Len Williams

the man who started it all

Len Williams will be remembered by many guitarists as the founder of the original Spanish Guitar Centre in London and the father of John Williams. For others he is internationally known as an ethologist-philosopher and the author of Challenge to Survival.

George Clinton

I first met Len Williams around the late fifties when I called at the Spanish Guitar Centre in Cranbourn Street to enquire about lessons. Len asked me to play a scale, saw that I wasn't doing too good, took the guitar from me and played, first a scale to demonstrate the Segovia fingering, and then the quick chord passage from Granados' Andaluz. What was remarkable about his performance was not just his impressive technique and sound (I was struggling to play that piece in those days); but that he was standing at the time, with his left foot on a chair, talking away, his commentary on left hand technique punctuated by quick puffs from a cigarette which hung all the while from the corner of his lips. I didn't start lessons but had private lessons with Ron Simpson, one of the teachers at the Centre.

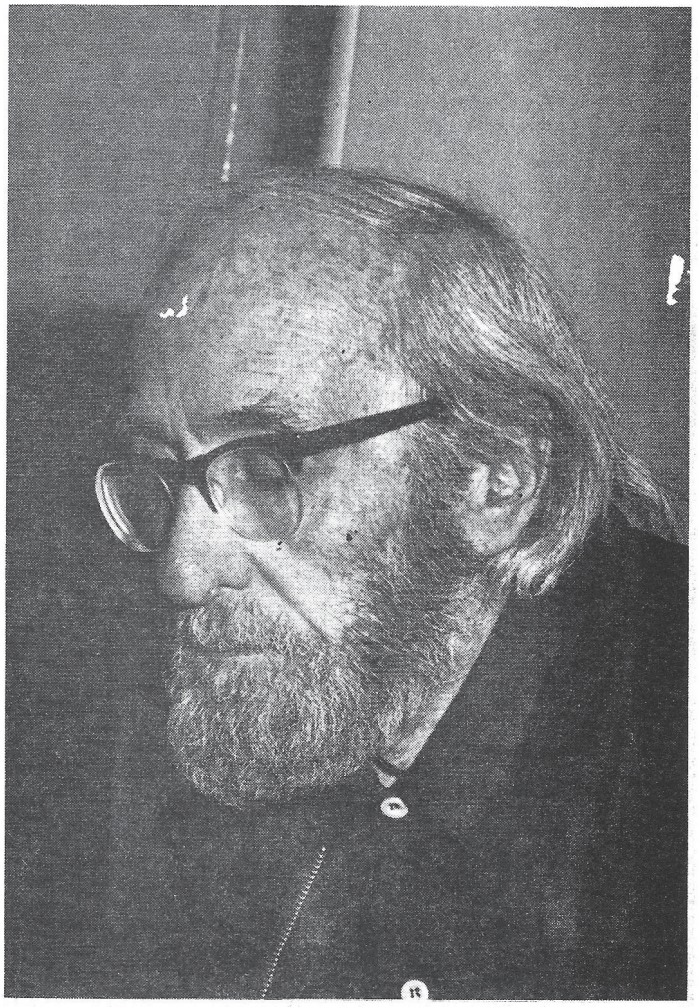
The next occasion we spoke was during August recently when I telephoned him at his home in Cornwall to get some facts about his son John Williams' early teachers, because the matter had been raised in a reader's letter. For obvious reasons Len Williams had long been on our books as an interesting person to interview, but I had always thought that having left the guitar world he wouldn't be too interested. Anyway, I took the opportunity to ask if I could go down to see him and was very pleased when he said that I'd be welcome.

Len Williams' home is at his Monkey Sanctuary which covers nine acres of woodland overlooking the bay at Looe. About 70,000 people come each year to see (and meet) the woolly monkeys, and when I arrived both car-parks were full. Because he suffers from emphysema Len isn't as active these days as he would like to be, although he spends a lot of time writing. I knew that he had a reputation as a vigorous conversationalist and being poorly hadn't thankfully changed anything there, and he soon warmed to the subject, smoking away as if his life depended on it.

Leonard Williams was born in London in 1910 into a musical family. "Everybody played piano. My aunt was a teacher and I was taught from the age of four." Before his sixteenth birthday Len was earning a living playing in workingmen's clubs for three and six a night. "So I started as a jazz pianist" said Len as he gave me a thumb-nail sketch of his early career.

