

# Bass notes



Photo: Brigitte 'Bibi' Lehmann

Gerry McAvoy remembers  
**Rory Gallagher**  
Interview: Trevor Hodgett

Belfast bassist Gerry McAvoy was Rory Gallagher's closest-ever musical associate for he worked with the Irish blues-rock guitar great for twenty years, through all the most glorious years of Gallagher's solo career.

His memories of Gallagher are fond but unsentimental. "It was twenty great years," he declares. "He was an absolute gentleman and a fantastic musician. I think he's very high up in that hierarchy of guys like Clapton, Hendrix, Beck and Page. Rory created his own style because there was a lot of Irish in his playing even though he was playing blues, so he was as much an innovator as Hendrix or Clapton or whoever, in my opinion.

"But I don't think his musicians were treated as well as they could have been. Rory could be the most

generous man in the world. If there were ten people going out for a meal Rory would pick up the bill. But he was very careful with the business side as far as the musicians were concerned. I think that goes back to [Gallagher's previous band] Taste because Rory got his fingers burnt there so that made him over-cautious."

McAvoy's resentment grew over the years. "I was only eighteen when I joined Rory," he says. "All I wanted was to play rock'n'roll and see the world. I didn't give a damn about money. In later years it came to the forefront because you end up with a family and things."

Characteristically, at gigs Gallagher would, through his body language, exhort his musicians to play with ever-greater intensity. McAvoy was not amused. "Rory

*"We'd go  
and see  
guys like  
Buddy  
Guy and  
Junior  
Wells"*

could be infuriating with his demands on stage which overstepped the boundaries," he argues. "Even though you were giving as much as you possibly could, it wasn't good enough. In general he was a great man but in that respect, in my eyes, Rory was wrong."

McAvoy acknowledges that Gallagher was hard to really know: "I probably got closer to him than most people but there was still this barrier and if you got too close you just knew to take a few steps back. That was the nature of the man. He was very insular, a loner in many ways."

An early highlight for McAvoy was touring the States. "In 1971 I was nineteen and we went to Los Angeles for the first time and played the Whisky A Go Go for a week," he reminisces. "It was a dream come true. Plus, in those days in America you could do your own show and then afterwards go to a club and see some fantastic musicians. Especially in Chicago – we'd go and see guys like Buddy Guy and Junior Wells. It was fantastic."

On one American tour the band played Shea Stadium, scene of The Beatles' famous gig, with Jethro Tull and Robin Trower. "We were on first on that show and it wasn't actually a pleasant experience because people were still coming in," explains McAvoy. "Rory didn't like it at all. It's fantastic to say, 'I played Shea Stadium,' but it wasn't a great experience."

During the long, dismal years of the Troubles, when most international touring acts chickened out of playing



Left to right: Rory Gallagher, Rod de'Ath, unknown fan, and Gerry

Belfast, Rory Gallagher earned the undying gratitude and loyalty of the city's rock fans by playing there every year. McAvoy's first gig in Belfast with Gallagher was in 1971. "A couple of bombs went off around the town but nobody cared," he says. "Everybody just came to see the music and it was an absolutely fantastic atmosphere because, at that time, international bands were staying away. But Rory and ourselves went and the people appreciated it and loved it."

Eventually, however, the magic with Gallagher faded for McAvoy. "[The situation] degenerated over the years," he reflects. "It wasn't something that went 'Bang' and hit you between the eyes."

Over-indulging in prescription medication and alcohol, Gallagher declined shockingly. "I'll give his brother [and manager] Donal his dues: he tried everything," says McAvoy. "But Rory wasn't the sort of man you could talk to. He made a decision and that was it."

McAvoy finally handed in his notice. "One of the reasons was the deterioration of Rory and the gigs becoming less successful," he says. "But also I was a sideman for twenty years and I wanted to be part of a band again because I write songs."

"So I sat down with Rory in a pub in Chelsea and talked about the whole situation and he took it quite well."

McAvoy joined Nine Below Zero but would help Gallagher out again the following year. "It was 1992 and Rory still didn't have a band together so we did a festival in France and a show in Glasgow, but he wasn't very well and it was sad to see," he says.

So what were the shows like? "Not very good," sighs McAvoy, still sounding upset at the deterioration of his old partner.

