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A Conversation with Yes' Steve Howe

Mike Ragogna: Steve, hey.

Steve Howe: Hello Michael. How are you?

MR: Extraordinary, how are you?

SH: Everything's good.

MR: Last time we were together, it was with Dax Kimbrough and you were with Asia.

SH: Yeah, we've been very busy, we've had to cool our heels after we finished on June 18th. We did South America, Europe, and the States.

MR: You're invested in a lot musical projects, one being the new album by Yes, *Fly From Here*. How did you guys approach this recent record?

SH: Well, I guess we just approached it like doing a regular record. We all bring different things to the record, we started with doing some demos and mucking around. Eventually, we got a call and started *Fly From Here*, then we went off and came back and did a few songs in January. We've got Geoff Downes on keyboards, and the whole thing turned out to be pretty fabulous.

MR: Who's the lineup on this album?

SH: Well, Benoit David is our vocalist, he's from Montreal, Canada. Then, of course, you have Chris Squire on bass and Alan White on drums, Geoff Downes on Keyboards, and myself on guitar.

MR: I believe it's your 20th studio album right?

SH: I think it might be, I haven't been counting, but if you've been keeping count, I'll take 20.

MR: (laughs) I think it's Yes' first album since *Magnification* came out.

SH: Yeah, that's definitely right.

MR: So, this is like 10 years since then.

SH: Yeah, for about three of them, we were busy touring, until 2004. Then, Jon got a bit sick and had a few accidents and became unwell, so about three years we didn't do anything. That's when I reformed with Asia and got going with that and did some solo projects. So, by the time 2008 came

around, (we) met up with Benoit and Oliver Wakeman, then Oliver kindly did a few years with us which was great. So, then that took us up with Trevor Horn.

MR: How did you find about Benoit?

SH: We heard about him on the internet, we tipped Alan (White) off, Alan tipped us off, and I met him first in Montreal because I was doing a solo show and a trio show that year in Canada. I was in Montreal for a few days. I put a few days aside to meet up with him and confirmed that he could do it, and that's when we kind of firmed it up really.

MR: The other day, somebody asked me for Benoit David music, if I had it in my iTunes.

SH: Of course, he has done another project called Mystery; he keeps going on, that one. He sounds like a full on rock singer there, but he brings a lot of character to Yes. The whole thing is really quite in-house.

MR: Yes has been known for its amazing musicianship, and the reason why it doesn't get stale is that you're always mixing it up. There are those members who have been on and off for years, but it does seem like one big Yes family.

SH: Well, in a way, we compare it to an orchestra. If the lead violinist isn't doing a very good job, get somebody else. It wasn't that we were ruthless, we just cared about the general quality of the group, and if anybody fell below that, than maybe there was a replacement. Of course, that's kind of funny saying that because, of course, there is a hierarchy of original membership. It's good though to have us guys who've played on for many years to steer the ship, because sometimes, it does need a little steerage.

MR: While we're on the subject of Yes, I wanted to talk about the different periods of the band. What's your take when you look back to the days of the *Fragile* and *Close To The Edge* albums, and then the Yes music that you're making now?

SH: We were young and excitable, and we were all trying to make careers out of this business, so we put a lot into it. We lived in a town called London, England, and because we lived in that town, we were a band that lived in a town. That changes, obviously; people live in different countries, different parts of the universe. In a way, that makes it hard to run a band...what you're asking me about is really hard to put a finger on, really. Of course, when I look back, the three albums with Bill Bruford were very outstanding, because Bill invented the kind of way the drummer didn't splash around like most drummers did. He was very contained and quite influenced by jazz, so that was a very compelling element in our music. It fitted with Chris in the most unusual kind of way, because they were quite opposite but they fit together perfectly. So, to have Bill on the three albums that I played on and, of course, the two before, I played on with Peter Banks on the guitar, basically, Bill was a gem of a drummer. Alan was terrific too, but he wasn't Bill. Bill fit in much more to the jazz side of rock, that's why he went off and that's why I like him so much, because he did follow his heart and his music.

MR: When other bands attempt music as complicated as Yes', they mostly don't capture the emotional element that your band does. How do you get that discipline to translate along with emotion?

