

**This interview with  
JORMA KAUKONEN of Jefferson Airplane  
was conducted by Neely Tucker  
of the Library of Congress  
in April of 2024**



*Jorma Kaukonen*

**Neely Tucker: Can you give us a little bit of background? You grew up in DC. Can you tell us how in the mid-'60s, when everything was going on, you got from good old conservative, kind of stuffy DC out to the wilds of San Francisco?**

Jorma Kaukonen: My dad was in the Foreign Service--he worked for the government all his life, but his later career was in the Foreign Service. And yes, I grew up in DC, more or less, but we traveled around a lot, and one of my dad's next-to-the last postings was in the Philippines. I went to school in the Philippines for a while, and when I came back to the States, I had gone to a Jesuit college in the Philippines called the Ateneo de Manila. So I had all these Jesuit credits that you had to go to a Jesuit school in order to make them worth anything, so I wound up at the University of Santa Clara, which is in Santa Clara, California. Jesuit school, etc., etc., and while I was there at the University of Santa Clara, I met Paul Kantner, who was one of the founders of Jefferson Airplane, and my whole West Coast thing sort of began from the South Bay of San Francisco.

Now, it is true that I always would tell my friends back in DC when I moved out there, "I'm living in San Francisco." But that wasn't true. I was living in the South Bay.

**NT: It's still good to get the street cred for San Francisco, though. Tell us about musically. When you met Paul, I'm guessing you were already playing guitar. Tell us how your music interest evolved?**

JK: I started playing guitar when I was like 14 or 15, in the mid-'50s. I was born in 1940, and I went through a lot of different things, but before I'd come out to California, I was at Antioch College, and while I was at Antioch College, I met a guy from New York named Ian Buchanan. Ian Buchanan was a friend of Reverend Gary Davis. He's long since passed away, but he was a famous Piedmont-style American gospel guitar player. To make a long story short, these two gentlemen really got me started playing fingerstyle guitar. So, in 1962, I wound up in California,

but I'm at this extremely conservative Jesuit school, and I ran into a guy who kind of looked sort of like me. We looked like we didn't belong. We weren't in a fraternity or anything like that, and he said, "You've got to meet this guy, and his name is Paul Kantner, he dropped out of this school, out of Santa Clara the year before." And so I met Paul. So now I'm a sort of a novitiate fingerstyle guitar player back then, but that's all I did the year or so before I went to school, so I was already getting pretty good at it. Paul was playing 12-string guitar in bands, et cetera, et cetera, and later on when he moved to San Francisco and started Jefferson Airplane, he invited me to come join the band, and it seemed seductive, and so I did.

**NT: Two-part question. One: did you drop out of college to go? And two: was this a head trip going from this very conservative college to at least what I'm picturing in my head as sort of stereotypical San Francisco in mid-'60s?**

JK: Keep in mind that this is pre-hippies. This is the beatnik era, and of course, I wanted to go to the... First of all, your first question about going to college, yeah, I did finish. I actually got a degree in sociology. I'm not quite sure what that qualified me for, but I guess it helped my grammar when I talk. Anyway, it was important to stay in school back then because guys my age were getting drafted and getting sent to Vietnam, and I didn't want to go to Vietnam, so that was one thing, and the other thing was that even while I was going to school, I found myself playing out all the time, whether it was at a coffee shop or coffee houses in San Francisco or Berkeley or Palo Alto or San Jose, that's just what I did. So the school thing was basically I got a monthly stipend from my dad. Thanks, dad. And it kept me out of the draft, and it gave me a chance to do what I really wanted to do, which was to hang out and play the guitar.

