kentucky-country-funk serving as the glue.

Ferguson's music came from deep within his soul, as if he mainlined into some bottomless well of inspiration. To hear - and watch - Ferguson launch into an extended solo was a thing of beauty. A rhythm machine, he could be ferocious, with flurries of notes flying out at lightning speed (thanks to a trademark style of double-picking), play a truly unique blues solo (no small feat) or carefully craft a gorgeous, soul-drenched R&B solo.

Drinking in influences like Lonnie Mack and Reggie Young (Ferguson cited Young's lick on Joe Tex's "Skinny Legs and All" as an inspiration), he created a unique style that was all his own - a rhythmic, melodic and quick-picking mix of Chicago, New Orleans and Memphis. I had grown up listening to *NRBQ* in Miami, FL., and, after not hearing a lick from him for nearly 20 years, when *Kentucky Headhunters'* guitarist Greg Martin sent me a cassette of "Jack Salmon and Derby Sauce" in 1991, I recognized Ferguson's playing in seconds.

"Jack Salmon" is still one of my favorite records - a deeply spiritual work that explored Ferguson's Celtic heritage and love of rock 'n' roll, blues, soul and R&B. But make no mistake; this was not the ordinary hodgepodge of styles that has since become so trendy. Ferguson drove right to the very essence of each of these styles and wove them into an absolutely beautiful record. Even more importantly, he wrote a cache of songs that was as distinctive and personal as his playing.

But before going any further, here's a recap of his career. Ferguson appeared on the first two *NRBQ* LPs - arguably the band's finest: The 1969 self-titled debut on *Columbia* - which is still stunning in its originality, musicality and mix of material, and predated the country and roots rock revival by decades; "Boppin' the Blues," collaboration with Carl Perkins that was equally ahead of its time. That LP contained what would become Ferguson's signature tune - "Flat Foot Flewzy" - and the song that, legend has it, was used to audition his replacement (with Al Anderson getting the nod). (Most of the classic *NRBQ* cuts with Ferguson can be heard on *CBS' Stay With Me - The Best of NRBQ CD*.)

After leaving *NRBQ* in 1970, Ferguson became an itinerant musician for hire, briefly playing with a club band in Ft. Lauderdale. After returning to Louisville, he had a series of groups including *Brother Stephen and the Humanitarians* (which released one LP titled *Fun For Fools*) and the longer-lived *Midwest Creole Ensemble* which sometimes included a horn section and choir.

Ferguson burst - an appropriate term - back on the scene in 1991 when he was tapped by Terry Adams (who had hurt his back) to finish up a release for the *Elektra/Explorer* series on Chuck Berry's pianist Johnnie Johnson. With Ferguson writing five of the cuts, singing on two and playing guitar on seven, the CD ended up being a Ferguson-Johnson collaboration. Ferguson's classic rock 'n' roll cut "Can You Stand it" and the stop-time novelty "Stepped in What?" fit Johnson like a glove. And if there was a question as to how his playing matched up against the big boys, check out "Blues #572." Eric Clapton takes a ride and then turns it over to Ferguson. The contrast is startling. Clapton's licks are classic - but Ferguson's playing is fresher and far more exciting.

The following year, Ann Arbor's *Schoolkids Records* released *Jack Salmon and Derby Sauce*. In 1996, he followed it up with the more gritty and rocking *Mama U-Seapa*, which featured some of his best songwriting ("Cops and Robbers," "Fight Like You Talk") and cameos by *NRBQ*ers Terry Adams, Joey Spampinato and Tom Ardolino. (Both CDs are still available at www.schoolkids.com)

I had the honor and good fortune to work and play with Ferguson from the early '90s until he died. He regularly stayed with me and played with my band *The Carpenter Ants* on all manner of gigs that ranged from outdoor festivals to clubs, benefits in the depths of southern WV and a fairly bizarre dance at a nudist colony. Suffice to say there is no shortage of Fergie tales.

No matter the gig or how many people were there, Fergie gave it his all. In that way he was a consummate professional. And no matter whether he stepped into rock 'n' roll, blues or country, his playing always had the special Fergie stamp. He also could dip into jazz (he compiled a repertoire of standards early on) and had a deep knowledge of music that spanned the R&B shouters of the '50s, country, blues, jazz and rock 'n' roll.

While playing on his tunes was always fun - he could singlehandedly conjure a wickedly greasy, funky groove - what I enjoyed most was hearing what he spontaneously chose to play on our songs. Still, whenever I'm at a loss for what to play, I think to myself, "WWFP" ("what would Fergie play").

His parts always made perfect musical sense and I absorbed as much as I possibly could. He played on every track of our group's "Ants in Your Pants" CD and added immeasurably. His solo on the 6/8 ballad "Crying in the Streets" is a work of art.

Sadly, we had scheduled a recording session this past September but postponed it. Lesson learned.

As magical as his music was, Ferguson was equally as unique and sometimes inscrutable as a person. He could be boyishly sweet and maddeningly frustrating; he could be incredibly considerate and hurtfully thoughtless. Through it all, especially in his later years, he had a deep quest for spirituality and a desire to learn and expand his consciousness.

Not surprisingly, his presence is still felt and still surrounds those who knew him and loved him. Every time I play I utilize what I learned from him. As sad as I am that he's gone, his music - songs like the gorgeous "Soul Waltz" and the driving "Outer Space Boogie" - continues to lift my spirits. Perhaps that's fitting. As troubled as his life was, music was his way of trying to find peace. Hopefully, now he's found it.