

words words words

Keith Briggs' idea for this column was not immediately embraced by the rest of us at B&R, but once he got it off the ground, it proved to be one of the most popular sections of the magazine and we were forced to eat our words (npi). I'm sure Keith wouldn't mind if we use his 'baby' as a vehicle for those of us who came to know Keith over the years, to write their own personal tributes to the man. Here are just a few of them.

It wasn't always easy to be Keith Briggs' friend. We were completely different people but we shared a number of character traits, to a greater or lesser degree, and a host of enthusiasms that ranged across music, literature and film.

These were mulled over and contested at numerous hostelries up and down the land, lubricated by more pints than should be consumed if you intend to drive home later. We didn't mention politics, though, since I wasn't a Labourite of the old school, nor could I contemplate doing to the Windsors what the Bolsheviks did to the Romanoffs. Like me, he was self-taught, intelligent rather than intellectual, his mind the fruit of voracious reading, more disposed to non-fiction than me, for whom fiction is a necessary adjunct and contrast to all those dry facts.

Much to his surprise, it turned out the Grand Canyon had almost as much allure for me (a non-swimmer) as it did for him; between 1996 and 2000 we did three raft trips along with his mate Pete Chipperfield. On the Colorado River you saw Keith in his element, taking a lead seat in the paddleboat, digging into the white water of Crystal and Lava Falls ('we were upside-down when we hit the wall but I still hung on to my paddle'), climbing to the top of the Tabernacle or striding across Happy Valley in a day-long hike at the end of which he always finished in the first three. It's only now I realise I was but one of Keith's acquaintances in a network of friendships that he assiduously maintained throughout the time I knew him.

It was standing-room only at his memorial service - of which he would have disapproved - although he should have been impressed that so many of us needed to show our appreciation. His natural attitude was self-deprecation but woe betide anyone who mistook his reticence for lack of knowledge. That capacity for wide-ranging interests illuminated B&R's pages. After improving the syntax and sense of the reviews he corralled for that half of the magazine, he gave free play to his inquiring mind with 'Words, Words, Words' and contributed any number of perceptive book reviews and the occasional article, should he find the time. He could put together a good CD set, too.

He's irreplaceable. Not just as a writer and reviewer, whose work we prioritised when each new magazine arrived, but for me he was a drinking companion, conversationalist, antagonist, failed romanticist, walker, white water rafter and rock. He was unique. Tolerance wasn't always his forté, but he helped me when I needed it and let me return the favour when life (in the form of an ungrateful woman) presented him with a brick wall he couldn't punch his way through. I'm still angry that he contrived to leave before his time but he'd lived his life to the full, enjoyed its highs, endured its lows, taken care of his friends, meant something. To say I'll miss him is a cliché and a painfully accurate fact. I could go on but just now I think I'll stop. **Neil Slaven.**

Keith was always very encouraging about my writing for B&R which I very much appreciated. I greatly enjoyed his dry humour when we corresponded. He always commented on the unusual post cards that I included when sending hard copy - so I searched for even more strange items which he always enjoyed! Keith was a perceptive and intelligent journalist and an inspiration to my own work. We only met once of the twenty odd years that we knew each other but I still thought of him as a mate. **Bob Tilling, musician, artist and writer.**

I've just read the sad news about Keith Briggs. He will be sadly missed by readers of B&R. His knowledge and enthusiasm for the music we love was something to be envied. **Fred Rothwell, discographer and writer.**

I am extremely sorry to hear of Keith's passing. He will surely be missed. **Andrew Galloway, Electro Fi Records.**

I'm very sorry to here about Keith - he was a lovely guy, who I always had plenty of time for. My thoughts are with you at this sad time. **Mike Gott, Gottdiscs Limited.**

8-2-7-2-4-8! Delivered in that stentorian, monosyllabic tone that seemed to challenge the caller: 'this had better be important!'. That's how Keith answered his telephone. Even more intimidating was his recorded message, especially his old one that seemed to go on and on as if *daring* the caller to listen to the end - and as for having the temerity to actually leave a message! Keith was



Keith (left) with Byron Foulger, Tony Burke, Tony Watson and Phil Wight at the 2003 Blues & Rhythm AGM, Burnley.

the archetypal grumpy old man, who taught me a thing or two about the art as I approach my sixties I can tell you.

