



**JOHN SEBASTIAN** HAS PLENTY TO SAY ABOUT REVISITING HIS LOVIN' SPOONFUL CATALOG AND ENCOUNTERS WITH FELLOW ROCK AND ROLL HALL OF FAMERS.

BY CHRIS M. JUNIOR



# STORIES HE DOES TELL

**Singer and multi-instrumentalist** John Sebastian knows a thing or two about being the person in charge (as the frontman and main songwriter for The Lovin' Spoonful) and being a hired gun (doing sessions for The Doors, The Everly Brothers, NRBQ and many others).

So does guitarist Arlen Roth, Sebastian's collaborator on the album *John Sebastian and Arlen Roth Explore the Spoonful Songbook*, released in September on the Renew/BMG label.

"Over the years, Paul Simon has hired him, Artie Garfunkel has hired him," Sebastian says of Roth. "Then he has this enormous body of work as a guitar teacher with his Hot Licks series, which he's had for a very long time."

Sebastian says there's a "gonzo simi-

larity" between Roth and late Spoonful guitarist Zal Yanovsky.

"He has a way of remembering Zal without actually going and playing the part exactly," adds Sebastian. "He'll reference one of Zal's parts in a very wonderful way. This has been a wonderful project in that regard."

Sebastian recently checked in from the comforts of home via Zoom (and wearing a Richie Havens T-shirt) to delve into the making of his album with Roth, as well as a handful of significant moments from throughout his career.

**GOLDMINE:** *As you say in the liner notes, this album was all Arlen's idea, but the material is yours. In revisiting The Lovin' Spoonful catalog with Arlen, did you have a list of things you wanted to*

*explore within the chosen songs? Or did you go in with a clean slate and respond to what Arlen and the others could contribute as players and singers?*

**JOHN SEBASTIAN:** Well, I think that the central musical arrangements all happened as an outgrowth of me and Arlen playing them. Now we played a lot of different Spoonful tunes, and we recorded several that didn't make it. There were things that we'd go back and listen to, and the problem (would be) either it's not as cool as the original, or we have to change something. In our situation — remember, besides being the guy under the spotlight, we're accompanists — this was kind of a nice exchange back and forth between accompanists. Later on, during the more intense COVID period that we were try-

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductees John Sebastian and Steve Boone, founding members of The Lovin' Spoonful, perform onstage for their first show in 20 years during the Wild Honey Foundation's benefit for Autism Think Tank at Alex Theatre on February 29, 2020, in Glendale, California.



ing to get this done, we were firing stuff back and forth between two studios but still treating it like we were really anxious not to put the kitchen sink on this thing.

**GM:** *What went into deciding which Spoonful songs to do, and how did you arrive at vocal versions versus instrumentals?*

**JS:** In most cases, we had started it as an instrumental. And then in several cases — like “Lovin’ You,” for example — it just seemed awfully natural to sing it. That also opened up that avenue for the MonaLisa Twins to join in. I think it was happening just kind of naturally; the elimination process was quite natural. We’d play something, and if it did resonate with us, we’d go on.

**GM:** *The album closes with you singing “Darling Be Home Soon.” The version is slower and quieter than the hit Spoonful version, and your vocal has a lot of weight and a tinge of sadness. Talk about your approach to the song this time.*

**JS:** Lots of takes. (laughs) It really did have a place on that album. As we began

to develop it, and I was singing it, we developed it some more, and I’d sing it some more. By the time we were done, we had a vocal and accompaniment. It’s just me and Arlen — even that organ-sounding thing is a guitar. (laughs)

**GM:** *With this project, you cashed in on your previous harmonica work for the MonaLisa Twins and had them sing on four songs. Talk about how you first connected with them and what made them a good fit for this project.*

**JS:** I think probably the sequence was that somebody emailed me a little film of them doing “Daydream,” and I wrote to that person — who I haven’t heard from since — to say, “This is one of the coolest things I’ve ever heard.” These women have that sibling harmony thing. ... So then whoever it was sent my response back to the twins. Then the twins wrote me back to say, “We’re so glad you like it. Could you possibly ever play harmonica on something that we’re doing?” I said, “Yes, I sure could.” ... They reacted very positively (to my first contribution) and sent me another thing, which I played

on. And then I think we were up to number three when they were making which was essentially their own album of their own material. I did that particular overdub, and then a couple of months later, they called me and said, “We feel funny about this, but we’re having trouble figuring out how to do the video for this song without having you in it. Would it be too crazy to come to Manchester and do the video?” ... I got on an Icelandic Airlines flight (and) was in Manchester in five hours. They then put me in a car on the way to a place called the Fishermens Rest, a 300-year-old bar ... they managed to rent it for after hours, and we went in and did this video, which is “Waiting for the Waiter.”