"Pianists were two a penny when talking films came in; there were ten men after every job. Banjo was the thing, nobody could play it so I took up tenor banjo. Worked on the banjo for four months, hear a record of Eddie Lang playing. Said to myself that's for me, they're using guitar over there. Bang on the guitar. Working hard at John Alvey Turner's; I'd been six months working hard on the guitar; in walks Mario Maccaferri, sees this boy messing around behind the counter, says that's quite interesting. We got talking and he liked me, took me out to dinner round to his place. We got friendly and he gave me quite a few lessons. I'd heard Segovia on record and that just knocked me sideways; and then Maccaferri sits down and as far as I was concerned in those days he played just as well as Segovia. And he taught me the proper apoyando technique when I was seventeen.

"Three or four months after he left Segovia came to London in 1927. Len Williams is in the front row and when I saw Segovia playing I thought to myself—no thumb-pick! That's how I'll go; I'll go on using a thumb-pick until somebody comes along and *shows* me that it's better not to use one. Now, if you ask people here what is Len good at? They would say 'We've never seen a better observer'. I've seen monkeys do things and I've interpreted what they've done; learned their sounds; how to interact with them — nobody has found out how to do it. So I'm a good observer, and I'm playing fairly well. I'm not a fool, and I'm watching there from the front row and I saw the way that thumb came round like this; and I already knew about apoyando technique. Do you know, all through John's development he had this habit of bending his last thumb-joint. I'd say 'Okay, you don't feel like practising and that's fine, but I've told you again and again if you go on doing this you're sunk. You must not move those fingers from here, they must move from the knuckles; and the thumb must move from the hand.' It's a simple matter if you study the thing; you don't pick a guitar as though



you're picking your bloody nose. In a way that wasn't serious we had a war on this bloody thumb."

Len having mentioned John I thought it was a good opportunity to get some inside information, like, how did he, as John's father and teacher, maintain his interest at an early age?

"There's never much trouble with children because you don't push kids when they're four and five, or even six. You discipline them a bit and you find other ways of persuading them. It can start

to be difficult later on, as in the case of John, when he was seven, because at a very early age they don't say to themselves 'My word, I'm doing well at this, I feel my friends are responding.' Children haven't got that kind of vanity."

In addition to his other fine qualities as a player, guitarists are always impressed by John's seeming lack of stage-fright. It's curious that whereas comments on nerves are part of most concert guitarist's self revelations, you don't hear John Williams referring to nerves, and funnily enough, I've never thought of asking him about it. So I asked his father.

"Nobody who grows up in our kind of environment could be selfconscious. Whether it's in this place, or in the old place in Melbourne, or when we lived in London. You'd never walk in on me or the people I'm with and find that we're just a little nuclear family sitting down there with a nice little lounge with wall-to-wall carpets and daddy will be home in a minute, and we've got some friends coming round at the weekend. I've never been in that situation. So a child who grows up in our environment just doesn't understand selfconsciousness. It doesn't make sense because they were born into a society where people criticise themselves; exhibit themselves, tell the truth, not because they're such honest people; they're open about everything not because they're exhibitionists—which they might well be. So in that environment when John was about nine or ten I'd say to him: "Feel like doing something on the guitar, John?" And he'd say 'I was waiting for that to come up.' So I'd say "Okay, that's out, you can piss off." . . . I might say that to him. 'No, no, no, I'll play.' "No, no, I'm sick of you saying you were waiting for that to come up; you don't have to play, I said piss off and I mean it." 'No, I'm going to play, and fuck you.' So, being selfconscious is a bit of a joke."

Readers who find John's swearing inconsistent with his great guitar playing should stop reading here, because I asked Len if, at that tender age John used that word I've just typed out.

"Oh yes. When I've finished say swearing to me". So I did.

"Swearing" took up Len, "is in circulation. It has its own dynamic and colour. And it's not used because the person who uses it has a poverty-stricken language or power of expression. It's part of the language; it's part of the feelings of the time, and when other words won't do. It's got nothing to do with whether it's an insult to the female genitalia or whatever; or has its roots in some of the sickest conditions of the human mind; the origin of it we're not concerned with. The words are there and you stop using them at your peril."

