

# John Fahey (1939-2001)

By John Doan

John Aloysius Fahey, the "Father of the American Fingerstyle Guitar," spent the last twenty years of his life in Salem, Oregon. During his career, he recorded more than forty albums, appeared on numerous others, wrote articles and liner notes, and produced many recordings and videos. He was a Grammy Award winner, and in 2003 was ranked thirty-fifth in *Rolling Stone's* "100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time."

Fahey was born in Washington, D.C., on February 28, 1939, to musical parents. His father, Al, played the concert harp, and his mother, Jane, played the piano. In the 1950s, Fahey began to combine various styles of music he had heard on recordings, including the picking patterns and vocal styling of blues musicians and the abstract and dissonant music of such classical composers as Charles Ives and Béla Bartók. His musical statements ranged from banjo-like celebrations to dreamy, folk-like meditations. Fahey called his style "American Primitive." In his later years, he would dismiss this early work as "Cosmic Sentimentalism."

With degrees in philosophy and religion from American University, Fahey moved to California to attend graduate school. He received a master's degree in folklore from UCLA in 1966, writing his thesis on blues master Charley Patton. His book on Patton was published in 1970.

Fahey paved the way for the development of a distinct style of music known as American fingerstyle guitar. He introduced psychology and spiritualism into his music and was a pioneer of what came to be known as "New Age" music. Fahey's compositions also embraced musical elements of other cultures, and he discovered and promoted musicians such as Bukka White, Leo Kottke, and George Winston. A pioneer in alternative or "indie" music, he formed Takoma Records in the late 1950s, naming the company after his childhood home of Takoma Park, Maryland. The company was one of the earliest independent labels to successfully challenge the corporate music model.

In June 1981, John and his third wife Melody moved from Los Angeles to Salem, a city he said reminded him of the town where he grew up. Within a few years, he was diagnosed with Epstein-Barr syndrome; he also suffered from diabetes and a continuing drinking problem that had begun in the mid-1970s. After he and his wife separated in 1990 and divorced in 1992, Fahey lived in a hotel room. When he could no longer pay for medical care, he moved into the Union Gospel Mission in downtown Salem.

In spite of these hardships, Fahey's last years were filled with creative pursuits that included painting, composing, and collecting records. He recorded with the John Fahey Trio and in 1995 started Revenant Records with an inheritance from his father's estate. Fahey died in Salem in 2001 after undergoing a sextuple bypass operation.

## Sources

Downes, Chris, Malcolm Kirton, Paul Bryant, and Tom Kremer. "The Fahey Files." *John Fahey American Primitive Guitar*. www.johnfahey.com.

Lowenthal, Steve and David Fricke. *Dance of Death: The Life of John Fahey, American Guitarist*. Chicago, Ill: Chicago Review Press, 2014.

Ratliff, Ben. "A 60's Original With a New Life on the Fringe." *New York Times*, January 19, 1997.

---

The Oregon Encyclopedia

[https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/fahey\\_john\\_1939\\_2001\\_/](https://www.oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/fahey_john_1939_2001_/)