I can still remember the call, from Tony Burke's wife Julie on the morning of March 7th, two weeks ago. She'd been given the bad news by Keith's friend Helen, and had been trying to get hold of Tony, but he was locked in a meeting, so she rang me to tell me that Keith had died. "Keith?", I'd asked her, "You mean 'our' Keith, Keith Briggs?", "Yes", she replied, "our Keith". She then told me of what she knew of the circumstances and I just sat there stunned. I'd just been reading an email from Keith that he'd sent the previous afternoon. Had I heard her right? I thought. I just couldn't take it in. Then the phone rang again, it was Tony, he'd got the message and rang me to verify what I'd been told. It was slowly starting to sink in, Keith was gone.

I remember the first time I met Keith, some twenty years ago in a Sheffield pub with Tony. The grizzled stern-faced geezer with the accent that I couldn't quite make out (part east-ender, part Norfolk drawl, with a hint of yellow-belly) didn't seem my type at all, until it emerged that he was a big Jerry Lee Lewis fan, that definitely made me warm to him. Then as the night went on and the beers went down it turned out that almost everything I liked (rock & roll: Little Richard, Fats Domino etc, r&b: Big Joe Turner, Wynonie Harris etc), Keith not only liked, but was extremely knowledgeable about. I was later to learn that this was just the tip of the iceberg as far as Keith's musical leanings went.

The purpose of this initial meeting was to agree how we could support Tony upon his take over of Blues & Rhythm from its previous editor, Paul Vernon. It soon became clear that we could not afford the luxury of paying to have the type-setting done professionally, at over a grand a time (in 1985/6), we wouldn't have lasted long. So I set out to do it 'in-house'. I had a smattering of basic computing skills and gradually learnt enough to take the plunge. At the same time, I was introducing Keith to the advantages of using a word processor rather than hand-typing or even handwriting reviews etc. This was the beginning of a long hard struggle. I used to dread the phone call from Keith: "This fucking computer's going through the window!". When he calmed down we'd sit and talk it through and I eventually impressed on him that he needed to save, save, save his work every couple of lines or so, not type for hours, only to lose everything due to a crash or whatever.

It would be fair to say that Keith didn't easily embrace technology, particularly computers, although he did grudgingly admit that they "had their benefits". I well remember visiting Keith on many occasions, to bring the latest hardware or whatever. Keith would inundate me with questions, "how do I do this?" and trying to write my answers down, despite my own misgivings as to my limited ability. When we tried to do something and it didn't work, Keith would give me that sardonic look as if to say "I told you so". I drove home sometimes a cross between an abject failure and a world cup hero.

Despite the problems though, and the occasional overheat, we always sorted things out. Keith was always very hospitable, coffee, cheese and pickle sandwiches and biscuits were always at hand.

I can't honestly say that Keith ever included me as one of his 'inner circle' of close friends, but I believe that we maintained a healthy liking for each other. I know I certainly did for him. **Tony Watson.**

I built up a relationship with Keith mainly over the telephone over the ten or so years I have been doing reviews and articles for B&R. We had the chance to meet one another at one of the Bishopstock festivals. Keith had a view about a lot of things which he was never scared to air. One of our common interests, as well as music, was movies. Keith had great knowledge on the subject of films. We used to talk about the latest films and we used to swap DVDs through the post. I had great respect for Keith and his knowledge on a variety of subjects. He always had the time to talk to me which I also respected. **Mike Stephenson**

Jammy Bastard I called him - and he generally ended his emails etc to me with the initials 'JB'. This derived from when he was lucky enough to get early retirement (about six years ago?). I'm certainly pleased he had a few years away from the rat race. Pity he didn't take it easy, as he suggested everyone else should do, but, as has been said: he no doubt went how he wanted, where he wanted, just not *when* he wanted to.