Heartbreakingly, Gallagher died in 1995, aged forty-seven. Meanwhile, with Nine Below Zero, McAvoy initially found himself operating at a much lower level. "It wasn't easy

Gerry and Rory on stage in the 1980s



"I used to get a bunch of guys together and play in pubs"

but at the same time there was a lot of fun involved," he says. "I didn't have the same restrictions as with Rory. There was nobody above anybody else. It was four guys who were equal partners in an adventure."

The band toured supporting Sting. "He was fantastic with us," says McAvoy. "He loves playing and he loves the whole road thing. A lot of guys of his ilk are nowhere near the venue before show time but he's there from two o'clock in the afternoon and he eats with the road crew and does his yoga with them. And he came into our dressing room a couple of times and had half a can of lager and a chat."

"Nine Below Zero had done supports for Clapton and so on and a lot of those guys are lacking in confidence and they'll turn the PA down slightly so that the first band don't get the full effect of it. Sting was the first guy who never did that. We had full PA and lights because he was that sort of character, full of confidence."

Weirdly, Nine Below Zero once backed actor Bruce Willis. "He invited us to play at the after-premiere party in Planet Hollywood for the movie *12 Monkeys*," says McAvoy. "He got up and did five or six songs with us. We just jammed really. He's not the greatest harp player in the world but he knew his stuff."

One tour took the band to Bangladesh. "An amazing experience," says McAvoy. "I've never seen poverty on that level so I wouldn't say I'd rush back to the place, but the gigs were amazing. We played one in the garden of the British Council and local musicians were getting up with sitars and all these weird instruments, playing blues with us. It was unique as an experience."

In 2005 McAvoy wrote his autobiography, *Riding Shotgun*,

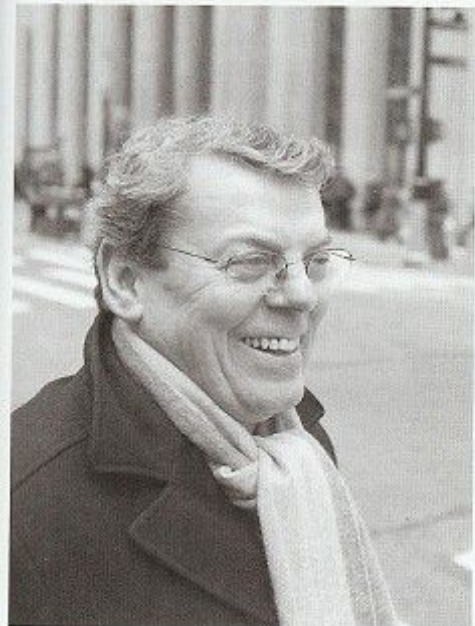
which brought him into conflict with Donal Gallagher. "It was my story and twenty years of my life was with Rory so I wrote it the way I saw it and remembered it," he says. "But Donal took umbrage and took it to levels I found disturbing. Yeah, legal stuff, but I said, 'Go ahead and sue me,' and he didn't. It never went any further. And I met Donal last year and we shook hands and had a chat so maybe it's all forgotten."

McAvoy has also, over the years, released two solo albums, *Bassics* and *Can't Win Them All*. "When I was off the road with Rory I used to get a bunch of guys together and play in pubs because I was always writing my own stuff," he explains. "And I just went into the studio and recorded them and Angel Air got in touch and put them out. It was like a live thing basically, poppy songs more than anything. *Can't Win Them All* was more rocky, more bluesy."

After twenty years McAvoy left Nine Below Zero. "It was time to move on," he says. "And about three or four years ago I started to listen to all the albums I made with Rory. I hadn't listened to them for a long time and I thought, 'These songs are great.'"

McAvoy formed Band Of Friends with guitarist Marcel Scherpenzeel and former Gallagher drummer Ted McKenna to play Gallagher's music. "Ted's a great drummer and Marcel's a fantastic guitar player who's very passionate about the Rory thing," he says.

Although the band is playing Gallagher's music, McAvoy doesn't regard it as a tribute band. "I prefer to call it a celebration," he says. "A normal tribute band would copy the music note for note but the thing about playing with Rory was it was different every night, and we try to attain that with this band as well and play the music our own way."



Gerry in New York, 2012  
Photo: Peter Chrisp