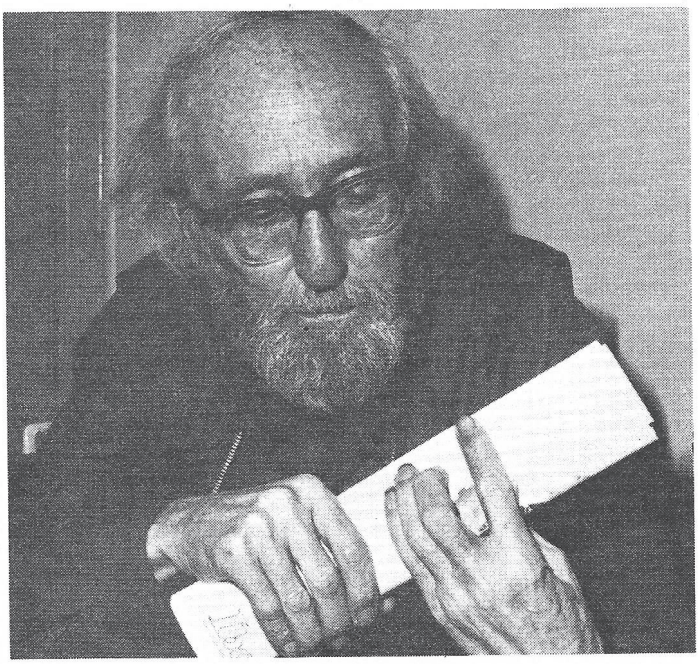
Another question on John's technique: his lack of noticeable string noise.

"The simple answer is that you can't move quickly on those strings with keeping your fingers on them. That sounds as though you're telling someone that they should do something they shouldn't do — take their fingers off! Of course, in terms of legato one note never starts until another finishes. But on the guitar, which has its own peculiarities—not to mention the whistling on the covered strings — it's so delicate. It's not like a cello which is such a strong voice with such power that it sounds better if you get a bit of sandpaper going in with it at the same time. But with the guitar, carrying it to extremes, you've got to be careful you've got the right buttons on in case they touch the instrument!

"So the poor old guitar player has got one of the biggest problems in the world — he has this string noise problem more than anybody. Now, you've got to have a fantastic technique to get rid of it. It drove Segovia up the wall; his string noises sometimes were terrible; it sounded like sausages frying on the record. I used to say to John: we know all about legato and the problem with strings but the thing is that when you're playing you've got to get from there to there — and you don't want any string noises. Put very simply you're going to do it bloody fast; you've got to move fast because you're not going to leave your finger on the string — you're going to take it off. And by Christ you'll have to move; you'll have to move so fast that nobody will notice you've taken your finger off; you're going to work at it until your technique is so good that you've enough reserve to *do* what you've been told *not* to do. So he lifts his fingers slightly, that's all. But you've got to have a good technique to start with otherwise it will sound staccato. If you watch him you won't see it — it's built into him from about the age of ten. I'm not saying you don't ever leave the finger on a string; on the top strings you can't hear it. It's an additional technique not an alteration.

"Another thing, in the old days you had what I called the cult of the Grand Barre. They were all very concerned that you got the full barre for everything and the result of this cult was that when you came to play small chords on three or four strings say, there is a very strong tendency to take up a hand position which is very much in the direction of the full barre. Now a jazz-man, who doesn't do a lot of full barre, when he does so he alters his hand and comes round more like this because of the way he holds the guitar. So when a jazz man does that it's sensible because he's holding it like that. I call it the arched wrist and variations on the arched wrist. You have to be flexible about it, according to the needs of the moment. Sometimes the wrist will be arched, sometimes straight — not dead straight of course, but pretty straight. That's how fussy I was about the left hand. Very flexible and very aware; and very fussy in avoiding the cult of the guitar, the Grand Barre — and all that crap."

That wasn't all the conversation with Len (I found that I'd filled up two ninety minute cassettes); but when I arrived and switched on my recorder Len surprised me by handing me an interview he'd written himself! "When I left you on the phone the other day I thought if you're coming down we might as well make a good job of it. You can do what you like with it, of course, change the questions or whatever. As far as Jack's concerned there are people who over-estimate him and you've got some people who under-estimate him. So I thought that somebody ought to put down the raw facts about old Jack. And that's me and that's what I did. So what is there isn't something that is spiced up. It's written purely as . . . it's exactly what I feel about him."