Still at least at least you had these recent years to do what you wanted. Damn, never did let you have that Jerry McCain stuff did I? Extremely sorry, honest! See Ya, **Byron Foulger.**

Dear Keith: Now that Fate has unaccountably intruded, you, Swinton and I will have to postpone (at least for a while) our proposed get-together. 'Til then I will forever carry the memories of our friendship, of your extreme and extraordinary intelligence, sense of compassion, sly, off-base good humor and your ever-readiness to help, no matter what the issue and certainly never just confined to music.

When I think of us at Johnny Parth's legendary party, our shock and attendant bewilderment at the "resurrection" of friend Chris Smith and our several tragic/comedic encounters with 'Godzilla' in Vienna, I can not help but laugh at the memories and images provided.

I was proud to be your friend and each and every time that you visited me at my home was, indeed, a very joyful and special occasion. I shall deeply miss you, old friend!!! Larry. **Larry Cohn, author and blues historian.**

C'est effectivement une triste nouvelle. Je ne connaissais pas Keith, mais je lisais regulierement ses chroniques. C'était quelqu'un de tres eclectiques dans ses gouts. Amitiés. (It's really sad news. I didn't know Keith personally but I read his reviews regularly. He was a man of very eclectic tastes). **Jacques Perin - Editor Soul Bag Magazine.**

Keith Briggs was my other 'main man' at B&R. I always looked forward to receiving the periodic little brown jiffy bags mailed to me from Skellingthorpe. Not only could I usually rely on an interesting selection of review material, but also the inevitable pithy comments from Keith either on a note included in the parcel, or shortly thereafter by 'phone. I thought I had catholic tastes in music, but Keith had me beat hands down. The man knew his stuff too, no half-assed, ill-informed opinions from his quarter.

In fact Keith was never short of opinions. He was either 'in your corner' or took a diametrically opposing view. Either way, he was extremely entertaining in his views and always came up with some comment or other to enhance (or occasionally slate) one's completed review. He was extremely good at choosing the right words or phrases to enhance his language, even if (as sometimes was the case) it required a dictionary to translate what he meant! He never edited a review without consultation and he was always apologetic if he needed, for reasons of space, to slim my 400 carefully chosen words down to 40!

As a reviewer, I recall discussing with Keith the infamous B&R guide supposedly explaining B&R's editorial requirements as to the *precise* demands for reviewers. These included punctuation, grammar, spacing, use of both upper and lower case and many more 'rules' of that ilk. All this in a document using a thousand words, where a few 'examples' would have sufficed.

I was struggling to decipher the document and rang Keith for guidance. His reply was rather more to the point than usual, no doubt because he had already had other reviewers haranguing him over the same subject. "I think it's bollocks too mate" came the terse response, "but just read the fucking sheet, stick by the rules like I've had to do, and send the bloody review in." He put the 'phone down.

Five minutes later he rang me back, apologised and talked me through the entire thing. We both agreed it was still bollocks, but at least we were all talking the *same* bollocks!