**GM:** *In other recent news, based on the posts on your website, you’ve received your share of items via regular mail to autograph during this pandemic. What’s the most unusual thing you’ve been asked to sign lately and the most unusual thing at any point in your career?*

**JS:** There was an Italian gentleman (laughs) at kind of a mobbed-up club

who came up to me and said, “I’d like you to sign my wife’s breasts.” And I was trying to weigh the various problems that could arise from that.

Help me, please: I have to stop (signing autographs every day). It got out of scale. I don’t know why, really. The amount of mail that I’m getting is kind of crazy. But what really is disheartening is all of these albums people are sending. During COVID? Really? You really want your semi-favorite guy to be handling all of this stuff *every day*, and then going to

a club in midtown, the Metropole. You can always hear the music pumping, and on this particular day, we decided to go in there and see what’s going on. Well, as we pushed through these two glass doors, there was a sound coming at us that was like a train. It was huge. And it was Felix and Dino (Danelli) — and nobody else! Just those two guys. And they’ve got this (Hammond) B3 gurgling and gargling like crazy, and Dino’s such a great drummer. (laughs) Yanovsky kind of retreated and went, “I think we better

The next song is “Do You Believe in Magic.” Zal’s reaction is, he begins to hit me repeatedly on the shoulder. And then everybody’s hitting each other in this car. (laughs) We did actually have to pull over.

**GM:** *Is there a cover version of a song you wrote that you hold above all others that you’ve heard?*

**JS:** Gee, it’s really hard to beat “Darlin’ Companion” by John and June Carter Cash. That was such a delight. Their

interpretation has the ring of truth about it. And Joe Cocker cannot be denied. I mean, that version of “Darling Be Home Soon,” it took me aback.

**GM:** *What are the onstage and offstage experiences from Woodstock that you think about more than anything else?*

**JS:** One of my really serious memories was wandering the grounds with David Brown, the bass player for Santana. ... We did actually circumvent the entire festival that day. It took us about half a day to do. That’s really a big one, and obviously, getting onstage, as much of a

surprise as it was and with as little notice as I had, was an amazing experience. But it was a strangely intimate experience as well. Me and almost everybody else on that stage had done a lot of shows for 40 people in a coffeehouse. I was surprised that there was that quality to this enormous, half-a-million-folks crowd.

**GM:** *There are items on your Wikipedia page, which I know that you don’t control, that call out for some verification or clarification. I’d like to bring up three of them. There’s a section on your early career, and it has this sentence: “Bob Dylan invited him to play bass on his Bringing It All*



The Lovin’ Spoonful during a recording session, circa 1966; Canadian guitarist Zal Yanovsky (1944 - 2002), John Sebastian and bassist Steve Boone.

the post office, pretty much every day? What I’d like to begin doing, I don’t want to stop signing stuff: I just want it to be me and Arlen’s new album.

**GM:** *Fair enough. Let’s take a sprint through the various phases of your career. As The Lovin’ Spoonful were on the rise, did you cross paths in New York with The Young Rascals?*

**JS:** Absolutely, and I tell this story as much as I can, and Felix Cavaliere enjoys it just as much as anybody. Me and Zal Yanovsky were in midtown (Manhattan); I think we were going to one of our movie marathons ... and there was

have our (stuff) together before we try to do this on this level.” It sent us scurrying to the rehearsal hall.

**GM:** *Can you recall where, when and who you were with the first time you heard “Do You Believe in Magic” on the radio?*

**JS:** No trouble with that. The Lovin’ Spoonful had actually gotten on a plane to Los Angeles to anticipate the fact that the record was coming out (in 1965). We get off the plane, we rent a car, we get in the car, we’re headed for Hollywood, and “California Girls” plays. And Yanovsky immediately starts bouncing around.

Back Home sessions (though Sebastian's parts probably did not appear on the album) and to join Dylan's new electric touring band, but Sebastian declined in order to concentrate on his own project, *The Lovin' Spoonful*."

**JS:** Was I out of my mind or what?

Yeah, I actually received a phone call on a real antique pay phone while the Spoonful was rehearsing up on Long Island. It was Bob — we knew each other a little because I'd been up to Woodstock and played with him a little bit informally. We crossed paths in the basement of Gerde's Folk City (in Manhattan). So I guess it wasn't a total surprise that he did call ... It took me 10 minutes to get the content, if you know Bob's speaking style. Eventually I understood what he was saying, and I said, "Bob, I can't believe I'm saying this but I started a band with these guys. I've written a few tunes, and they're kinda committed to it, and so I gotta keep going." And I never heard from Bob again in my life! (laughs)

**GM:** Well, I think things turned out OK for you in the end.

**JS:** I was certainly glad I knew what I had to do. I've had accompanists tell me I did the right thing.

**GM:** Also per Wikipedia, it says you were asked by Crosby, Stills and Nash to join as the fourth member but declined.

**JS:** Well, again, a thing that can get blown out of proportion very quickly. Because the way it started: I invited the guys up to my house in Long Island to get them away from Los Angeles ... everybody was so complimentary out there that I felt they were getting themselves in trouble. They took me up on that offer, and we did have several weeks where they were rehearsing with Harvey Brooks and Paul Harris, two wonderful players on bass and piano, respectively. And I would be in and out. I also was doing a lot of trying to re-create a career as *The Lovin' Spoonful* had declined.

