

The Musical Odyssey
of Jon Butcher

by Gail McCarthy

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BY GAIL MCCARTHY

Philadelphia-born Jon Butcher, who made Gloucester his home, grew up in one of the farthest reaches of the United States in Nenana, Alaska. His path would bring him back east and eventually to Boston, where he became part of the legendary 1980s music scene. In 1986, Jon's talents landed him a Grammy nomination and a seat at the 28th Grammy Awards, but he lost to English guitarist Jeff Beck.

"If you've got to lose to somebody..." Jon said with a big smile.

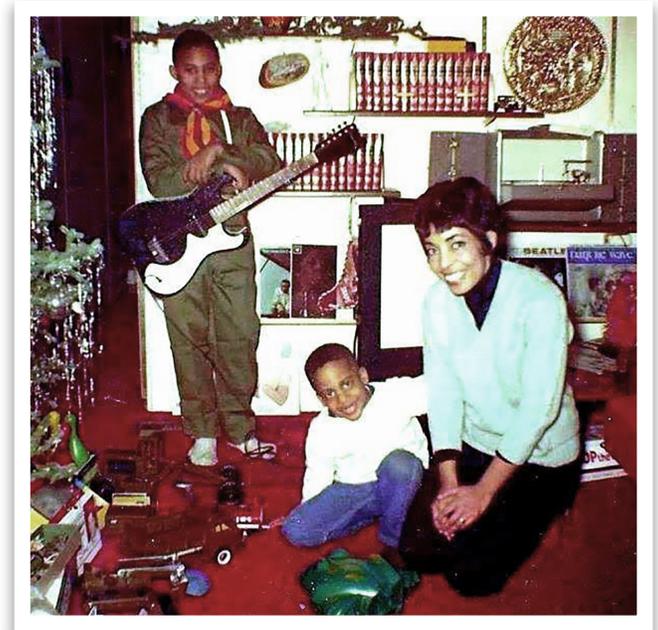
Extremely articulate and almost soft-spoken, Jon transforms onstage into a powerhouse of guitar muscle and soulful vocals that continue to pack music venues. He recalls the early days in Boston when lines would wind around the city block to see The Jon Butcher Axis.¹ Among its credits, the band opened for KISS, Def Leppard, INXS, and RUSH and toured the United States as the opener for the J. Geils Band. Many decades later, through a kind of kismet, a variety of forces pulled him to Cape Ann.

But first to his unique early years. Jon got his first guitar at age five, and the passion was instant. "I had been begging my parents for a guitar," said Jon, "I was watching a lot of 'singing cowboy' Saturday morning TV like Roy Rogers, which looked like a lot of fun to me."

AWAY TO ALASKA AND BACK AGAIN

When Jon was about seven or eight years old, his parents took jobs with the government at the Clear Air Force Base in Liah, Alaska.

¹ The official name of Jon's Band was "The Jon Butcher Axis" and is sometimes shortened to "AXIS" in this story.



Young Jon with guitar in hand, brother Brian, and his mother Joan, circa 1967.

"I was there when Alaska was free from the politics of today, that is, except for fear of nuclear war with Russia! Living in the woods and isolated from the Lower 48 was an ideal way for a kid to grow up," said Jon. It was in Alaska that Jon thinks he developed a love of nature which he would carry on to his eventual arrival to Cape Ann.

But Jon's family would later move back to Pennsylvania, to a suburb of Philadelphia, for his last two years of high school. "That was culture shock," he recalled. "It was the first time I came face to face with prejudice. From a social standpoint, it was tough. I came from a town with a total population of 136 people to the suburbs of a big city."

As Jon searched for his place as a teenager in high school, the guitar became a way to create contacts and forge connections.

"By high school, I could play a little bit. Some kids in class talked about forming a band, and someone asked who could play the guitar. I said I can," he recalled.

Once they heard him play, that was it. "That's when I started making friends," Jon said. "The guitar was a kind of passport, a way for me to navigate socially. It made me feel worthwhile and helped point me to a career in music."

ON TO BOSTON

In 1975 Jon moved to Boston to attend Graham Junior College for broadcast journalism (along with fellow musician and guitar player Johnny A). As a young musician in the 1980s, Jon believes his musical prowess insulated him to a degree from the worst of the racial tension of 1970's Boston. He noted the violence that broke out in Boston in 1974 in the wake of U.S. court-ordered school desegregation, including when white protestors threw bricks and bottles at school buses carrying African American students. Jon knew, despite the standing-room-only crowds at these shows, it was inevitable that some in the audience were racially intolerant.

"The school bussing situation and that mindset carried into the 80s," Jon continued. "I played a lot of places and headlined shows that probably didn't have many who looked like me. Playing guitar was, at that point, the great leveler."

THE JON BUTCHER AXIS AKA AXIS

After graduating from Graham, Jon's path led to the stage and the studio as a recording artist. He began with the group Johanna Wild. That band morphed into The Jon Butcher Axis with co-founders Chris Martin and Derek Blevins, and the band's popularity continued to grow.