SH: I don't really know, it's just because we are who we are and we play in particular ways. Some of it's down to how we individually like our instruments to sound, and you put those together, and you get Yes. It's what we are looking for, a band with a lot of musicality, a lot of counter harmonies, counter singing--we definitely wanted to do a lot. We wanted to make a real splash and be the band that was capable. That's why we went on to do things like *Case Of Delirium*, *Awaken*, and *Machine Messiah*, after we did *Close To The Edge*, as if we hadn't done a lot of big music. Basically, we've been really ambitious, and that's been fueled by the energy of us all--partly by me, partly by Chris, and partly by everybody who's in the band. To calm any further

question, if you were going to ask this, people like to try and define who leads Yes. Yes leads the group. Of course, Jon was a great orchestrator; he would just sit there, he wasn't playing an instrument. He could give ideas and he did give a lot of ideas and we had to interpret and play them. We enjoyed doing that because we all had ideas; it's not like he had to fix anybody's parts or tell anybody what to play; he would push ideas out. So, everybody was useful, and after all, he wasn't playing an instrument. That was contributing as much as we were contributing, and he didn't contribute more, he contributed the same. He could contribute ideas, while we were giving our own ideas as well. There was a lot of work that went into the song.

MR: Steve, I wasn't actually going there with that question, but thanks. (laughs)

SH: (laughs) Well, I had to answer that question in an interview yesterday, and I just thought about it again. In Yes, it's quite a deceptive sense of coming about and leadership, it's so dependent on what we do.

MR: But where I was going was the group's precision was so spot on, I wonder if there was any notation going on.

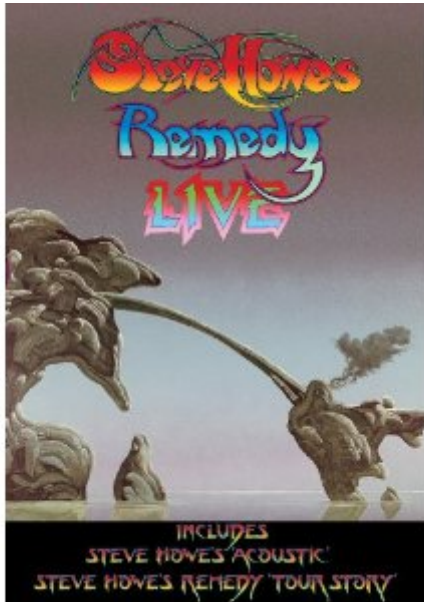
SH: Notation?

MR: Writing down on staff paper.

SH: Not really, we used to kind of laugh at people that did that. Rick did it and we would say, "Only you know what that means, because we didn't do it that way." We had our own charts; Chris would write notes down, I would write chords. Sometimes, I would have a huge chord chart when constructing the song. I usually just write out the sections so I can look at it. When you're arranging with a band, it's actually very hard to remember what you're doing at first, because if you decide to change something, when you get there, you don't remember. To avoid that, you keep your chart up to date; I can't really play and look at a piece of paper very intentionally. I look at it a few times when I wonder what's the next chord.

MR: Are you comfortable considering Yes one of the best rock acts of all time.

SH: I don't want to be facetious and so, "Yeah, of course it is. It's great." I don't want to say that. Then again, I would now, because it's what I put so much time into enjoyably. It was absorbing in those first three years with Bill, then we started moving to solo projects and starting writing solo guitar pieces, and all that worked. I don't have to push myself to write a few tunes, it involves work, enjoyably so. Nevertheless, you do have to go through the motions. You don't just wake up and you've written a song, it takes many years of going back to it; you haven't written it yet, you're developing it. No music comes in a packaged box, it's about developing ideas from almost nothing. Things are much more complicated than you really want to think about, that's why songwriting is something you do at home, it isn't about the band. You have to have something going on in your life to write songs about, that's what songs are supposed to be about.



MR: Let's move on to your solo work. Lately, you have the *Remedy Live* DVD. That's a 2004 tour capture, isn't it?