**NT: And when you moved up to San Francisco, was that specifically... did Paul have like, "We've got this group, it's Jefferson Airplane." I know there was some evolution of the band, but was it that clear of an invitation? Can you me through how that progressed.**

JK: My life is a series of interesting synchronicities, and I had already graduated the University of Santa Clara, and I was kind of pondering what to do next, but I had a lot of guitar students in San Jose, and to be honest with you, had it not been for the Jefferson Airplane, I probably would have owned a little music store in San Jose or Santa Clara. But Paul had moved to San Francisco, and he just gave me a call out of the blue one day and asked me if I wanted to try out for this band. At this moment, nothing could have been further from my mind. What I was thinking about doing--it's kind of funny to think back a lifetime later-- I was a fan of great American blues players like Champion Jack Dupree, who had been living in Copenhagen in Denmark for a long time, and I was married to this Swedish lady at the time, and I thought, "We're going to move to Scandinavia. I'm going to hang out with expat American blues musicians, and that's what I'm going to do." But Paul asked me to come up and try out for Jefferson Airplane. So I went up and played with him. And, again, it seemed seductive, it seemed like a fun thing to do. And it's not like I had to not do something else, I really had nothing else going on at the time.

**NT: Was there immediate work? How long before the first album came out was this?**

JK: We had an interesting story. And if you were to be talking to all the different Airplane members, and I'm sure you will be talking to some of them, everybody's got a different perspective on it. Marty Balin, who was the lead singer in Jefferson Airplane, had hooked up with a couple of... I don't even know what they did, but they were guys with straight jobs, and they had money. And they had bought this little nightclub on Fillmore Street called The Matrix. A complete hole in the wall, but a nightclub in San Francisco is a big deal to guys like us back in those days. And so, we were sort of pressed into service as the house band, sort of. And I think they gave us a fifth or a sixth...we had a piece of the action there for a while, although nobody saw any action back in those days. So, even in the beginning, before we were getting gigs, we had a gig. We were kind of the house band there. And one thing led to another. San Francisco in

those days, it was still beatniks and stuff like that, which guys like me loved, of course. But there was motion in the air. And the music thing was starting to happen. I can't tell you exactly why this was the case, it just was. San Francisco was an interesting place back then. I'm not sure it's that interesting today, because who can afford to live there, but that's another story.

**NT: Hunter Thompson had great quote about San Francisco at that time that you could strike a match anywhere and it would catch fire, you know, in that era. Did that seem the way it was to you from then through, say, like 1970 or so?**

JK: Yeah, there was a lot of energy. And speaking of Hunter Thompson, after one of our rehearsals of the Airplane, Hunter Thompson drove me home. I had an apartment, a third-floor walk-up in the western addition of Divisadero Street. He rode me on the back of his motorcycle; and that's why I will never ride with another motorcycle rider, but that's another story. Yeah. I mean, San Francisco is an interesting place. Back then there was so much stuff going on. And think about this--it was a cheap place to live. My third-floor walk-up sort of had two and a half rooms and a garage, it was like 85 bucks a month. You can't get a mailbox for that in San Francisco today. But there was just a lot of stuff going on and anything went.

The western addition wasn't quite a ghetto neighborhood, but it was definitely a disenfranchised neighborhood, a cheap place to live. Guys like me lived there and stuff like that. And there was always something going on. There were a lot of clubs happening. And for some reason, who knows, ley lines, confluence of destiny, who knows?

**NT: Tell me a little bit about how that worked into you all's first album. And then, of course, things kind of really blew up after that.**

JK: Airplane was an interesting band. We were the first band that got a major label deal. And we had this manager back then, his name was Matthew Katz, and he did a bunch of stuff that probably wasn't right back in those days, but what he did do is he got auditions for us with record companies. And so we actually got a deal with RCA. There was a lot of musical talent in San Francisco, but at that time, we were the only ones that got a major label, which means that people outside the Bay Area would get a chance to hear what we were doing. And that was a really big deal. Folk musicians like me and my pals back in those days, we wouldn't have thought about getting a record deal. Now, it's a different world.

**NT: I kind of want to jump to "Surrealistic Pillow," but with the first album ["Jefferson Airplane Takes Off"], can you tell us a little bit in the band dynamics, how that came together?**

JK: The first album is a real folk-rock album. And our first chick singer, Signey Anderson, she's passed away also now, she was our singer, it was Marty and Paul, and our first drummer was Skip Spence. Now, Skip Spence gained a lot of international fame because he was in Moby Grape; he's an incredibly talented guy that I met in San Jose in '62. And he had, if you think back then...well, back in those days, guys in upcoming bands liked to have bangs. You wouldn't believe how much hairspray I had to put on my hair to keep those bangs down there. So Marty saw Skip somewhere and he looked at him, Skip was a good looking guy, and he said basically, "You're a good looking guy. I want you to be my drummer." And Skip said, "I've never played drums." And Marty said, "Learn." And Skip was one of those guys who could... he actually learned. And he's an incredibly talented guy that could learn to play anything. In any case, so Skip sang and played drums on our first album.

