

Prepare for Takeoff: Fuzek interviews Jorma Kaukonen of The Jefferson Airplane

Okee dokee folks... The Jefferson Airplane was one of the best bands to come from the Summer Of Love/Woodstock era. Though they are down to three surviving members, you still have the chance to see two of them in concert. Jorma Kaukonen and Jack Casady formed Hot Tuna in 1969 as a side project while they were still members of The Airplane. Hot Tuna has had many members, including Airplane bandmates, but Jorma and Jack have always been the core. Kaukonen and Casady will bring acoustic Hot Tuna to the Narrows in Fall River on April 23. I spoke with Jorma Kaukonen and you can read that conversation below:

Jorma Kaukonen: What are we talking about today?

John Fuzek: You have a show coming up at the Narrows in April.

JK: Hold on. My son is calling but that's going to be a long conversation. I'll call him back when we get done. Ok, let's get back to this.

JF: You have an acoustic Hot Tuna show coming up. That is you, Jack (Casady) and who else?

JK: Just me and Jack.

JF: OK, I worked with you a couple of times at festivals. Rhythm and Roots and Grey Fox.

JK: Oh, yeah, man, great fun! That's a while ago. I remember Ricky Skaggs was on that show.

JF: I stage managed that show.

JK: We didn't offend you, did we?

JF: No! You two were a riot! Really liked working with you. You and Jack were a trip to work with. It was ten years ago at Rhythm and Roots festival was the last time we talked. You did an electric set there.

JK: Well, we're still hanging in. I'm heading across the panhandle of Florida right now we're on our way to Houston, man. Jack and I just did three shows in Florida. It's the first time we've played together since New Year's. We're playing well, we're having a good time and people showed up to hear us. What's not to like, you know?

JF: You were doing live streams over the pandemic.

JK: Yeah, that saved our bacon being able to do that. It was such a pleasure to be able to reach out like that.

JF: A friend of mine watched those live streams religiously during the pandemic.

JK: We had a heck of a good time doing that and we just did one a couple of weeks ago with me and my

friend Johnny.

JF: Is that Hurlbut?

JK: That would be Mr. Hurlbut, yes. We're probably going to do more when I get home.

JF: My friend wondered if you were going to do any touring with John.

JK: I did a short tour with him last year. It was a Jorma tour but I cut him in on like half of each set. I love playing with him. We have such a good time. I hope we will, it's in the forefront of our minds.

JF: What does John do at Fur Peace Ranch?

JK: He's been our ranch manager for over 20 years. He's starting to wind down a little bit. He's sort of semi-retired. We're not doing a lot of in-person teaching things this year. We're doing a lot of that online but we're doing lots of concerts and he's the guy who puts our shows together.

JF: What kind of concerts do you do there?

JK: We have a 250-seat theatre and we just bring in artists we like. It's great! We also have a weekly radio show on our local NPR station out of Ohio University. WOUB is the station and our archives are up online, of course, like everything is.

JF: I was wondering if you remember Marjorie Thompson.

JK: Of course. Absolutely. I think she's been gone 6 or 7 years now. She was one of our dear friends and one of our instructors at the ranch and she taught at Brown. She opened for me at the Narrows a couple of times. She was an exceptional person.

JF: Yes, she was a friend of mine, we did quite a few gigs together and she used to speak highly of you.

JK: This kind of illustrates the kind of woman she was, when she was diagnosed with cancer, there really wasn't any cure for it and she elected not to do the horrible treatments and right before she passed she did a road tour. She called me before she came home and said, "Jorma, I've had a great year."

JF: I can hear her saying that.

JK: I had so much respect for that.

JF: Some folks posted questions on Facebook that they wanted me to ask you. My girlfriend wants to know if you will play "Embryonic Journey." It's one of her favorite songs.

JK: Well, since she requested it I will be more than happy to do that!

JF: She will be thrilled! She also loves the guitar playing in "Today" as well.