God bless Keith, I'll miss you and our long, rambling conversations. Now at least you'll get to decipher some of those obscure lyrics. Them wot wrote 'em and sung 'em are all at your beck and call! **Steve Armitage.**

I am sorry to hear of Keith Briggs' passing, the guy did a bang up job! **Billy Hutchinson, Team Writer Blues Matters magazine.**

I never met Keith but always read his articles, sleeve notes and reviews with great interest and admiration. They conveyed not only his enthusiasm for, and deep knowledge of, his musical passions, but also his genuine curiosity about the world from which such music came - his fine pendant piece to my article on the Great War was typical of that. I thought the 'words' forum was an inspired feature and hope that it will continue. **Henry Thomas, Researcher and B&R contributor.**

My connection with Keith was first and foremost Iceland, where I work as a guide. He came on three of my trips - most recently last summer. After getting soaked through on the first, he vowed he'd never do another, yet came back two more times. I enjoyed his passion for the Icelandic sagas, his humour and honesty. His knowledge of the sagas and recollection of the minutest of details was extraordinary. He was a great guy and I have no doubt he will be much missed by all lucky to have been close to him. **Cathy Harlow.**

Keith passed away suddenly in early March and I can still hardly believe it. Since then we have received many kind tributes and fond memories of Keith. Thanks to all of you who have sent condolences.

As I wrote in B&R 198, Keith was our reviews editor and also the compiler of the 'Words, Words, Words' feature and the Alternate Takes section. He also wrote the sleeve notes for many CDs and box sets for an array of reissue labels. He was a keen sub-editor and proof reader too - pointing out my own inabilities to understand the English language properly and my disregarding of proper punctuation. He did this with great humour often reminding me that I was supposed to be a printer!...

What is fascinating is that I had known and respected Keith for 20 years. What I didn't know was that he touched so many people's lives. Not only through blues, western swing, hillbilly and jazz, but his massive knowledge of books and films which is now proving to be legendary.

It turns out that Keith was also an expert on Icelandic sagas - so that's why he went there for holidays! - as well as the American Civil War, the wild west and cowboys and the First World War. Like me he was on the political left and he often told me that the only good trade union was the Wobblies (International Workers Of The World). His political outlook and politics were one of our regular phone discussions. Sometimes, those discussions and debates, on music, B&R or politics, led to heated arguments and disagreements - with Keith ending up telling me - "You sound just like my old boss" or sometimes "Why don't you let me *****n' finish!".

Keith's funeral was just right. Many friends from the blues world turned out and the music....'T Bone Jumps Again', with Muddy's 'Long Distance Call' played during a period of private contemplation and, as the curtain closed, Jelly Roll Morton's 'Oh Didn't He Ramble'.

One month or so on - box sets and CDs are coming out with his sleeve notes and CDs are still arriving at his house in Skellingthorpe - it takes time to get word out.

I miss Keith. I miss our phone calls, usually waking him up before 8:00am after he 'retired' from work. I miss his ideas, his advice, (which he used to say I never took!) his humour, his comradeship and his friendship. I miss not having him around. We all do. **Tony Burke.**

I don't think I had seen Keith since the days of my touring activities when he used to get across to those Sheffield gigs - but we had a great long distance working relationship working on these JSP box sets and he had some very nice original concepts. A sad loss to us all. **John Steadman, JSP Records.**

My sincere condolences and sympathies to all at B&R over your colleague and friend. Like everyone else there, he did fine work and will be missed on this end. **B&R subscriber Michael Gilroy.**

I first met Keith at the Colne Blues Fest, somewhere in the early 1990s. We only met a couple of times after that, once more at Colne and the last time at the 2003 Burnley Blues Fest. However we did speak many times on the phone, an enquiry about a review or a spot of brain-picking (me picking his!) or a casual call to see what had come in for review usually ended in a 45-minute blether that quickly went off the original subject.

Our conversational subjects went from books to movies to politics to his latest USA rafting trip. When we discovered a mutual interest in American Civil War history that topic always raised its head, typically, Keith's knowledge of the subject was enormous whilst mine was miniscule!