Len Williams demonstrates full barre

Len Williams on a question of teachers

Who really taught John Williams the guitar?

The question really doesn't make sense. John grew up in a musical environment and there have been many teachers in his life, including the most important one of all — himself.

I think you're just being evasive. Who played the dominant part in his early training?

That's diffficult to answer, because I don't believe in dominance. I tend to dominate people, and I think it's appalling. Perhaps the first act of brainwashing was by a French arts teacher named Robert Felix, who was living with us when John was five years old. Robert taught John the first six notes of The Marseillaise in the key of C, which is similar to "Here we go round the Mulberry Bush" — but a lot easier to play. John thought it was great fun, but since it was all done on Robert's mandolin, I had to reconvert him to the guitar.

I take your point. If it weren't for you, John today would be the world's greatest mandolinist?

That stops me. Okay, I taught John the correct technique from the age of five, a technique which I have always referred to as the methodology or system of Segovia.

With respect, how did you manage to do that. I understand you were a jazz and not a classic guitarist.

I was a jazz guitarist by profession, but in 1928 — when I was seventeen — I met Mario Maccaferri, and it was he who taught me the basic traditional or classic technique. Because of my interest and study of straight guitar, most jazz men of that time thought I was rather eccentric.

So you think John was born to be a great guitarist?

No I don't. I don't think he was *born* to be a musician. But I would say he was born to be an artist — in the widest meaning of that word. He displayed a natural talent for music and rhythm at an early age — somewhere around seven — but I think most children who are highly sensitive, imaginative and intelligent, have a natural talent for almost any of the arts. I may be wrong. But that is my view.

Can you give me an example of this gift of the imagination?

Oh dear, there are so many. There was the time when I couldn't find the sprinkler for watering the garden. It had been thrown over the fence, and was returned by a neighbour a few days later. I was livid. John was five, and he had to be the culprit. When I questioned him he said "the wind must have blown it over." I was so impressed I accepted the explanation. Whenever he covered up he always blamed the elements, not people. If he lost something, irretrievably, he would say the house was too dark . . . couldn't we have more light in the hall. He was a poet by nature — a poet with a sense of humour, a disposition for bargaining, and a talent for gambling and diplomacy. On one occasion when he lied — as all healthy boys must — I took the matter very seriously. I tried the man-to-man approach: "Now look John, what should we do about it? This can't go on. Look at the trouble you've caused. What would you do? Would it help if I punished you?" John, aged six, said: "It might." I said, "Well, how about three hard smacks on the backside, or no Lunar Park on Saturday?". John: "How about two not so hard smacks?". I couldn't hit him, and I liked going to Lunar Park myself, so I gave up. John's a born diplomat. I think he inherited it from his Chinese grandfather, who was a K.C. in Melbourne.

I take it that John had no real choice on whether he was to be a guitarist or not?

That's right. But no child has any option on its education — unless it displays a special gift for one skill above all others. Many gifted children reach puberty with no clear idea on how they will live and shape their lives. In our family circle we did a tremendous amount of drawing, painting and art work. John was good at most, but seemed to be more interested in music. He loved sport and games. When he was ten he made a clock out of Meccano. It only went for three minutes, but it went. Perhaps he would have made a good bridge builder. We shall never know. I'm sure he could have been a 'cellist or a pianist. He says he's glad his instrument is the guitar. I do believe that music should be an essential part of a child's education. As for the guitar, a father can only teach what he himself knows. John was also taught socialism, non-violence, chess, dialectic logic, not to smoke and that only idiots eat white bread.

Is John still a socialist?

You'd better ask him, but you would first have to define what *is* a socialist. All I can tell you is that we still argue and disagree on a number of things, not on politics and morality, but on preferences in music, theatre and literature.

How did John's meeting with Segovia take place?

We returned from Australia to London in 1952, when John was nearly twelve. Segovia was touring with the Brazilian singer/guitarist Olga Coehlo at the time, and we met them at the Piccadilly Hotel in London. John played Granados and Albeniz for them and they were astonished by his technique and interpretation. Segovia said to Coehlo: "Here is the one . . . here my successor.". From here on John studied at Segovia's summer school in Sienna, and later at the Royal College. There were many teachers in his life, including Segovia, Pujol, his teachers at the College, and goodness knows how many colleagues and friends in the early years of his development.