JK: That's not me!

JF: Oh, I know but she loves the guitar playing in that one, too.

JK: I was just listening to Surrealistic Pillow recently and that's such a beautiful song. I wish it was me!

JF: She always tried to get me to learn these songs. I am good but not that good of a guitar player.

JK: You know, songs like that...It's so alien from my approach to playing the guitar. It's one of these things that's so minimal in some ways but really hard to do.

JF: It also has to be the right environment to play it, too.

JK: That goes without saying.

JF: So, besides you and Jack, Grace is the only one left from the Jefferson Airplane.

JK: Yes, it's just the three of us.

JF: Are you still in touch with Grace?

JK: We have business interests in common, we have a legacy company... I had dinner with her a couple of years ago and I hadn't seen her in years. We talk maybe once a month or so. Grace never lets us down. She has no verbal boundaries whatsoever and you just know it's going to be a fun conversation.

JF: She's not singing anymore but she is painting. I like her paintings.

JK: It's interesting, she was one of the great voices of my generation but when she was done, I couldn't imagine being done with guitar playing, but when she was done with singing, she was done with it. So she's just been painting and she's really good. Now that being said, I was talking to her a couple of months ago and she said, "You know, I've been messing around with the piano at my house" and I said, "Grace, if you ever record and don't cut me in on it I am really going to be mad!"

JF: Yeah, I would be, too! It would be great to hear you, Jack and Gace do something together.

JK: Nothing would make me happier, that would be so awesome.

JF: Even if she just sits in on a Hot Tuna show or something.

JK: The one thing about Grace is that you never know about her. I am not predicting anything but I wouldn't be surprised if I were surprised.

JF: You're 81 years old now, right?

JK: I am. Grace is pushing 82. So, we gotta get this done, you know!

JF: I talk to a lot of performers and I am a performer myself, and I wonder how long performing can be kept up. It's very taxing on the body. I have had hand problems for the past couple of years and I am just 61.

JK: You need Jorma's CBD products!

JF: I actually use CBD on my hands.

JK: Well, you should go to our Fur Peace Ranch website (FurPeaceRanch.com). If you like CBD we have

a whole line of great shit. You should just check it out just for the laughs! We even have CBD calming shit for dogs! Anyway, to get back to it, I am really lucky because so far I am healthy, I don't have arthritis in my hands. I'm an older guy that doesn't feel as good as they used to but what it's done is that it has caused me to work on my guitar technique in a more classical kind of way if you know what I mean. The kind of stuff that they try to teach us when we are kids but we would just say, "I don't need that, I don't need to play like that." I think my technique is better than it used to be and it doesn't hurt as much.

JF: That's probably my problem. I was just a stubborn kid who didn't want to learn the right way.

JK: We all were. We all thought, "Who needs that shit you don't know anything." I was telling Jack, for example, a lot of this has to do with age, my callouses are nowhere as thick as they used to be, and they don't get thick, but my hands don't hurt because my technique is better. You don't need to grab the strings that hard. I use 12's on my acoustic guitar and 11's on my electric. I guess 12's are considered light gauge these days in the acoustic world. They're not wimpy strings. I am lucky that I am still able to do this. It's fun. I still guitars in general, just as much as I ever did. So far, so good.

JF: I am hoping when I am your age that I can still play!

JK: There's no reason that you can't

JF: Someone wanted me to mention your cousin in RI, John Brett? I guess he is friends with a few of my FB friends.

JK: He is a bonafide distant cousin. His mom was one of my mom's nieces I think. They are all from those tobacco farms in CT.

JF: Someone mentioned a show in Boston where after the show Van Morrison showed up.

JK: That is not true. It's an urban legend. I would have remembered that!

JF: Another thing that someone asked if you remember is playing at URI and someone spiking your drink with acid.