SH: I made a record called *Elements* and on it, I used as the bass player (my son) Dylan, and he plays on most of my solo albums. *Inside Out*, liked it a lot when they released it. It's got a big mixed-up feeling of having rock stuff on it and some jazz tunes on it. Then, there's some solo electric guitar on it, weird psychedelic stuff on it. So, what we did after that was go out on tour and create a solid line-up. I had Ray Fenwick on guitar--he's quite versatile and an old friend of mine. I know he can play stuff I can play, so he was playing my parts in the rhythm area. So, I picked a whole lot of songs, but the thing I didn't do was go into many improvising opportunities. There was a tune called "So Bad," and that was the only one that was really improvised; a lot of it was very structured. At that time, I wanted to have that really structured guitar music. It was very much worked on in arrangements. So, we went out, basically toured Great Britain and then Europe. In the DVD, you see moments where we were playing in different environments and you see how much wilder we were. When we were down in Spain and you see clips of us playing in Barcelona, it's very intense. Yet when we played in the opera house in New Castle, it's much more subdued. It was very thoughtfully controlled. In the DVD, you get to see that and you get to see it in the rehearsal too. I think DVDs are great, I think this one takes kind of a stance. It's very thoughtful and I didn't enjoy it. It was a very nice time.

MR: Also, one of the bonus features on the DVD is your acoustic set.

SH: In that show, there's a very big part where I play solo guitar. That's a condensed solo version of the big song from *Relayer* that Yes did, that we never played it after the *Relayer* tour. I've been playing it a lot, and I hope to get Yes to play it eventually. My repertoire has grown so much, I need a whole show to do it now. I'm working on *Motif Volume 2*, but I released *Motif Volume 1* with 20 tunes of solo guitar, and what I want to encapsulate with the two volumes is that whole repertoire. It's kind of shifting around and I change things around, but it's a repertoire that really interests me about writing and solo guitar.

MR: So, there will be a *Motif Volume 2* any day now?

SH: Well, not any day, but maybe next year. It proves that country western had an amazing effect on me when I was young. I was really a rocker; I liked Little Richard and Eddie Cochran; I got all of these influences from Tennessee Ernie Ford who had some great guitarists playing with him. They kind of invented the guitar break. Tennessee Ford's hillbilly music was so dynamic that it

became an ingredient in any song that a guitarist would take a solo in. Take James Burton in Rick Nelson. Those solos sound just as good today as they sounded 40 years ago. I hear them playing on "Hello Mary Lou," it's sensational. James Burton did all of his best playing with Rick Nelson.

MR: Do you remember how you discovered that music?

SH: Well, I guess it was on the radio, partly. I actually bought rock 'n' roll records on 78. In England, they came in small singles, so you had these breakable records, and I used to buy Little Richard on 78s. I've got a couple of them--I kind of collect 78s. Those early records were such a lot of fun, when you hear the music you kind of remember where you first heard it. Of course, it used to move me, and it used to make me jump around the room--much more exciting than what my parents like. My brother and sister didn't really like rock 'n' roll, they turned me on to classical and jazz. They said, "That's rubbish, listen to this, this is authentic music, this is real music." I kind of shoved it off and then listened to it and thought it was great. It became very easy to be pursued; if it had a guitar in it, I was going to listen to it. So, that introduced me to every kind of music where a guitar ever played, and it played everywhere. I was bound to explore most of popular music by saying, "Where's a guitarist in 1920?" And somebody would show me someone that played back then.

MR: This is probably explaining how you got your amalgam of different tastes and different approaches when playing guitar.

SH: It shows that I became open later when I suddenly heard Vivaldi or something I liked it. Eventually, I listened to trumpet music and thought it was amazing, and I got into jazz. It's so easy to get into; you have such a rich place to go. It's interesting, there really isn't a type of music I don't like. Even instruments that I used to hate like the accordion, but I don't know, I actually like it.

MR: Can you remember what your first guitar was and how you got it?

SH: Sure, I was 12 and I had been begging my parents for about two years until they said, "We'll go." I went with my dad to a place called King's Cross in London to the guitar shop. This guitar had no make on it. It cost 14 schillings and for that, you got a guitar and a case, and that was it. I was a complete idiot, I thought I could play it instantly. I was just somehow driven by believing I could do it; in a way it helped me. As soon as I learned my first song, I went, "Okay, I'm there." Then I learned The Shadows--I almost spoke about that a minute ago, because on the radio when I first heard them, I heard them play "Apache" before it was released. The next week, I went out and bought it and I didn't like it. My brother had recorded it on The Saturday Club, and The Shadows played "Apache" on it. I went out and bought the record of it and it was really dull. Then I played the tape again and the difference was they were playing live in the studio. There was strange reality between a recording and live; I much preferred the sound of live because it was so exciting to hear. The record was done like a schmaltzy, middle of the road record. It didn't have any edgy rock 'n' roll EQ on it; it was very mellow. Mostly, they weren't that adventurous, but they ended up getting more adventurous.

