

Rozanne Gomez conducting an interview for the Session Stories Project at Westminster Archives on 27 February 2023.

Colin Green

Born in Woking 1943

Guitar

Colin's mother was a "war widow" and his father had been a tobacconist. His aunt was a Sunday school piano teacher and he has piano sessions during which he learned to read music. Around this period "skiffle" music was becoming popular and the main featured instrument was the guitar. His mother told him that his father's guitar was still in the house and Colin found that he could transfer his musical knowledge from the piano to guitar. Remarkably this included being able to tune it and play it. This was entirely intuitive and he never understood fully how he did it, although like many of the musicians of his day he had a copy of Bert Weedon's "Play in a Day" and he would borrow books from the library to learn from.

He became involved in music after "bunking" off school to play in coffee bars where he was spotted and offered a job.

First session was with a band called Glyn Stewart and the Clansmen with whom he recorded a track called "Weepy Willow" at the age of 16 at Lansdown studios. He was paid cash in hand in those days before he had even unpacked his gear!

Colin thought the atmosphere at these sessions was "great"-everybody was there because they loved music. There was a huge amount of work at the numerous studios in London which would often be working from 8.00am until midnight and it seemed like the bubble would never burst.

One of his greatest challenges was parking near the studio. His first questions would be, "How much and where"? In the early years this was not so much of a problem until the advent of parking meters, yellow lines and traffic wardens which made the practicalities of moving to his next session complicated. This became such a problem that an independent business was established to move instruments from studio to studio so that session musicians could avoid travel stress.

Colin was surprised to become involved in the session scene as he had no formal training and felt he was learning on the job. Many of his colleagues had attended music colleges and he regarded them as being superior at the time.

His work came at first through “fixers” and once he had established a reputation the phone would ring constantly between 7.00am and 8.00am. He was working twelve hours a day until he invented a fictitious fixer and studio so that he could put some free time in his diary. It wasn't good to turn work down so this was necessary to maintain good relations with his fixers.

Colin didn't specialise or play a particular type of music. He found that this was part of the attraction although it did mean that he didn't know which challenges he might face. He would expect to record at least four songs for an album in a three hour session. There would be no post production-this was the finished article. He referred to Woolworths' own record label called “Embassy” which recorded “covers” of hit songs for the budget market. They would record six titles between 10.00am and 1.00pm and they would be in the store by Saturday morning.

His sessions would usually comprise of three slots: 10.00am-1.00pm, 2.00pm-5.00pm and 7.00pm-10.00pm. The travel difficulties referred to were exacerbated by the fact that he didn't live in London.

Colin felt that one of the qualities a session musician required was confidence. The “red-light” nerves of a recording session were off-putting for many musicians who did not cope well with that pressure. However, he felt able to meet these challenges which made the job exciting. The fact that he was getting paid to do something he enjoyed was a major part of the attraction of session work.

He was usually confronted with written music which was often recorded as written but sometimes open to interpretation. Suggestions for making improvements were rare due to the fact that studio time was expensive and sessions were subject to tight deadlines. Because studio time is now cheaper session musicians are more often employed for their creative skills.

The atmosphere in the studios was very good with “lots of laughter”. Once he was established with the “fixers” and “belonged” to the circle of regular session players he always felt relaxed about work. There was so much work that he would pick and choose sessions and he would often know which other musicians would be on the session.

He was mainly engaged as part of a rhythm section but for film work he would work with an orchestra. Colin found this especially enjoyable because of the magic of creating music which had previously only existed in the composers head.

The producers were very much in charge and a sign in one studio stated, "Rule one is the producer is always right, when the producer is wrong, rule one applies".

Colin was always paid cash in hand on arrival at his earliest sessions. This ceased when an employee of EMI was mugged while carrying a large sum of money for musician payments. Payment was then by cheque. The Musicians Union allowed 28 days for payment at which meant that he had to keep invoices and records of payment. However, there were never any contracts. All agreement were word of mouth. There was a residual payment called PPL (Public Phonographic License) which was a small payment for each time a recording was played. Many musicians were unaware of this and did not receive payments. Most sessions are now "buyouts" which means the recording company retains the right to use the music for any purpose at any time. Before the buyout system, only a percentage of the original fee would be paid - around 10% but as the session fee was only about £10 in the early days, these performance payments are very low. Session musicians were paid 125% for "overdubbing" which meant a repeat playing over the original track. The Musicians Union only set minimum rates and were not supportive for payments made which were higher than this.

Colin was rarely credited for his work. Occasionally a full album or film soundtrack would receive accreditation.

He recounted the pressures on family life which necessitated adding "phantom" sessions into his appointments book. There were, however, natural breaks around Christmas for example as the music for this period was recorded beforehand – usually in the summer!

Colin always tried to maintain a "live" aspect to his work as playing in a band before an audience was a special pleasure rather than the session work which he regarded as purely commercial. His "fixers" usually accepted this as a valid reason for turning down a session.

His most memorable session was with Elton John completed at Trident studios. Where he recorded "Your Song", "Border Song" and "60 Years On". He liked

the arrangements and the strings, rhythm section and piano were all recorded quickly at once. He often had a “why am I here” feeling when working with well-known artists such as Henry Mancini and Quincy Jones.

Technology has changed the financial nature of his work. Colin himself has a modest recording studio which uses software he only paid £200 for. In years past this would have cost thousands of pounds to buy and a great deal to rent. This means that the skills of the session musician of being able to read and interpret music and record it the first time without mistakes are no longer necessary as recording can now be done cheaply.

He points out that in recent years the term “session musician” has changed and may mean musicians employed to support groups while on tour.

Colin would not like to start in the business now. His advice to young musicians is to enjoy it if they are lucky enough to make any money out of it. He reminisced about Archer Street in Soho where all the free-lance session musicians would meet to find work. They were considered the elite and could make a recording session. Colin laughed at an incident when an unpopular producer was told by the assembled session musicians that “if he did not speak nicely to them they would play what was written.”