JK: I have been spiked with acid at gigs twice and it wasn't in RI. Once was at Pirates World with The Airplane in Florida. The other was with Hot Tuna at the Carousel Ballroom in San Francisco. So, it has happened, but not there.

JF: The last time I saw you play you were with electric Hot Tuna on the Tedeschi-Trucks tour and you were the first opening act.

JK: We kind of rotated that but we were there. I love Susan and Derek. In my opinion that is arguably the greatest band in the world today. We were out with them for a couple of months and I got to know them all, that's a big band, and they were like family. It was awesome.

JF: Do you plan on going out with electric Hot Tuna again in the future?

JK: In April were doing, even though I am 81, we are doing my 80th birthday, because it got canceled, we are playing Carnegie Hall, and that's going to be electric! We do select electric stuff. Later this summer we are going to be on tour with Little Feat. We're going to be doing a trio with Justin, our

drummer but we're doing it acoustically, but I realize that when I use the word acoustic we are all plugged in. We are going to be playing as a stand-up acoustic trio.

JF: I remember your set at Rhythm and Roots and loved your set at the Tedeschi-Trucks show. The sound is amazing. Jack has such a chunky bass sound.

JK: Jack is such a tone chaser. The tones he is chasing change from time to time but I totally agree with you, man. Again, Grace never lets me down with her lack of verbal boundaries and Jack never lets me down by coming up with some kind of great tone and great lines. Jack and I have been playing together forever but every night something new comes up it's like "where does this stuff come from?"

JF: You two have been playing since high school right?

JK: Since 1958.

JF: Wow, that's amazing!

JK: Totally! That's a long time!

JF: Has it been smooth the whole time or have you had ups and downs?

JK: Honestly, we sort of "hiatused" for a while in the '70s but Jack and I have never had an argument. People ask, "How does Hot Tuna stay together for so long?" You play in a band so you will appreciate this: We have never had a band meeting! There is nothing that will break up a band like having band meetings!

JF: The Airplane did a rooftop concert, do you remember when that was?

JK: I would have to Google it.

JF: I was just wondering if that predated the Beatles rooftop concert.

JK: Oh, we were before, absolutely!

JF: I thought that but I wasn't sure. It was almost the same situation as the Beatles though.

JK: But we never got a permit and Marty got arrested. One of the funny things about it, Jean Luc Godard, the French filmmaker was making a movie and he was going to use this Airplane thing, I don't think anything ever came of it. Anyway, we did this thing on the rooftop, we were really loud, you gotta check out the YouTube video! Marty starts the thing off by screaming, "Good morning New York, wake up you fuckers!" or something like that. Anyway, we played the songs and the police came and shut us down. When we got downstairs the cops asked, "Who is the leader of the band?" We all pointed at Marty and they took Marty away!

JF: I have watched that video a few times, I really like it.

JK: It's funny shit!

JF: So, The Narrows show will be you and Jack. What do you anticipate doing for that show? How long, etc.

JK: Normally we do two sets. The first is an hour and the second is 75 minutes. But we always run over. That's what we are looking for. Thanks to the quarantine concerts I have resuscitated songs we haven't played in decades. And had it not been for the quarantine I probably wouldn't have taken the time to relearn them. We will be doing some new old songs. I've also written a couple of new songs. So we're going to get everything from the beginning to the present. And "Embryonic Journey," of course!

JF: Very good! She will be happy! What kind of guitar are you playing these days?

JK: I am glad you asked- there's this guy in Greene, Iowa named David Flammang. One of the things he does is build guitars in the style of a 1936 Gibson J-35. I have had two of these guitars for the past few years and I am so in love with them. That is what I am playing now. And that is what you will see when we come to the Narrows.

JF: It has been a pleasure talking with you again.

JK: Back at you! Take care, man!

Acoustic Hot Tuna will be at the Narrows in Fall River on April 23. For more about the show, "Embryonic Journey" to NarrowsCenter.org. That's it for now. Thanks for reading. www.JohnFuzek.com