A guy named Tommy Oliver produced that record. And in those days, the studio at RCA down at Sunset and Ivar, the machines they had in the studio were three-track machines, no noise reduction, none of that kind of stuff. And so they had three tracks, so you could ping-pong stuff

back and forth, but you could only do it a couple of times because the tape would degrade. So that album and "Pillow," which we'll talk about later, was also no noise reduction, is as close to a live album in the studio as you're ever going to get.

**NT: That's what I was going to ask you. I mean, it was really stand and deliver with a lot of the records in that era.**

JK: It was.

**NT: So when it came to "Pillow," Grace Slick had joined the group. Did you have your songs all set when you went into the studio? Was this done in two days? Was it over a couple of weeks?**

JK: I should remember this, but I don't. I would imagine it was done within a week, because studios were expensive and we didn't have a lot of time. Grace was just a monumental talent. I don't think she had a lot of studio experience before that, but Rick Gerard, that produced that record, and Jerry Garcia sort of whipped us into shape because he knew more about harmonies than guys like me did, certainly. It was such an exciting time and all the songs... we probably weren't prepared as well as the engineers would have liked us to have been, but we actually kind of knew the songs when we went in. So laying the tracks down wasn't as difficult as it could have been in later years when we sort of became prima donnas for a while and wasted a lot of time in the studio; there was no time to waste back then. And I do remember when Grace was singing, to hear her voice soloed in a studio, I just had never heard anything like it. She's one of the great voices of my time. And I think it's unfortunate that she doesn't sing anymore, but she doesn't.

**NT: It really stands out. I listened to the album last night and then this morning, which is the first time I've listened to it in quite a while, but it really comes out. She has this really clarion powerful thing that just sort of cuts through stuff. It's really something to listen to.**

JK: I agree. It's the sort of thing that guys like me chase for the rest of your life. You know what I mean?

Everything was just right in that band at that time. And guys like me, guitar players, we geek out about stuff all the time. It's one of the things we do when we're not working. But back in those days, you just played whatever you got. And I'm not sure that this is something you're interested in, but when you think about my guitar solo sound on "Somebody to Love" and "White Rabbit," I used a Standel Super Imperial, which is a big amp with two 15-inch speakers in it, that I got because the Lovin' Spoonful guys had one. Solid State and a Guild Thunderbird guitar-nobody would play any of these instruments today. They're all looking for vintage tubes and all this kind of stuff. So, here's this Solid State amp and this odd Guild guitar, and that's the sound for those solo guitars on "Somebody to Love" and "White Rabbit."

**NT: Did you have those solos worked out beforehand? Did they just give you, like, "You got this many bars, play and we'll come back to you, kill it."**

JK: No, we didn't. First of all, I don't think any of us had the ability to do that kind of stuff, which is good because we came up with new stuff. We'd rehearsed all the songs, but once you get into the studio and play it, then it lives forever. And, again, because there was no noise reduction, we couldn't do more than one overdub. So we just kind of went for it. As a result, the end of my little trailing thing at the end of "Somebody to Love," there's a note that's a little flat that if I was doing today, I'd probably fix it. But I didn't. And so that's the way the solo goes.

**NT: When you say “doing it in the studio together,” I'm picturing all of you standing within a few feet of each other...you're standing here, Grace Slick is over here. Was it that close together in a recording studi?**

JK: Yes. We recorded that album in Studio A at the then RCA Studios in Sunset and Ivar. It was a huge studio where they did symphony orchestras. And they had us sort of sitting in the middle and they were like gobos to sort of isolate us as much as possible. But, yeah, there was no real sound discretion. So you kind of got what you got. You couldn't really change things afterwards. And the way things worked out, it was okay. It was better than okay, actually.