Jon Butcher touring with the J. Geils Band, circa 1982.

"The word 'axis' after my name came from a meeting with the company big shots at Polydor Records. Fans thought it was my last name," said Jon with a chuckle. "It was actually a connection to one of Jimi Hendrix's albums."

In his early music career Jon felt torn about the comparisons to Jimi Hendrix. "Hendrix is a legend, and we obviously had similarities, both being black and playing the guitar in a rock/blues context," said Jon. "Some exploited the comparison as a way to promote the band, but I wasn't sure. It took me a few years to embrace the comparison and to realize I could still have my own identity as an artist."

MAKING IT BIG, BOSTON AND BEYOND

While The Jon Butcher Axis was well-known in the Boston area in the late 70s, playing at places like the Channel and the Paradise, it wasn't until 1982 that they made it big. Just after Christmas, the phone rang in Jon and Chris Martin's East Cambridge apartment with an invitation to open for the J. Geils Band for three concerts surrounding New Year's Eve.

"I remember walking onstage for the first time to a large audience, something like 10,000+ people at the Boston Garden," said Jon. "I was petrified, my heart racing. We had never played in front of such a big crowd. Before we even played a note, I raised my guitar over my head and yelled, Boston!!!! And that's all it took to get the crowd going. I turned from petrified to electrified."

The exposure from the wildly successful shows at Boston Garden led the band to hopping onboard the *Freeze Frame* tour with J. Geils, and to the band's first record deal with PolyGram Records. Their self-titled debut in 1983 was critically acclaimed, while the single "Life Takes A Life" reached #26 on the Billboard chart. The "Life Takes a Life" video was the second by a black artist to be aired on MTV, the first being Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough."

The 1980s were a wild ride for Jon Butcher and his bandmates, highlighted by a Grammy Award nomination for Best Rock Instrumental Performance—"The Ritual" on their 1985 *Along the*



The Jon Butcher Axis's first album cover with Polydor Records in 1983.



The Jon Butcher Axis backstage with Def Leppard during the Pyromania Tour, just after show. Oklahoma, 1983.

Axis album. Performing with big name bands like Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, Def Leppard, and RUSH became the norm as well as making music videos for MTV ("Life Takes a Life," "Holy War," "Don't Say Goodnight," and "Ambitious" with Jeff Beck) during MTV's early formative years.

After appearing in a music video with Jeff Beck, Jeff and Jon were invited to a music producer's house in LA for dinner. There he met guitarist Eddie Van Halen who Jon described as friendly and down to earth. "You work with these well-known musicians making videos or going on tour," said Jon. "But you don't really get to know them until you just sit down, slow down, for dinner, or just hang out with a glass of wine."



Jon on the night of the Grammys, 1986



On left, guitarist Jeff Beck and Jon at a dinner party in LA, circa 1988.



Jon on left at dinner party with guitarist Eddie Van Halen and on right is Bruce Amdur, AXIS tour manager, circa 1988.

SCARY MOMENT ON ROAD WITH DEF LEPPARD

In 1987, Jon and his band went on tour with Def Leppard just after The Jon Butcher Axis “Holy War” video was released. “We were touring southern states and pulled into the hotel parking lot in Mobile, Alabama,” said Jon. “A screaming crowd greeted us in the parking lot, but these were definitely not fans.”

The crowd was waiting for the band to arrive because their video “Holy War” was viewed as offensive to some evangelicals and other religious groups. “It was scary at the time. We were tired and not expecting that kind of welcome,” said Jon. “But, in the end, we had to shrug it off. We felt the ‘Holy War’ video properly represented our feelings, and many other Americans at the time, albeit in an explosive way. But, that’s rock and roll isn’t it? That’s what the designers—Chuck Berry, Little Richard, even Elvis, had in mind—to shake things up, shake up the status quo.



Members of The Jon Butcher Axis in front of a fan's car, outside the Paradise nightclub in Boston. Left to right, Jon, drummer Derek Blevins and bass player Chris Martin, circa mid-1980s. Note the vintage Def Leppard shorts on drummer Derek Blevins.

The protestors had a right to protest, but our concerts were sold out.”

ON TO LOS ANGELES

In the early 1990s, after a long period of touring and recording, the AXIS decided it was time to move on to something else, as bands often do. “The things that make a rock band work are the same things that ultimately lead to breaking up,” said Jon. “Traveling together, being together all the time sometimes causes fractures. We weren’t any different in that way. Add to that, the record company really didn’t understand who and what we were, and what kind of records we wanted to make. We knew it was time to move on.”

Jon moved to Los Angeles, where he continued his rock career. One critic described his talents as “powerful soul-infused vocals; his guitar work reflects a skillful mix of rock and R&B, funk and soul, jazz and Americana, all of it focused through a prism built from the blues.”

By 1993, Jon was a member of the Barefoot Servants band. As a musician he had opportunities to travel, creating a fan base around the world. “I went to Moscow with fellow musician, colleague, and best friend Chris Pierce to perform at a popular music festival in the 90s. I think meeting folks in that situation was a revelation,” Jon said. “There is no substitute for travel to broaden the way you see yourself in the world.”