But you were his only teacher from the age of five to twelve?

I will settle for dominant teacher. The fact is that there were many of us living together in one large house during the Melbourne period. Naturally we had many interests in common — socially, culturally and politically. There was the arranger-guitarist Joe Washington, the artist Robert Felix, and Sam Dunn — a musician and journalist. John's mother, Melaan, a devastatingly beautiful lady incidentally, was a great fan of Django Reinhardt when I first met her. Before we married she was the secretary to the Chinese consul. Musicians and other

A MATTER OF CONSERVATION

Copy of actual correspondence with The Monkey Sanctuary

THE ROYAL NAVY
H.M.S. LYNX BFPO SHIPS

Leonard Williams, Esq.,
Woolly Monkey Sanctuary,
Near Looe, Cornwall.

20th August, 1969

Dear Mr. Williams,

H.M.S. LYNX is a 'Cat' class frigate, due to Commission on 11th October, 1976 for service at home and in the Far East.

The Secretary of the Federation of Zoological Gardens has suggested I write to you in an effort to obtain a stuffed mounted Northern Lynx as a trophy for the ship. Any assistance you could give us would be appreciated and would result in publicity for the ship and the donor at our Commissioning Ceremony.

If you are able to offer any assistance in obtaining such a trophy, I would be grateful if you would contact me.

Yours faithfully,

D. M. LING, Lieutenant.
The Royal Navy.

THE MONKEY SANCTUARY
Near Looe, Cornwall.

26th August, 1969.

Dear Lieutenant Ling,

In reply to your letter of 16th August, there must be some mistake. I am an animal conservationist, not a taxidermist.

However, my good friend Chief Sitting Lynx of the Iroquois Indians in North America has a very good mounted and scalped specimen of a lieutenant of The Royal Navy, which I'm sure he would donate if you mentioned my name.

Please convey my regards to the Secretary of the Zoological Federation and tell him I look forward to seeing him stuffed at the Commissioning Ceremony on October 11th.

Yours sincerely,

Leonard Williams.

ROWLAND WARD LIMITED
CRAWLEY ROAD LONDON N.22

Taxidermists to sportsmen of the world

1.9.1973

Dear Mr. Williams,

From time to time we receive enquiries from clients who wish to purchase animal skins of all types, usually made up as rugs from our stocks.

I am writing to enquire whether you can offer us skins of such animals as tiger, leopard, polar bear, etc., when any of your animals die. If you can arrange to supply us, I shall be glad to hear from you in due course.

Yours faithfully,

A. A. BEST
(Director).

THE MONKEY SANCTUARY
Near Looe, Cornwall.

A. A. Best, Esq.,
Rowland Ward Limited,

Sept. 5th, 1973

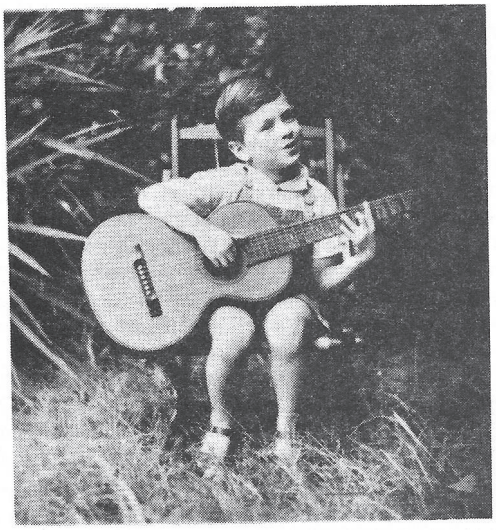
Dear Mr. Best,

In reply to your letter, I regret to say that we have very little to offer you in the way of animal skins. Most of the big game hunters who are shot in our sanctuary are collected by their relatives, who prefer to make their own funeral arrangements.

Recently however a distinguished colonel — famous for his sportsmanship as a great killer of African wild life — was captured by us alive. His skin is in poor condition, but his mane would make an excellent wig for a chimpanzee friend of mine who is going bald. If you can supply me with the wig, I will be pleased to let you have the colonel free of charge.