It was a very casual comment that has been repeated so much that it makes it sound like it's a bigger thing than it was. It really was momentary. (I had a drum kit), and so I had kind of moved to the

kit as they were playing something with a little more of a beat to it. I'm tapping along with my hands and pumping along with my foot, and as we finished the tune, Steve (Stills), always wonderfully mercurial, goes, "Look at this! This is

... Who knows? If I had spent another 15 years on the drums, I probably could have done that job. I straightened it out, though. I introduced Stephen to (drummer) Dallas Taylor. That was my good deed.



Sebastian outside a taxi in London, April 1966.

good! Why would we change this? We don't need a drummer who goes tik-tik-tik boom, tik-tik-tik boom. We can have this guy just flopping along. And he could be another voice; he could be another songwriter." (laughs) But that idea was not an idea that sunk in deep.

**GM:** In the section about your session work, Wikipedia says you used a pseudonym for your harmonica playing on *The Doors'* "Roadhouse Blues" for two reasons: One was to avoid problems with your recording contract, and the other to "avoid association with Jim Morrison"

due to his ongoing indecent exposure case. Are both of those the truth?

**JS:** No, that's somebody really trying to fill in the blanks. I was very glad when Paul Rothchild called me and said, "Would you come in and do a session with The Doors?" You have to understand that both Paul and I had reservations about The Doors' sound. I don't know how else to put this. It was not a swingin' thing. It was a "I'm a really cool guy" thing, and it was a number of other things, but it wasn't a swingin' thing.

bass." I said, "Done." It was a wonderful introduction to Lonnie, and I got to play with Lonnie on several other occasions later in Woodstock on the spur of the moment, with no rehearsal of any kind. And I think because of that (Doors) session his trust was very high, and it gave me a wonderful secure feeling.

**GM:** Did it take a lot of effort to get *The Lovin' Spoonful* to appear in the Paul Simon movie *One-Trick Pony*?

**JS:** No, it didn't. Paul called me and

**JS:** Yep. That would have been the only opportunity for folks in modern times to have heard a pretty raucous little band.

**GM:** What stands out from the night *The Lovin' Spoonful* were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?

**JS:** I wish it was more pleasant. I wish I could tell you that we stood up there and got a chance to play and it was fulfilling and everything. That wasn't what happened. During the afternoon, they were doing the rehearsals. We did essentially no rehearsal. They said, "OK, you guys do it" — very half-hearted, though. There were much bigger acts being honored at that particular 2000 event.

Paul Shaffer, who I always felt was a tremendous ally ... I was so surprised he rushed us like crazy. We go and we played "Do You Believe in Magic." Within four beats, I can tell the bass drum is no longer there. The reason was that they'd set the kit up and not really tightened down the beater on the drum, so that Joe (Butler) has no foot, and he's trying to play and gracefully gesture to (the stagehands) to come in here and either tighten the thing down, put it back or please let us start again.

So we finished the tune (and said), "That was terrible. You gotta let us do it again." (The answer was), "Gee, we're really pressed for time. We gotta move on. You know, we'll fix it in the mix." Oh, brother. So, it was disappointing.

**GM:** It was a long-overdue induction. It's too bad it turned out that way for you onstage.

**JS:** Well, I did get the opportunity to say out loud, "Fellas, I'm glad you got around to us 15 years after our English contemporaries."

**GM:** Last question: With your signature solo hit "Welcome Back" having appeared in a recent TV commercial for Applebee's, does that give you extra clout at that restaurant chain around the country?

**JS:** I'm very grateful to Applebee's. I don't know if it's gonna get me in there. I'm still trying to get into the Italian restaurant around the corner. ●



Sebastian performs at Woodstock, August 16, 1969.

And Paul said, "Look, I'd really like you to play some harmonica on this particular tune, and I think that you'd be a good influence on Jim."

That's the only true part there. I never presumed anything because I didn't have contact with The Doors or even that moment in Los Angeles pop culture. I was somewhere else. I was trying to make a record with Rothchild (1970's *John B. Sebastian*); the album was being held, and Rothchild had a good deal of sympathy for my situation. One of the things he did was give me a session here and there, and The Doors' session was the one where he said, "I think you'd be a good influence." And he saved the best for last: "Lonnie Mack is playing

said, "We're making this movie, and it's about this guy who has these requests to play this old song ... and he has to play these golden-oldies concerts. So we're looking for some golden oldies that we might like, and you guys look the best." (laughs) I said, "Yeah, Paul." It was very straight-forward.

There was a *really* disappointing element to that, too, though. Because they were recording the Spoonful for this pretend event that the songwriter would attend, and they took the teeny part they needed. The Spoonful was doing a set for them, and they stopped the tape because they wanted to save tape.

**GM:** Always the budget in the way.