Jon eventually started a production company, Electric Factory Music & Film, creating music for television commercials, cable and commercial TV shows, movies, video games, and other projects that called for original music scores. Among his credits are *Ugly Betty*, *Star Trek: The*



The Barefoot Servants band at a radio interview in Austin, Texas. Left to right is Lee Sklar, bass guitar player; Ben Schultz, guitar; Jon; and Ray Brinker, drummer, circa 1997.

Next Generation, Hendrix: The Movie, The Sopranos, and HBO's DEADWOOD.

"I've been lucky, but also had the willingness to reinvent myself—several times!" said Jon laughing.

BACK TO BOSTON AND A HOME IN GLOUCESTER

The success of his business meant he could afford to buy a house and put down roots in Los Angeles, but some 20 years later, in 2010, a confluence of circumstances drew him back to New England. "One of my close friends, Peter Hackel, suggested I return to Boston," said Jon. "The economy was tough after 2008, and many entertainment businesses were taking a hit, including mine."

Upon returning to Boston, Jon found musicians still eager to share the stage with him. He had no idea how pivotal his move from LA to Boston would be, partly because he fell in love. Jon began performing again and found himself at a show in downtown Gloucester. In the audience was Laurinda Mahoney. After the show, he and Laurinda, a graphic designer and gifted photographer, started talking and began what would become a lifelong relationship.

"As things got serious, we decided we wanted to spend more time together, and that was the beginning of my move to Gloucester," he said. Two years later, they married and continue to enjoy a mutual love of the arts.

"Honestly, I never imagined I'd be here," Jon said. "Having the chance to discover Cape Ann was such a blessing. I'm a nature guy, and this was the pinnacle, the best. I've never seen anything so captivating and inspiring for creating music, even to this very day. I've never met



Jon on the set of HBO's *DEADWOOD* as an actor for about three years. Circa 2004.

such creative and warm people as I have here on the North Shore. My wife Laurinda is also well-connected in the Gloucester arts community. She's the graphic designer and photographer who created the art design for all my recent albums. But her heart is with photographing the incredible birdlife of Cape Ann."

Another critical connection occurred when Jon met Fly Amero, a musician whose long career includes being part of the band Orleans. "When I arrived here, Fly was one of the first musicians I got to know. I struggle to find words to say how impressed I was (and still am) with Fly as a singer, songwriter, and guitarist," said Jon. "I have him to thank for introducing me to the Gloucester music and arts community."

Fly soon introduced Jon to singer-songwriter Allen Estes. "We became fast friends. I admire Allen's poetry and songwriting so much. I produced the *Carnival Man* record for Allen in 2020, which I'm very proud of," Jon added. "Speaking of poetry, I'm a big fan and friend of Glenn Bowie, another Gloucester poet I hold in high regard."



Jon, Fly Amero and Allen Estes perform at the Shalin Liu, circa 2018.

Jon has become part of special annual events like The Big Strum in the past and the current annual holiday shows with fellow musicians, including Amero, Estes, and Sal Baglio, among others.

“As much as I enjoy playing, I also enjoy meeting people, talking about music, about guitars. I’m especially touched when I learn that something I’ve written has become meaningful to someone else,” Jon said. “I look forward to making contact and laughing with the folks who stuck with me. I owe them a lot.”

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Jon is not one to sit still. During the start of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020), he started a film company, Watercolors Movies, to make mini-movies for artists, musicians, and others who have a story to tell but don’t have deep pockets or corporate connections. A consummate singer-songwriter, he used his talents to propel his artistry forward despite the challenges of the pandemic.

“While the world went to pieces, I sequestered myself in the recording studio, determined to make something positive during a time of widespread pain and anguish. We were all in the same boat—wondering what we are going to do, how are we going to live, when will it be over,” he said. “I took that doubt and negative energy and turned it into something that feels hopeful. At least, to me it does. Hope resonates with everyone.”

Jon’s album *Special Day* was the result. “I think we’re wired to be uplifted in some way by music. There’s some negativity to be found for sure, but people mostly want to be uplifted; they need it,” said Jon. “We need positive energy to keep going, to feel safe. For me, I need music, like I need water. It’s a wellspring, a way of feeding my soul and keeping my head up.”

Recently Jon formed the BUTCHER, BAGLIO & ESTES band and in 2022, their debut album *GYPSY CARAVAN* was released.

“This is a strong, soulful, and heartfelt record,” said Jon, who welcomed the opportunity to record with two of his cherished friends.

“When I think of Gloucester, I think of the wonderful and talented people I’ve been privileged to meet. I think of my amazing experiences with nature and the ocean. I’ve made memories for a lifetime here,” said Jon.

An avid bicycle rider, Jon continues to explore every inch of the island of Cape Ann. “I summer ride everywhere,” he said. “There is no little harbor, nook, or cranny I haven’t visited on my bike. Music allows me to express myself, and on my bike is where I feel most free.”