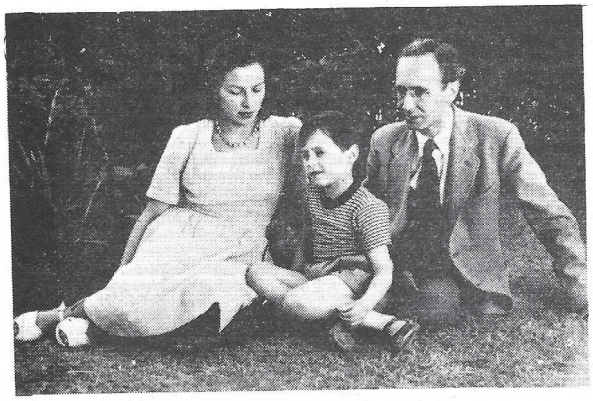
Yours sincerely,

Leonard Williams.



John Williams, age 4½.

John Williams, age 6.



John, his mother Melaan, and Len.

friends joined us at open house on weekends. Among these were the Australian composers Felix Werder and Miles Maxwell, the actor Frank Thring and the great 'cellist David Sissterman. I recall one incident from that period that illustrates the obvious advantages of such an environment, when Joe Washington said to me: "You know, Willy, the boy's phenomenal. He plays the Kuhnau Suite, and he's only ten. But I still think you don't do enough to make him understand the importance of legato and sostenuto. His technique is fantastic, but he lifts his fingers off the strings too early. He has enough reserve to play more legato. You really must do something about it.". I said, "Then *do* something about it. You're a string man. I'm not the only bloody teacher in this house.".

One thing from what you say comes through very clear: John was not influenced by the cult of the guitar. I'm surprised however that you didn't also teach him jazz.

When John was six years old I taught him the chords and a few simple melody lines from some of the jazz classics. "Lady Be Good" was one of his favourites. In those days it was all fun in the game of music making. I didn't want John to be a stuffy straight man who looked down on jazz. But from fourteen on he took no interest in jazz. He was already his own individual, determined to go his own way.

Among the many people who influenced John, you do not mention John Duarte. Why is that?

When we returned to London in 1952, Duarte, Terry Usher and many old timers who knew me in the thirties were anxious to play some part in nurturing the talent of John. None of them could help John technically. Usher was hopeless. Duarte however did give John some coaching on ear-training and theory. But there others who did as much — my old friend Reid Stuart for example — a 'cellist who wrote regularly for Strad. I personally spent more time trying to teach classic technique to Duarte than he did on theory to John. His informal sessions with John lasted only a few months during the period 1953/4. I don't think John got on very well with Duarte socially. In any event, by the time John was fifteen none of us were playing a

dominant part in his musical training. It was all taken care of by Segovia, the Royal College and John himself. But Duarte can make a lot out of little, or nothing out of a lot. He has a genius for it.

But Duarte did teach for you at the Spanish Guitar Centre?

I had six teachers at the Centre, and Duarte was one of them. He held on class a week on theory and interpretation, and he did it well. Duarte however is a kind of autocratic democrat. He'll teach anyone. I am by nature a selective elitist — in other words a bit of a snob. The result was that I also used his class as a dumping ground for what we called the "professional pupils" — those who had little talent for making music but wanted to go on learning for the rest of their lives. Nevertheless, some of my top pupils like Gordon Crosskey and Peter Calvo — who are now established teachers and players in their own right — attended Duarte's class and profited much by his teaching on theory and interpretation. But I never allowed Duarte to teach technique or tone production. His right hand was and probably still is appalling. His left hand was superb for jazz, but inadequate for straight guitar. He never was able to produce or demonstrate the essential qualities of tone production that are peculiar to the guitar. He came to the straight guitar too late in life. I know that a good player is not necessarily a good teacher, but I also know that you can't teach instrumental technique unless you are also a good player. That should be obvious. A modest player may well teach theory. He can even become a guitar musicologist. But if he cannot capture and reproduce the inner voice and magic of the instrument he professes to represent, he will fail. Duarte is a highly accomplished man who can well stand on his own ground. But he tries to compete on levels on which he is not equipped.

I take it that you also have no time for Duarte's views on Barrios?