I admired his writing, always forthright, never afraid to fight his corner, even when his opinions maybe did not always suit certain folk. We didn't always see eye to eye but I always respected his integrity and I'd like to think he respected mine. I'll miss our blethers on the phone, so long partner; it was good to know you. **Phil Wight.**

We are deeply saddened to hear of Keith's passing. Our sympathies to all of you at Blues and Rhythm. **Miriam Linna and Billy Miller at Norton Records, USA.**

When I moved to Lincoln in 1976 to work at one of the city's leisure centres, little did I know that I would meet a man who would have a profound influence on my life and become a great friend for the best part of thirty years. Keith, had an in-depth knowledge of blues music and while we were sharing an office

together, he rekindled my love for the music that I had first heard in the early sixties. But that was only the half of it. Keith was extremely well read on a number of subjects: American history, Icelandic sagas, the First World War and the Cinema, to name but four. He also had a rapier like sense of humour - I remember that we spent a lot of time laughing. Can you imagine what it was like to share an office with this man? It was an education to say the least! He was like an uncle to my two sons. The youngest was influenced by the music he grew up with and the long talks he had with Keith. He is now living in Austin, Texas, playing harmonica in a local band. He would also want to express his deep regret at losing a friend. Words are inadequate to describe the feeling of loss I feel for this special guy. Those who knew him will know what I mean. **Justin Wallace, friend and B&R reader.**

Like so many things in life, my contact with Keith came purely by chance. I sold him some LPs around 1975 and he ended up asking if I had certain other items and could he have tapes of them. We were soon exchanging tapes and it became very clear that we both had interests in the same styles of music; at the time his main interest was blues, mine otm but we also enjoyed jazz, western swing, bluegrass, classical, folk and music from around the world. We finally met-up in 1976 and from then until a fortnight before his death visited each other on a regular basis; these meetings being a combination of listening to music, quaffing ale and often doing a walk or two. Over the years we also did a good few walking trips in locations as diverse as Suffolk, the Lake District and Scotland. Both of us used to agree the walking should be a vital part of proceedings but should not interfere with visits to pubs that served a decent drop of ale.

Apart from missing his company, enjoying music, films, walking and conversation with him I am going to miss being able to phone him to ask where I can find a certain track in my own record collection! Having said I met Keith by chance, my final visit to him almost (by chance) never happened - my car was playing up, the weather was bad and I nearly turned back home, how glad I didn't. Keith was always generous with his time and helpful both with reviews and general information. Much appreciated mate. **Pat Harrison.**

I returned after a short holiday to find B&R with the very sad news about Keith Briggs. I never met him and knew him only through the pages of your magazine, yet I feel I have lost a very close friend. I write reviews for Now Dig This and have always tried to do what I believe Keith succeeded in effortlessly: he made me think that work that he praised was worth my buying, and yet he retained an eternal good humour, and never slagged anything off. I loved his erudition, his mastery of the English Language, and his lovely sense of humour, as well as his remarkably eclectic tastes, all of which I share, many thanks to him. I shall miss his contribution to B&R and wish you well in your future without him. **Peter Bowen, Now Dig This**

What a shock to read in B&R of Keith Briggs death. I never met him, but felt like he was a true and close friend though our many rambling telephone conversations - often concerned not just with the blues but with stuff like his ice-trekking experiences and all sorts of scandal involving mutual enemies - and friends. Keith was a reliable source of knowledge and advice about many subjects and I will miss him very much. His loss to the mag is, I suspect, tremendous and I do hope you'll continue his 'Words Words Words' feature as its something I always enjoy. But no-one but Briggsy (and he said it was OK to call him that) will ever write quite like him - his last word in B&R 198, reviewing Tracey E. Laird's book 'Louisiana Hayride', is classic Briggs and had me laughing through the tears. I hate to think of him dying as he did, while trying to keep fit; what was he thinking of, he of "Take It Easy"? **John Beecher Rollercoaster Records**

A lengthy tribute to Keith by his friend, the noted American music critic and blues scholar Mary Katherine Aldin can be found at www.aliveandpicking.com Words, Words, Words will continue to appear in B&R as an occasional feature edited by Chris Smith. All contributions can be emailed to Chris at: chris@skerries.demon.co.uk