MR: Some of your other heroes must be people like Chet Atkins and Les Paul.

SH: Well, I heard Les Paul before I heard Chet Atkins, because my parents had Les Paul. But when I heard Chet, I thought, "Now we're talking." I heard somebody who had a lot of things going on. He was doing stuff nobody else was really doing because it was the country picking. The first thing I wanted to do was that. I had heard Scotty Moore doing it with Elvis Presley. So, Chet was the broad stroke; he had original music, he was playing traditional music, jazz, and he was playing all sorts of stuff. I was really up for that, a record that didn't just have one type of music on it. It showed that on a guitar, he could make something speak. I loved the way he played so much.

MR: Let's go on about guitars, so you had the unnamed guitar, and...

SH: ...that wasn't for very long. My parents actually saw something in me, because when I turned seventeen, they got the money, 60 pounds, to get the great Gibson ES-155, the guitar I play with Yes, mainly. I play it everywhere when I want to improvise. It's a great improvising guitar, it still is my most important guitar. Currently, that's what I'm playing, I'm playing that guitar. On the Yes album, I played some of that and I played a Stratocaster. The Les Paul Junior, the Les Paul Custom is all over a track called "Life On A Film Set." Steel guitar, I play a Fender steel; I play 12-strings, they're very colorful guitars. I'm playing a lot of Steinberger again for a couple of reasons. I used it on the Fly From Here album, both the 6-string and the 12-string. I don't play a Rickenbacker 12-string anymore, because I can get that sound from a Steinberger. Rickenbacker is hell to get into any kind of regular shape easily. I play a lot of acoustic because I write on it; I am playing my Martin MC-38 Steve Howe model, which Martin still has a few left. That's a lovely guitar, it's a bit better than the 00-18 that they brought out with my name on it, which was originally my guitar that I played. I moved to an MC-28, which is the predecessor to the MC-38, which is really a lovely high-end guitar.

I've been working to death today on the Yes show, we have a tour starting on the 2nd of November, which is in six weeks. I just rehearse on a Steinberger, because it's so easy to play in an armchair. You can just sit there and play all day, the fingerboard is a guitarist's dream. Also Line 6 just set me up with a whole new pedal board and amp arrangement--the HD 500 POD is amazing. I'm on a whole new level of technology having moved in with them full time in 2006, because all of my amps before that. Everything before that was an irregular pedal board, something we'd make ourselves, with boxes and power supplies on it. Now, we can create exactly the sound that we think, exactly the sound that's on the record. So, the guitar sound I used on stage the past four years, is amazingly close to what the records sounded like. To get the same sound, usually things are mic'd different, so to program up songs is really worthwhile. Instead of selecting effects, I just go to the different programs. For each song, I have a bank.

MR: You were placed by *Guitar Player Magazine* in their gallery of greats along with Steve Moore and Eric Johnson, and for five years in a row, you were their best overall guitarist from '77 to '81. Nice.

SH: I was pleased about that because it's kind of a nice caché. Steve Moore deserves it so much, and Eric has done brilliant things as well. He's such a musical guitarist, that's what the three of us have in common. We're not crazy wild screaming amazingly fast--well, Steve is incredibly fast, and fast isn't fast anymore. It's about music and it's about the sound you make, I think Steve and Eric have both produced great sounds.

MR: We've yet to talk about your being in GTR. You had fun in GTR, right?

SH: I had fun in GTR, it was great band. It was one of those things; it kind of came and went. It was like Asia at that time. I don't think we care to resurrect it as an original band, but as an idea, it's quite good.

MR: What advice would you have for new artists?