I must say that I take no part in the silly war that has been raging in the cult of the guitar since I left London in 1964. I've heard all Duarte's rubbish about Barrios, and it's too absurd for any further comment. People who don't like and/or criticise the music of Barrios usually do so because they cannot play it. It's too difficult for them. Even Segovia won't touch it. John Williams does, and so does Alirio Diaz. I would if I could, but I can't. I've been playing straight and jazz guitar for fifty-two years, but I can no more play Barrios than I can Reinhardt. Both Barrios and Reinhardt made and played their own music. Both were great in their own way, but both had one important thing in common. Disregarding their creative imagery and their fantastic techniques, they were incurable romantics who never lost touch with beauty. Perhaps that is why some people have no time for either of them.

You sound very hard on John Duarte?

I have the right to be, as he has with me. We are very old friends, and there is very little that we don't know about each other. The fact is that I have a lot of respect for him. I even like him a little. There are others who under-estimate his talents. The trouble is that he pushes himself too much, with the result that many people find his manner objectionable. If you give him an inch he'll take a yard. He lets himself down. Jack — as he is known to me — is long winded, and he can be a little small minded. But he really means well. He's an excellent lecturer and musicologist. The scope of his expertise and general knowledge in many fields is vast. Many of his guitar compositions in my view are excellent. He's also a top man on jazz guitar. His improvising is superb. A lot of people don't know that. Over all, Jack feels in some ways he has been let down, and that many people have failed to recognise his qualities. And he's right. It's a tough world, and one can easily be overlooked.

What do you think lies in John Williams' future?

Specifically, I have no idea. I only know that John today, having met musicians and people at every level and walk of life, numbers Johnny Dankworth and Cleo Laine among his closest friends. He has discovered for himself the jazz man's life style and special sense of humour. He even has the bloody nerve to ask me why I didn't teach him jazz guitar. But I understand him. He just likes to see me explode with indignation. He's also the only argumentalist I know who can reduce me to a state of total confusion. To sum up? Well, John learned from an early age that music and living are welded together; that society and art are — or should be — all one; that the joy of living rests in the art of being natural, of loving people and not art for art's sake. You can't teach that to anyone.

Why the move from the guitar to monkeys?

I'm not really sure I know the answer, except that music and nature are never far away from each other. I was bewitched by Mario Maccaferri and I never recovered. My tastes in music have remained simple. I go no further than the Russian line from Borodin and Glazunov to Shostakovitch and of course Smetana, Prokoviev, Sibelius and Khatchaturian, and the European greats. I like the Rodrigo concerto—the other two bore me, except parts of Ponce's Concert of the South.

I hardly touch the guitar these days; but I listen. I think the guitar world still suffers from the lack of trained "natural" musicians who can give concerts and hold master classes on the level of John and Diaz. We still have many "late in life" player-teachers who teach the correct technique but do not have the background training and musicianship of any good first violinist. These "later in life" players did not grow up in a musical family or environment that is necessary for nurturing a natural talent. The climate has changed dramatically and will continue to do, but the so-called classic guitar has some distance to go before it can earn the attention of composers of the stature of Shostakovitch. Meanwhile the conventional musicologist is bewildered by what he calls the "anomoly" of the guitar. The anomoly is simply that the guitar has proved itself to be at once the most personal as well as universal instrument for breaking down the traditional barriers between classical and free-expression music, which includes of course jazz. (In terms of greats—whatever the word is supposed to mean—I put Reinhardt on the same level as Segovia). In the space of twenty-five years the guitar has become the most international of all instruments. What used to be regarded as a cult has grown into a creative reality. As for the anomoly, there are countless anomalies, many of them bizarre to a point of being ludicrous. Others—in the guitar hands of political singers like Joan Baez, are devastating and thrilling for their unity of feeling and content. The vocal guitar art of Joni Mitchell evokes deeper feelings than a plain-song by a German lutenist. Paco Pena uses his flamenco guitar together with social commentary to defend as well as express the folk art of Spain. Jazz artists like Joe Pass have nothing like the classic-technique of the Segovia school, but they are greater guitarists and musicians in the broader sense of artistic expression than all those small-time "professors" who are pushing their luck (and Bach) in academies and colleges all over. And there are many boys in the rock scene who are doing some exciting things which reminds us old timers just how old we are. Meanwhile everybody is playing the guitar.