**NT: Obviously, if somebody gets on this list [the National Recording Registry], whatever song we're talking about was a big hit. So I wind up asking this of just about everybody: when you finished “White Rabbit” or “Somebody to Love,” did you go, "Wow, this is a hit?" Or, "Huh, that's one for the record."**

JK: I went “Wow!” because of Grace's singing on those things. I remember when I heard her, I was in the studio when she sang it. And when she did that and we heard it back, it was like, "Wow!" But did we know that anybody outside of our little San Francisco group of pals would care about it? Absolutely not. Or I didn't anyway.

**NT: Which one were you talking about? Both songs when you were in the studio?**

JK: Yeah, both songs. Because there's a bunch of, like, disparate songs on “Surrealistic Pillow.” We're talking about the ones that everybody knows about, of course. And, humorously, from the viewpoint of a band member, those are the two songs that none of us had anything to do with writing except Grace. And we didn't own the publishing.

**NT: It's always the way it goes.**

JK: It is.

**NT: Tell us about, after that, how long after you recorded it--this is 1967, it's the Summer of Love--did you start hearing yourselves on the radio and when did everything sort of start blowing up for you all?**

JK: I think the first time I heard it on the radio was probably that summer of '67. I'm really bad about dates and stuff like that. I'm thinking it might've been KDIA out of Oakland, which is normally a rhythm and blues station, but they liked us and occasionally played some of our stuff. I don't remember where the underground stations were happening in San Francisco yet, like KMPX, but I will tell you that the first time a guy like me hears your song is on the radio, it's a really big deal. Because the radio was everything growing up. To get something on the radio, that was the deal.

I found out in 2015 or '16 when we got a Lifetime Grammy Achievement award that the Airplane had been nominated for a Grammy in '67. And I didn't even know, because we didn't care about stuff like that back then, but to hear something on the radio, that was a big deal.

**NT: Was it the life of the rock star that everybody pictures when you all went on tour? Was it sex, drugs, and rock and roll?**

JK: I think that we thought that we invented sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and we might have invented some rock and roll, but I don't think we had much to do with inventing the other two things. I believe they'd been around for a while. I mean, first of all, you go from being an unemployed college student who's living in a third-floor walk-up in the western addition in San

Francisco, to, all of a sudden, making some money and people actually caring about what you say and do and basically giving you carte blanche to do a lot of things. And, in retrospect, I think it was a lot of fun. I'm not sure. That's the way it was. You should have been there.

**NT: It sounded like a lot of fun, I guess, until Charlie Manson showed up and then things kind of got weird.**

JK: You're absolutely right about that. But something else also that we need to think about is I'm 83 years old right now. I was like in my twenties back then. And in your twenties, everything is great. I mean, for that kind of stuff to fall in your lap, who does that happen to really?

**NT: I want to ask you about the legacy of those two things. There's a lot of interesting stuff on the record, but would you agree with me that those are the two standout songs and those are the two songs that the record is probably remembered for? Would that be correct?**

JK: Absolutely. We had a bunch of talented guys and gals in the band, but had it not been for Grace and those two songs, we probably wouldn't be having this conversation.

**NT: Right. And then what's the legacy of those two things, you think? Particularly "White Rabbit" has had such an...**

JK: I'm not sure about legacies. I'm not sure I'm really qualified to weigh in on that, but every now and then, somebody who's a little younger than me, who served in Vietnam, will send me a picture of a Huey with one of those songs painted on the nose or something like that. That's powerful stuff.

**NT: That is. That would just be amazing that you say it here and it comes out there and all of a sudden this is a song that everybody knows. And, like you said, that's you on the guitar.**

JK: Agreed. And in a normal world, I'd be a great-grandfather, but in this one, I've got a 17 year old daughter and a 27 year old son. And yeah, my daughter is a young musician too. And we talk about stuff because she's very talented, but she can't wrap her mind around this stuff at all.

**NT: Yeah. I'm at 60. I'm somewhat younger than you. And I have two 14 year olds and a 25 year old and they're like, "Dad, were there even rocks when you were around or was it all just dirt?"**

JK: I can relate. Believe me.