SH: Well, everybody's tried to give advice. People just don't usually take advice. (laughs) I can be light about it. There's one thing that makes a professional guitarist stand out--particularly on an acoustic guitar--is that you don't squeak too much. You've got to squeak occasionally, but not when you change a chord and not when you change a position. When you're actually playing and you can't avoid a squeak, then bless you, we've all got to live with that. But squeaks should be kept to a minimum. I think your career should really be about pushing on and not being distracted. Your playing won't keep ascending in a straight line higher and higher. You get to a point and you

think, "I can do this a bit more," and it climbs another step of the ladder. That's how things grow. To have an interesting career, you have to be pretty determined; you've got to find a way of making a living at it. That's the third part of my advice, is as soon as you can, don't be free, because that is not a career. You've got to charge, you've got to realize that at some point, you have to feed a family off of music, and that's a very tall order. There's a lot of quick roots to success, and we really see there's just one, and that's determination. I don't think you should step out into the big wide world unless you've been playing for at least 10 years. Some people get on very rapidly; but at first, don't try to be everything.

MR: That's a very all-encompassing answer. We also didn't mention The Steve Howe Trio, that's the one you're in which you're playing with your son Dylan.

SH: When we can we get together, I have Dylan on drums and Ross Stanley on organ. We've done two albums-- *The Haunted Melody* and the live album *Traveling*. We keep evolving and doing different things. Next year, we plan to...they haven't exactly agreed yet, but I'm sure they will--we have a little bit of a run where we get a new album and some new tunes and jazz them up. I love that because I just take my best guitar and plug it in and don't do anything with the pedals, I just have a volume pedal. I don't actually use effects or anything. An organ is a great instrument, that thing really hops around, it does the bass as well.

MR: It's always good playing with family isn't it.

SH: Yeah, Dylan has been so supportive and very inspiring. Dylan has really put his head down on the drums; that's his whole world and that's fantastic. I actually have a big secret that nobody knows yet, but I have a new record coming out on Warner Classic called *Time*, and it's a Steve Howe meets orchestra kind of record. We do two kinds of music--we do traditional classical pieces and we do some original pieces. I hope you like it, it's a very special album that's taken a lot of work and it's really been worked on. It's got a real orchestra on it, so there's no compromise. It's called *Time* and it's coming out on the 21st of November.

MR: What was the recording process for the new album?

SH: Basically, what happened was, I was working on this idea with my friend Paul Sutin over in Switzerland. He had some music and I played on it. So, about four or five years ago, I got some of this music and it's kind of almost there, but we hadn't had a complete album. I met up with the composer and conductor on some of the songs on the record, Paul K. Joyce. Basically, he and I got stuck into this idea, and he had a lot to contribute in how we could make this really beautiful record. We gradually developed it with the synthesized orchestra first so we could see how it was shaping up with my guitar work, and develop it. So, once we had got it, we then said we need the real orchestra. We went into British Grove studios in London and all of the people came in--harp, horn, violin, all of that kind of stuff. Then with the arrangements Paul had done, they played it all and they had real instruments. So, we then gave it to Curtis Schwartz, who mixed all of my solo albums, and it was pretty much all finished and he took a look over it, because he understands how my guitar can work best. He's learnt over the years not only how I like it, but also how it works best. So, we really did pull it together.

MR: Are there any songs on this record that you had and looked back on and thought, "Wow, this is a great track"?

SH: Well Paul Sutin wrote a track that we rearranged considerably called "The Explorer." On this track, I play a 12-string Steinberger guitar, with a classical ensemble and that tune really worked out well. Another favorite of mine is "Rose." It's a Spanish guitar tune that I wrote, it's a melodic tune where I don't really play much more than single notes. Some of the other ones are more involved, like when I play Bach, it's really more involved, and those are some of the more

enjoyable pieces to play. When you're a musician that decides to play Bach, you have to wake up because it's a real challenge.

MR: When you're tour, how do you choose what to play?

SH: It's about what I can play and what's possible. We would like next year to do some shows and take 12 people and play this live. That would be a luxury. We would be hoping that there would be some other forms of watching us play and do this. We would love to tour, but that's not the big emphasis at the moment.

MR: Steve, thanks so much for this. As always, it was great.

SH: Well thanks for calling, it was fun.

Tracks:

Disc One - CD

1. Fly From Here (Overture, pt. 1-5) Listen
2. The Man You Always Wanted Me To Be Listen
3. Life On A Film Set Listen
4. Hour Of Need Listen
5. Solitaire Listen
6. Into The Storm

Disc Two - DVD

1. "Making of" the album
2. Live footage

Transcribed by Theo Shier